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# WALKING THE WEST WOODS

RAMBLINGS ON THE WEST WOODS AT ANTIETAM NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK

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SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2020

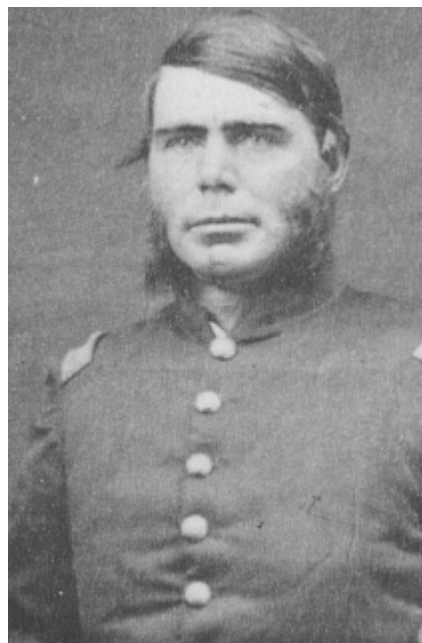
**"The whole Division except our Regiment was broken into a mob, madly pressing to the rear followed closely by the enemies lines:" William J. Colvill and the First Minnesota in the West Woods.**

William J. Colvill to Antietam Battlefield Board, December 10, 1892  
Antietam Battlefield Board Correspondence, National Archives, Box 1 {Microfilm}

No 403 Masonic Temple,  
Duluth, Minn., Dec. 10, 1892  
Col. J. C. Stearns and  
Gen. H. Heth  
Antietam Board.  
Washington, D.C.  
Gentlemen:-

In response to yours of the 30<sup>th</sup> inst. requesting certain data as to position of my command in the battle of Antietam, etc.: I have the honor to make the statement following:

My command was Co. F. 1<sup>st</sup> Minn. Vol. Inf. being the senior Company of the Regiment which was a part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade<sup>1</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps.



**Illustration 1:** William J. Colvill, Jr. Source: *U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania*

On the evening of Sept. 16<sup>th</sup>, the Division was massed in the order of its Brigades[1]<sup>2</sup> as they came in on the march of that day, at a point in the valley of the creek on the east side, not far—I judge about forty rods—from<sup>3</sup> Burnside's Crossing.<sup>4</sup> I do not remember the order by Regiments, but from our marching order of the 17<sup>th</sup> when our Regiment and Brigade lead the Division, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade<sup>5</sup> lead it on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

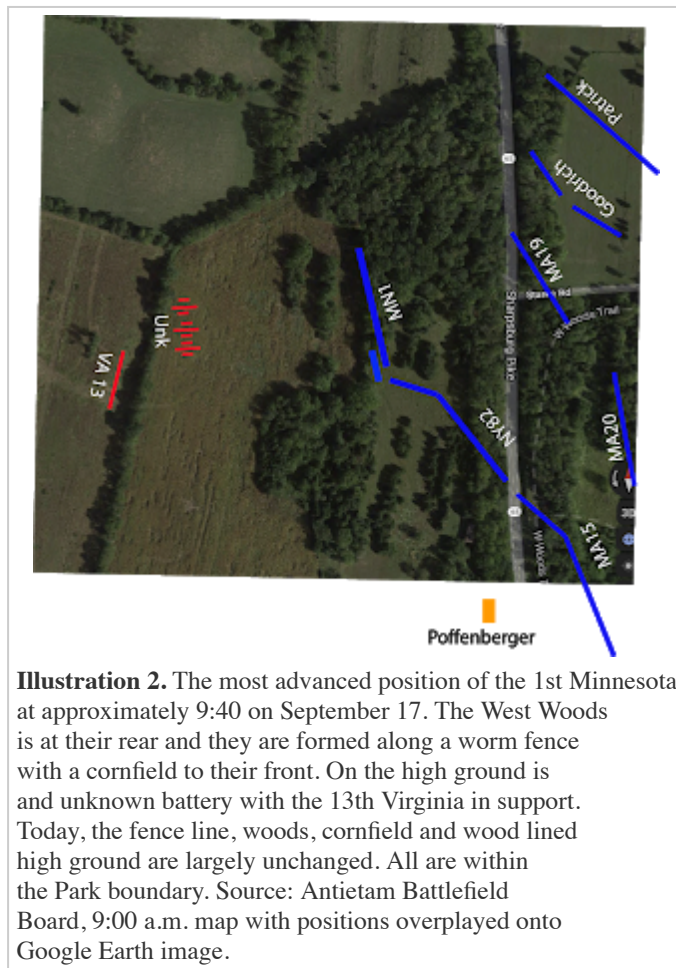
We did not move from this position until after Hooker's farthest advance on the 17<sup>th</sup> and when there seemed to be a lull in the battle. I have the impression, this was near 9 o'clock A.M.<sup>6</sup>

I have no maps and have never revisited the field and can only give you an idea of the point of our farthest advance by a recital of our movements, which I will make as brief as possible.

