

Lansing Remembers Its Boys In

BELL TOWER

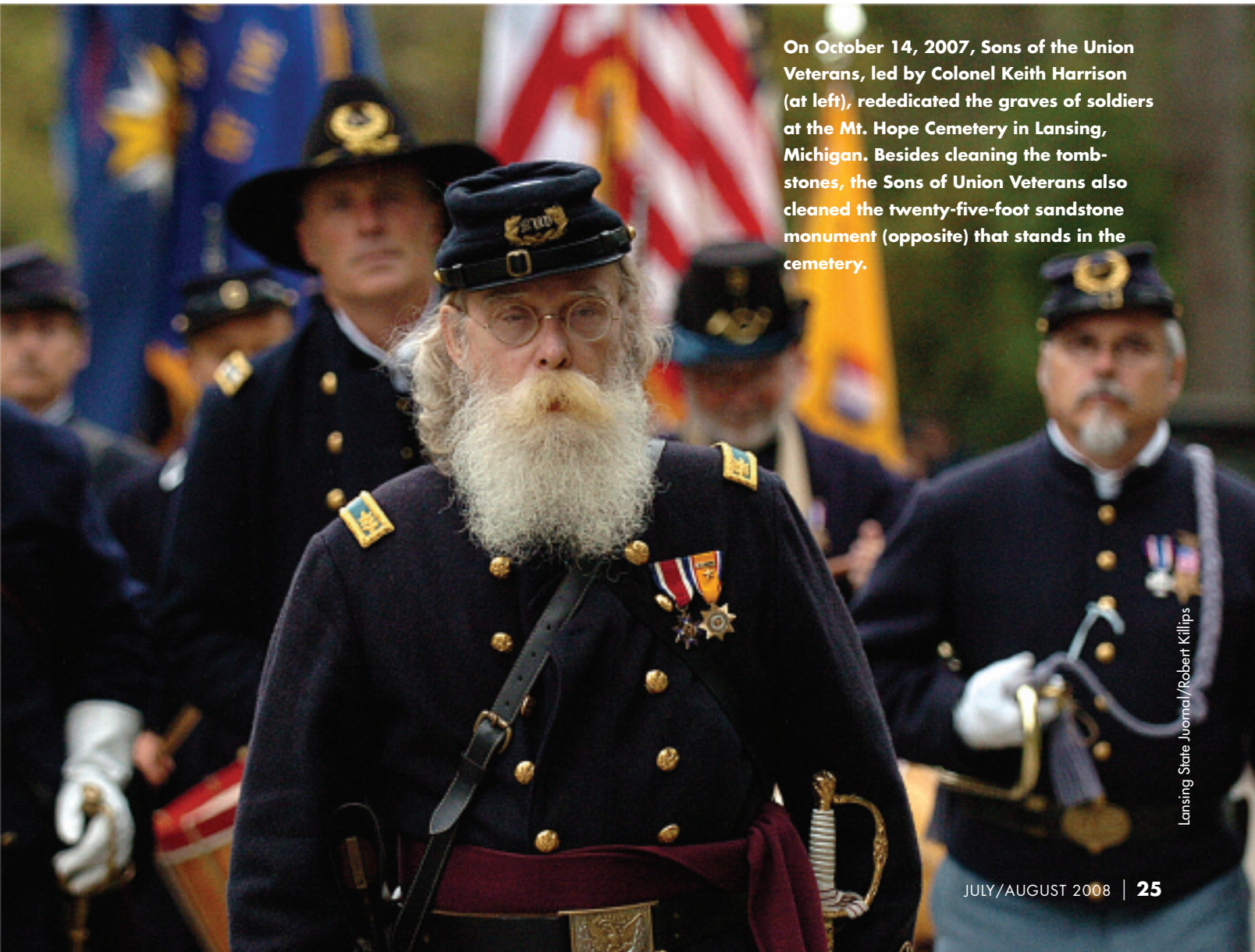


Roger L. Rosentrefer

By Paul D. Arnold

In June 2006, I noticed a short announcement in the *Lansing State Journal* about a ceremony honoring five African-American Civil War veterans buried in Lansing's Mt. Hope Cemetery. As a member of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, a fraternal group that preserves our Civil War history, I attended the ceremony. I introduced myself to the event organizer, Lansing historian Jesse Lasorda, who has an interest in the war's African-American soldiers. He shared the story of each man, including Napoleon Hamilton, who belonged to the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry, a regiment made famous for its assault on Fort Wagner and later immortalized in the movie *Glory*.

On October 14, 2007, Sons of the Union Veterans, led by Colonel Keith Harrison (at left), rededicated the graves of soldiers at the Mt. Hope Cemetery in Lansing, Michigan. Besides cleaning the tombstones, the Sons of Union Veterans also cleaned the twenty-five-foot sandstone monument (opposite) that stands in the cemetery.



The African-American veterans are among the forty-eight soldiers buried in the Soldiers Lot at the Mt. Hope Cemetery. Most were Civil War veterans, buried without regard to religion or skin color. The men were members of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), an integrated Civil War veterans' group whose openness was mirrored by a quote popular within the organization, "We Drank from the Same Canteen."

