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Connecticut gets a 'fitting memorial'



The Connecticut monument is dedicated at Grant's Canal Tuesday. (Meredith Spencer*The Vicksburg Post)



By Pamela Hitchins

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With songs from a troubadour, flags fluttering in the breeze and smiles for "a fine day," o and Vicksburg National Military Park staffers celebrated the official dedication of the Conn monument Tuesday — newest in the inventory of the 109-year-old park. It is in a noncon land, just west of the river bridges.

Many of them sported shamrock stickers in honor of the 9th Regiment Connecticut Volunteers, the "Irish Regiment" that labored in June and July 1862, attempting to dig a canal across DeSoto Point near Delta, La.

The monument is near the only visible remnant of the attempt commissioned by Union Gen. U.S. Grant to entice the Mississippi River to bypass Vicksburg. Had the canal succeeded, a battle to conquer Vicksburg would have been less crucial, as Confederate cannon would not have been able to fire on passing Union boats.

"This is a fine day for the park to add a state monument to the otherwise grand collection of monuments that we already have," said Monika Mayr, VNMP superintendent. "It really enhances the site and adds to our ability to tell the story of the canal here."

A six-man Knights of Columbus honorary color guard, decked out in white, green, purple and red, stood at attention — three on one side of the monument, three on the other — during the ceremony. The first Supreme Knight, James T. Mullen, was a sergeant in Company C of the 9th Regiment at Vicksburg.

As Connecticut state troubadour emeritus Tom Callinan stood with his guitar, a breeze caught the Connecticut and regimental flags, and they waved broadly behind him as he sang "of Connecticut's 9th, me boys,...young men fighting for freedom in a land where they hadn't been born."

Master of ceremonies for the dedication was Robert Larkin of Cheshire, Conn. "Some 16 years ago my youngest daughter and sister visited this park where our ancestor, Pvt. John Marlow of Company C, died on July 24th during the first assault on Vicksburg in 1862," he told the crowd of about 75 people. "They found no mention of him or the 9th and no monument to the state of Connecticut."

Larkin worked for nearly 10 years to change that, becoming chairman of the Connecticut monument committee, fundraising, contacting descendants of the 9th and helping with historical and design efforts. "Our heartfelt thanks go out to all who supported us," Larkin said. "We are honored to present this monument and give Connecticut a fitting memorial here at the Vicksburg National Military Park."

Karen Senich, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, presented the monument to the park on behalf of the state. "This is a monument that is a work of art," Senich said. "We are very proud that a Connecticut artist, Stacy Mathieu, did the work you see here today."

Mathieu in turn thanked composite artist and designer Kerry Sheldon. "She did an amazing amount of work on the portraits, and worked with Bob (Larkin) to put the proper uniforms on the men, enhance the resolution of their faces, improve the composition and make sure they were historically accurate. She spent countless hours on the project."

Mathieu's work hand etching all images on the center panel extended over five months. "This is the first time I've seen it upright," she said. "It's such a great culmination of all the efforts people have put into it over the years. Just seeing it assembled on the concrete pad, with the benches — it's a nice unified whole."

The black and green granite monument stands about 10 feet high and 10 feet long, and consists of a base, two side panels, the etched centerpiece and two benches. The pieces weigh 13,597 pounds.

In his remarks, VNMP historian Terrence Winschel thanked Larkin for his vision and persistence in spearheading the effort to see the memorial realized. "Looking back on it, it has been a remarkable achievement," Winschel said.

Carol Brown, of Branford, Conn., made the trip to honor two of her ancestors, both of whom survived the canal effort and are memorialized with portraits on the monument — her great-grandfather, Lt. William O'Keefe and Capt. Lawrence O'Brien, whose sister married O'Keefe after the war. Brown was there with her two daughters, Alison Brown and Kristin Fary, both of Atlanta, and Fary's three children, Grace, 15, Paige, 14 and Jack, 6.

"We heard lots of stories from our grandmother about her Uncle Larry," Alison Brown said. "Even in the heat they had to wear their full woolen uniforms. They had to march in dress parade, wearing their packs and carrying their arms at the end of the day. They weren't even allowed to bury the men after they collapsed and died."

Winschel remarked after the ceremony that the monument can only add to the park's reputation as the "art park of the world," a moniker given to it by a Civil War veteran. "It adds to the significance of the site," he said, nodding toward what remains of the canal nearby.

The Irish Regiment, 845-men strong when mustered-in in New Haven, Conn. in the fall of 1861, saw action in Pass Christian and occupied New Orleans before venturing up the river to Vicksburg in June 1862. Though the site memorializing their efforts is called Grant's Canal, the work of the ninth was known as Williams Canal, as Union Gen. Thomas Williams commanded the effort.

The canal across the neck of a peninsula was to be long and deep enough to accommodate Union boats, Winschel said. In the high heat and humidity, "with only the muddy water of the Mississippi to drink," 153 men of the 9th died in the effort, from heat stroke, malaria, dysentery and other diseases — "a ghastly toll in human life," Winschel said.

In 1863, Union forces moved down the west side of the Mississippi, crossed the river at Bruinsburg and then moved up through Port Gibson, Raymond and Jackson before turning back toward the river. After direct assaults failed, a siege began and Vicksburg was surrendered on July 4.

The park, created by Congress in 1899, preserves much of the terrain and battlements from the war on the city's perimeter. In addition to the noncontiguous site in Louisiana, the National Park Service also owns two overlooks on Washington Street and the headquarters of Confederate commander Gen. John Pemberton on Crawford Street.

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