The Division moved—our Regiment leading—northerly to a ford<sup>7</sup> on the creek and across that and beyond on a line nearly parallel with the Hagerstown Pike to a good Division distance, then faced to the left and

- Massachusetts 20th (The Harvard Regiment)
- Massachusetts 2nd
- Michigan 7th (Company B)
- Minnesota 1st
- Minnesota Sharpshooters, Second Company
- Mississippi 13th
- Mississippi 17th
- Mississippi 18th
- Mississippi 21st
- New Hampshire Light Artillery, First Battery
- New Jersey 13th
- New York 107th
- New York 21st
- New York 23rd
- New York 34th
- New York 35th
- New York 42nd
- New York 42nd (Tammany Regt.)
- New York 59th (Union Guards)
- New York Artillery, First, Battery L
- New York Artillery, First, Battery M
- North Carolina 24th
- North Carolina 25th
- North Carolina 35th
- North Carolina 46th
- North Carolina 48th
- North Carolina 49th
- Pennsylvania 69th (Paddy Owen's Regulars)
- Pennsylvania 69th (Site 2)
- South Carolina 2nd
- South Carolina 3rd
- South Carolina 7th
- South Carolina 8th
- Virginia 13th
- Virginia 15th

marched Brigade front, the other Brigades following in order, to the Pike<sup>8</sup> from which, after a brief halt, we advanced, at first square with the Pike, and then — following Gen. Sumner<sup>9</sup> who rode rapidly near our right — obliquely to the right, over and beyond the dead and wounded of Hooker's Corps and of the enemy,<sup>10</sup> about half a mile, I think all the way through large rather open timber,<sup>11</sup> and came square against a ravine, with a cornfield on the opposite side, on the extreme right, where was our Regiment which just about covered the width of this field.<sup>12</sup>



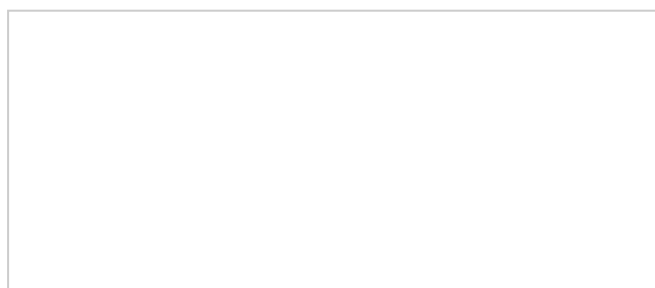
**Illustration 2.** The most advanced position of the 1st Minnesota at approximately 9:40 on September 17. The West Woods is at their rear and they are formed along a worm fence with a cornfield to their front. On the high ground is an unknown battery with the 13th Virginia in support. Today, the fence line, woods, cornfield and wood lined high ground are largely unchanged. All are within the Park boundary. Source: Antietam Battlefield Board, 9:00 a.m. map with positions overlaid onto Google Earth image.

The field was long and was lost to sight towards the river, I suppose owing to the undulating character of the ground. It was bounded on the left by the same timber through which we had passed, and on the right by a narrow skirt of same, separating the cornfield from a long pasture field which apparently extended from the River bluffs back to the Pike. On the opposite side of this pasture field dense timber grew along its whole length. We were received at the ravine by a sharp

fire of small arms from the timber in and on the opposite side of the ravine and from the cornfield, and returned it with vigor.<sup>13</sup> In a few minutes the fire from the cornfield almost ceased and we could see the enemy fleeing down through the corn in numbers. In this brief time we lost heavily, I think at that point over a hundred men out of six hundred, killed and wounded.

During the fire, being uneasy about our right, I placed the Regimental Pioneers — which were with my company, and on the extreme right — at a point about 20 rods<sup>14</sup> in advance, in the skirt of timber between the cornfield and long pasture field I have mentioned. This was the farthest advance that day. The ravine mentioned must be well known, for along it from left to right 'till it reached our Regiment, the Brigade with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades, which latter had been halted to the left rear on raising ground with intervals too short, and had suffered from this fact equally with ourselves from the enemies fire — was "rolled up" by a furious charge from the left.

As I saw it[,] the whole Division except our Regiment was broken into a mob, madly pressing to the rear followed closely by the enemies lines. Instantly on the breaking up of the 84<sup>15th</sup> N.Y.,[1] which was next on our left, Col Sully<sup>16</sup> of our Regiment gave the order to about face and march to the rear, which we did double quickly, accompanied with a shower of cannister from a battery<sup>17</sup> which had hurried up the pasture field and which had been reported by our Pioneers just as we started.