The Soldiers Lot at the Mt. Hope Cemetery can be traced to the mid-1870s when a member of the local Order of the Stars & Stripes asked a question: "Why didn't the ladies of the Soldiers Aid Society erect a monument to the fallen Union soldiers who served from Lansing?" On the evening of June 21, 1875, a meeting was held at the Universalist Church in Lansing and the Lansing Women's Monument Association was formed. Officers were elected and the project was begun. The Order of the Stars & Stripes, headed by a Dr. Rush Shank, a Civil War veteran, had a lot in the Old Lansing Cemetery near the corner of Saginaw Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. This cemetery lot was exchanged with the city for a forty-five-foot-square lot in the newly opened Mt. Hope Cemetery in south Lansing.

The lot was located on the highest spot in the cemetery. The Lansing Women's Monument Association raised the money and the base of the monument was erected and dedicated on Memorial Day 1877. According to the *Lansing Republican*, "It is a handsome piece of emblematic work, executed by home artists. The monument is constructed of Ohio sandstone and is 6 feet square. The



The festivities at the October 2007 rededication included reenactors and members of the Curtenius Guard, Camp 17, firing a ceremonial volley.

base has relief carving on the four sides consisting of the Great Seal of the United States, the Coat of Arms of the state of Michigan, muskets stacked in a tripod with a Laurel Wreath & the simple quote 'Our Fallen Heroes.'" The monument cost \$617.28.

The Soldiers Lot has seen its share of history. In 1878, Lieutenant Luther B. Baker, who was

one of the officers responsible for the capture of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, was grand marshal of a Memorial Day ceremony. George Ranney, a Civil War surgeon and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, was a member of the local G.A.R. Post and regularly attended services at the Soldiers Lot. Auto pioneer Ransom Eli Olds routinely ferried dignitaries from the State Capitol to the site in his new horseless carriage on patriotic holidays. All of these men are buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery.

It was also common for Lansing's Civil War veterans to march to Mt. Hope Cemetery en masse from various locations in downtown Lansing. The Women's Relief Corps met before patriotic holidays to make wreaths of evergreen to decorate the graves of Lansing's "Fallen Heroes" and place flowers on the graves on Memorial Day.

As the number of Civil War veterans dwindled, the Soldiers Lot was opened to veterans serving in the Spanish American War, as well as World War I. One soldier who served in World War II is buried in the lot.

In the 1930s, Evergreen Cemetery opened a mile away from Mt. Hope Cemetery. A large number of veterans chose to be buried at "Little Arlington" in Evergreen, instead of the Soldiers Lot. Consequently, the Soldiers Lot became largely forgotten.

Lansing State Journal/Robert Killips

In the spring of 2007, Curtenius Guard, Camp 17 of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, examined the site and decided to restore the entire site to its original splendor. After organizing community backing for the project, the Sons began the restoration.

Lansing State Journal/Robert Killips



Sons member Mark Heath played "Taps" at the cemetery rededication.

The Curtenius Guard members had their hands full. Most of the headstones had sunk and were covered with black mold and lichens. The monument was in dire need of cleaning. Its base was so dirty that moss had started growing on parts of the relief carving. The paint on the flagpole, erected in 1909, was extremely worn with the primer showing through. The area around the burial site also had mole damage and was choked with weeds.

The Curtenius Guard, Camp 17, partnered with the Lansing Board of Water & Light's, Maintenance Construction Resource Center, a division of the local utility company located in the Lansing area. Work crews volunteered their time and skill. The flagpole was primed and painted and the monument received a gentle power washing.

The Sons raised, reset and cleaned the majority of the forty-eight headstones, turning them from dirty brownish-green to bright snowy white. Each of the Civil War headstones stood forty-eight inches tall and weighed approximately 200 pounds. One of the headstones had a foundation of almost six feet deep, weighing 500 pounds. A local turf-grass organization donated its time and expertise, restoring the grounds to their present lush green state.

While researching background information on the soldiers interred at the site, it was discovered that five indigent soldiers buried in the Lot (four from World War I and one from the Civil War) had never received headstones.

According to historian Lasorda, "One Civil War soldier has been buried there for over a hundred years, lying in an unmarked grave." The Sons have ordered the headstones and these unknown soldiers will be honored with markers.

On Sunday, October 14, 2007, the Curte-

nus Guard, Camp 17, rededicated the graves in the Soldiers Lot. Approximately 100 people turned out for the rededication. A replica thirty-four-star Civil War flag donated by the American Legion flew proudly as Commander Ron Shull opened the rededication. James B. Pahl, past national commander in chief of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, conducted the ceremony. Pahl is also a member of Curtenius Guard, Camp 17. Wreaths were laid at the four corners of the monument base by representatives from Military Order of Loyal Legion of the United States, Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Women's Relief Corps and Curtenius Guard, Camp 17. A forty-four-page booklet was given out to attendees containing biographical sketches of all soldiers buried there.

Taps then echoed through the cemetery as a Civil War-attired bugler from the Sons sounded the final tattoo. **mh**

Paul D. Arnold is a Lansing historian and camp commander of the Curtenius Guard, Camp 17. He lives in Lansing. The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War are trying to locate photos, letters and artifacts from both the Lansing (Charles T. Foster, Post #42) and Sunfield (Samuel W. Grinnell Post, #283) G.A.R. posts. For more information, go to <http://suvchw.org.mi/017/017home.htm> or email the author at suvchw@hotmail.com