

MEMORIAL PROGRAM: Monday, June 7, 6:30 p.m., Graham Cemetery, one mile west of Orange on State Route 20. The Orange County Historical Society will sponsor a memorial celebration of the life and music of “Banjo” Sam Sweeny, Gen. J.E.B. Stuart’s famous musician. Sweeny died in Orange County in early 1864. Historian Stuart Vogt determined Sweeny is buried in the cemetery and arranged for a head stone.

CIVIL WAR

TOWN & COUNTY FREDERICKSBURG, VA. SATURDAY, MAY 22, 2010 THE FREE LANCE-STAR

7

UNSEEN, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

BY MICHAEL AUBRECHT
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

CONSIDERED to be the most prestigious decoration bestowed upon members of America’s armed forces, the Medal of Honor is given to those who distinguish themselves “above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States.”

Initially christened the U.S. Army Medal of Honor, the decoration was first authorized by a joint resolution of Congress on July 12, 1862, in the midst of the War Between the States, and 1,522 military men who participated in that conflict received them. To date, 3,447 men and one woman have been awarded the medal, many posthumously.

One recipient with ties to the local area was Pvt. Frederick Alber, who was awarded his Medal of Honor for valor in action. Alber was a German immigrant and member of Company A of the 17th Michigan Volunteer Infantry. He was recognized for saving an officer on May 12, 1864, during the Battle of Spotsylvania.

His citation reads: “Bravely rescued Lt. Charles H. Todd of his regiment who had been captured by a party of Confederates by shooting down one, knocking over another with the butt of his musket, and taking them both prisoners.”

The life and legacy of Frederick Alber are rather remarkable. Although they have been heavily examined by historical societies and re-enactment groups, no photograph of the man has yet been discovered. This dilemma is quite common when researching soldiers who were killed in action during the Civil War, as photography was just coming into vogue, but Alber lived until Sept. 12, 1913.

His moment of gallantry came during one of the most grueling engagements of the Civil War. Immediately following the bloody stalemate at the Wilderness, the Battle of Spotsylvania erupted and lasted from May 8 through May 21 of 1864. This desperate and ferocious encounter, at sites with names like “the Bloody Angle,” resulted in more than 30,000 casualties.

Also referred to as the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, this bat-

CIVIL WAR CORNER »

MICHAEL AUBRECHT

tle is considered to be part of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s Overland Campaign, and pitted the brash commander’s Army of the Potomac against Gen. Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Lee’s troops had been tremendously successful in defending the Old Dominion in previous years, but were terribly lacking in supplies and starting to show their diminishing numbers.

It seems fitting that Frederick Alber became a soldier, as he had to protect his own family at a very early age. After his parents emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1847, they settled on a farm in Lodi Township in Michigan. The Albers appeared to be living out the American Dream when, in July of 1849, the family was dealt a terrible blow. Both of Frederick’s parents and a brother contracted cholera and died shortly thereafter. As a result, he was left with the responsibility of caring for his brother and sister. They remained on the family farm and worked the land as their father had intended.

Frederick Alber was 24 years old when he enlisted in the 17th Michigan Infantry on July 2, 1862, and went off to fight for the Union. His regiment participated in at least nine major engagements, including the Battles of Antietam, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg, Cold Harbor and Petersburg.

The 17th Volunteers earned the tenacious nickname “Stonewall Regiment” following their inaugural fight on South Mountain. Not to be confused with their adversary’s equally regarded “Stonewall Brigade,” which was commanded by Gen. Thomas J. Jackson, the federal “Stonewallers” boasted eight Medal of Honor recipients.

After rescuing his superior at Spotsylvania, Alber stood out in the



BARBARA AND JESS FRANKLIN

Pvt. Frederick Alber was awarded the Medal of Honor for rescuing a Union officer from his Confederate captors at the Battle of Spotsylvania. His grave is in the Oregon Township Cemetery in Michigan.

minds of those who had witnessed his courage. The story of his bravery circulated, and on Feb. 21, 1865, Maj. Gen. John G. Parke formally recommended him for the Medal of Honor.

He wrote: “In addition to his undaunted bravery, exhibited in the Wilderness rescued, at Spotsylvania, May 12 [1864], Liet. [Charles] Todd, of the 17th, who was in the hands of a party of rebels, shooting down one, knocking over another with the butt of his musket and taking the captors of Lieut. Todd as prisoners, conducted them both to the rear.”

The resulting award was finally issued on July 30, 1896, some 32 years after the Battle of Spotsylvania. Most historians today believe that the medal was simply mailed to Alber, as there is no mention of it in the local papers. There was no ceremony, no formal presentation, and no celebration. As the recipient has no surviving likeness on record,

it seems understandable that the event was devoid of public fanfare.

Later that year Alber’s first wife died. Over the course of the next six years, all of his siblings passed away, leaving him as the sole family immigrant in America. In December of 1904 he remarried, but due to his advanced years he was forced to sell the farm. In 1913 he passed away at the age of 75. With his death, the world lost his images, impressions and firsthand memory of the Civil War.

That, however, is not the end of this humble soldier’s story. Thanks to his descendents from Michigan to Virginia, the legacy of Frederick Alber has been passed on from one generation to another.

In November of 1999, Oregon Township dedicated a new headstone in the local cemetery to honor the veteran. At the unveiling ceremony, a chaplain from the Sons of Union Veterans stated, “It seems well we should leave Comrade Frederick Alber to rest in honor where over him will bend the arching sky, as it did in great love when he pitched his tent, or lay down weary and footsore, by the way or on the battlefield for an hour’s sleep.”

The U.S. Senate also took a moment during the 106th Congress, First Session, to pause and recognize the event, reading aloud a declaration titled “Tribute to Civil War Hero Frederick Alber.” Finally, in spite of the absence of a photograph or recorded image, a proud but humble man received well-deserved recognition, at an extraordinary level, for his remarkable and noteworthy contribution.

This month our area acknowledges the anniversary of the Battles of Chancellorsville (April 30–May 6, 1863), the Wilderness (May 5–7, 1864) and Spotsylvania (May 8–21, 1864). As we reflect on the life of Pvt. Alber, let us remember *all* of the honorable men who fought here, those in blue and those in gray.

Michael Aubrecht of Spotsylvania County is a freelance writer. The author would like to thank Barbara Franklin, the great-great-granddaughter of Frederick Alber, as well as her husband, Jess Franklin, for introducing him to their ancestor and his extraordinary tale of valor. Visit Aubrecht’s website and blog at pinstripepress.net. E-mail him in care of gwoolf@freelancestar.com.