A field and farm house and farm yard, with barn and other out buildings and stacks of grain lay between us and the Pike.<sup>18</sup> We passed

BLOG ARCHIVE

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  - ▶ September (1)
  - ▶ August (1)
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  - ▼ March (1)
    - "The whole Division except our Regiment was broken..."
- ▶ 2019 (2)
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- ▶ 2014 (9)

- ▶ 2013 (17)
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ABOUT ME

JIM BUCHANAN



Volunteer, Antietam National Battlefield Park.

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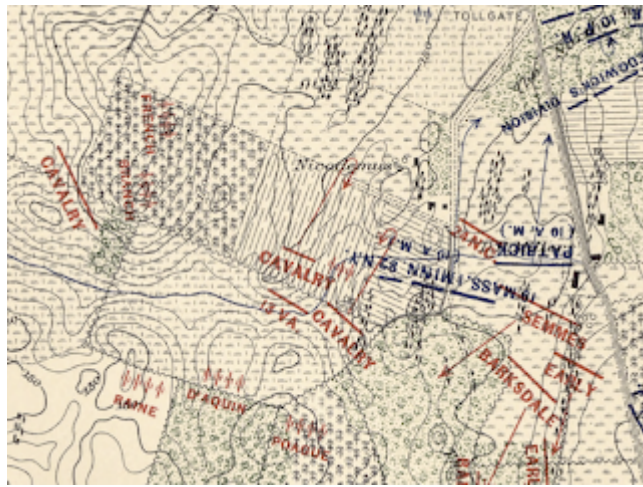


Illustration 3. Detail from the Antietam Battlefield Board 1030 map. On the western high ground, French and Branch's Batteries move into position. Raine, D'Aquin and Poague occupy a series of hills to the south. The unknown battery associated with the 13th Virginia and some of Stuarts cavalry advances toward the Nicodemus Farmstead.

over this field in line with and almost in contact with the enemy, facing about twice to repulse those following us, and rushing through the farm yard under a shower of cannister, tumbled over the stone fence in front and in less than 20 seconds formed on our colors in the road, every man in his place, and then immediately moved double quick by the right flank to the corner of the dense wood, which I have

described as bounding the long pasture field on our right. Here a Battery of ours was quickly placed a short distance out in the field and we formed in support on its left.

The enemies battery<sup>19</sup> — the same which had been following us—was quickly silenced and for about 20 minutes we exchanged fire with sharp shooters, the support of the battery, which was in the dense wood and had us at an advantage on that account; but after considerable loss to ourselves, we silenced them and were then withdrawn to the Pike at a point in rear of the same wood,<sup>20</sup> where we found other troops, I think of Franklyn's Corps;<sup>21</sup> and some time after, perhaps at noon or a little after, we rejoined our Division which had been rallied at the Batteries under Kirby<sup>22</sup> (the same which that had repulsed the enemies charging column with such frightful loss). We took position on the extreme right of the Division immediately at the guns. This position was on high land immediately back of the Pike. A few rods to our right was an orchard in which that afternoon we buried some of our dead and more the next morning.<sup>23</sup>



Illustration 4. The final position of Gorman's Brigade, and the First Minnesota on September 17. They are situated in and around Joseph Poffenberger's farmstead and orchard.

We held the same position that night and on the next morning, the 18<sup>th</sup>, I was assigned—not mustered—as Major of the Regiment, and at night fall took command of the Division picketts—a very strong guard in the wood from which we had been driven the day before, with instructions to advance them as skirmishers at earliest dawn, moving till we should strike the enemy. During the

night I reported constant movements of the enemies trains and artillery, and at the first break of day, advanced the picketts rapidly until we reached the River; soon after which I had occasion to cross the same pasture field along its lower end to the edge of the dense wood before spoken of, and noted near that corner the ruins of an old mill, or what appeared to be such. This may aid in locating our position on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

I have have referred to the Hagarstown Pike as the points of "departure and arrival" but I may have been misled; the distance between is so great that perhaps the farmyard I have mentioned is on some other road coming

obliquely into the Pike. We crossed ~~it~~ first on the side towards Sharpsburg at some distance from and out of sight of the Quaker Church<sup>24</sup> and came out on the other side of the Church and about as far from it.

I suppose from your knowledge of the field and of the movements of the different Divisions, you can, from what I have stated, locate the Regiment and my command exactly.

I hope you will not find this too tedious. But for fear of becoming so, I should have made a fuller statement, and given some interesting incidents which I have not seen in print, but the collection of which may not come with the purposes of your Board.

I am very respectfully, W. Colvill,

Ex Col 1<sup>st</sup> Minn

1 Brd Brig General

=====

William J. Colvill, Jr.<sup>25</sup>

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Willis A. Gorman's First Brigade of Sedgwick's Division, II Corps, comprised the 34th New York, 15th Massachusetts, 82nd New York, and the 1st Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup> The order of brigades of Sedgwick's Division as it advanced to the West Woods were: Willis A. Gorman, Napoleon J.T. Dana, and Oliver O. Howard.

<sup>3</sup> 220 yards.

<sup>4</sup> This is an unknown reference at this point. Sedgwick's Division encamped on the 16th due north of the Philip Pry house and orchard.

<sup>5</sup> This is Brig. Gen. Napoleon J.T. Dana's Brigade.

<sup>6</sup> II Corps Commander Edwin Vose Sumner received orders from McClellan to advance his command at approximately 7:20 a.m.

<sup>7</sup> This Antietam ford is marked on the Antietam Battlefield Board maps and lies approximately 900 yards downstream from the Upper Bridge.

<sup>8</sup> Hagerstown Pike.

<sup>9</sup> II Corps commander Edwin Vose Sumner.

<sup>10</sup> Colvill is describing the regiment's advance through Miller's Cornfield.

<sup>11</sup> West Woods.

<sup>12</sup> See Illustration 2.

<sup>13</sup> This small arms fire came from the 13th Virginia of Jubal Early's command that was protecting the left flank of the Confederate artillery arrayed on Hauser's Ridge. See Illustration 2.

<sup>14</sup> 110 yards.

<sup>15</sup> Colvill should have stated the 82nd New York.

<sup>16</sup> Col. Alfred Sully commanded the First Minnesota at Antietam.

<sup>17</sup> This may have been D'Aquin's Battery. The Antietam Battlefield Board 9:00-9:30 map shows it moving to the far left of the Confederate artillery line.

<sup>18</sup> This was the Nicodemus farmstead directly north of their 1030 position. The Antietam Battlefield Board 1030 map shows the regiment retreating north along a farm road parallel to the Hagerstown Pike and running just to the East of the Nicodemus farmstead. A stone fence bordered the west side of the farm road.

<sup>19</sup> This may have been Capt. William Thomas Poague's three gun Rockbridge (VA) Artillery. Poague recorded in his Official Report, that "when the enemy was forced to fall back, I was directed to report to General Stuart on the extreme left, and with

other guns kept up an advancing fire on the retreating enemy until he found shelter under a number of reserve batteries." Five Confederate batteries rushed to the support of Semmes Brigade's breakout to the D.R. Miller farmstead. The "other guns" that Poague mentioned were batteries commanded by Raine, D'Aquin, French, and Branch. See Illustration 3, showing their locations. OR, Series 1, Vol. 19, Part 1, pages 1009-1010.

<sup>20</sup> North Woods.

<sup>21</sup> By Noon, Gorman's Brigade, resting in the "rear" of the North Woods, were very near John Gibbon's brigade. The rest of Sedgwick's Division were holding about 200 yards due east of Gorman's left flank.

<sup>22</sup> This was Lt. George A. Woodruff's Battery or the 1st United States, Battery I. It was previously known as Kirby's battery for its commander Lt. Edmund Kirby. Kirby was on sick leave from Sept. 1-24 during the Maryland Campaign. Source: *Cullums Register*.

<sup>23</sup> See Illustration 4.

<sup>24</sup> Dunker Church.

<sup>25</sup> Captain William J. Colvill, Jr. (1830-1905), Company F, First Minnesota. Although seriously wounded at Gettysburg, Colvill survived the war and went on to serve in the state legislature and as Minnesota's Attorney General before returning to his law practice in Red Wing. See further, Al Zdon's excellent biography, "Colvill of Minnesota," published in Summer 2009 by the Minnesota Historical Society, pages 260-71 at <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/61/v61i06p260-271.pdf>.

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**Further reading:** For regimental histories, see Richard Moe, *The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993); Isaac Lyman Taylor, "Campaigning with the First Minnesota: A Civil War Diary," *Minnesota History*, March 1944, pp. 11-39; John Quinn Imholt, *The First Volunteers: History of the First Volunteer Regiment* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1963); Wayne D. Jorgenson, *Every Man Did His Duty: Pictures and Stories of the First Minnesota* (Tasora Books, 2012). Also a very useful site maintained by the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment at <http://www.1stminnesota.net>.

POSTED BY JIM BUCHANAN AT 6:27 P.M. 

LABELS: FIRST MINNESOTA

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