

The Two Henry's:
Private Henry Phillips and Private Henry Vanderver
Civil War Soldiers

At 4:30 in the morning on Friday, April 12, 1861, a ring of South Carolina artillery batteries under the command of Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. In the emerging light of dawn, Abner Doubleday answered the guns of his fellow West Point graduate. The Civil War had begun.

One can now only imagine the fear and anxiety then gripping Washington, D.C. President Lincoln was gravely concerned for the safety of the Capital and its inhabitants, located just across the Potomac from the newly born Confederacy. An urgent call went out for volunteer troops to march immediately on Washington to preserve the seat of the Union. Among the very first to respond was the Seventh Regiment of the New York State Militia, headquartered in a handsome new armory in downtown Manhattan. The regiment was known as the “Silk Stocking Regiment” for its large number of social elites, with traditions running to the beginning of the century.

Within five days of the firing on Fort Sumter, Henry Jackson Phillips presented himself in lower Manhattan to enlist for thirty days service in the Eighth Company of the Seventh Regiment. On the afternoon of Friday, April 19, Private Henry Phillips—dressed in full gray fatigue uniform and sky-blue greatcoat, with knapsack and rolled blanket on his back—left for Washington, joining one thousand comrades in arms in the regiment’s march down Broadway to rousing cheers. The Seventh Regiment, traveling by ferry, railroad and steamer, followed by almost twenty miles of arduous forced march through hostile territory, finally reached Washington six days later. Upon their arrival, Private Phillips and his regiment paraded up Pennsylvania Avenue, where they were reviewed at the White House by a very relieved President Lincoln. The Capital was safe, at least for the time being.



The Eighth Company of the Seventh Regiment in Camp in Washington, May 1861.

Private Phillips spent his first nights in Washington sleeping under the unfinished dome of the Capitol Building, soon followed by accommodations for most of May at a very well equipped Camp

Cameron, named after the Secretary of War. The camp had been funded with aid by the New York Stock Exchange. The neat rows of white tents were well stocked with cigars and glass decanters of potables. After a day of drilling and parading under the watchful eyes of Washington's citizenry, the men of the Seventh were serenaded at dusk by their own band of European-trained musicians. On some days, they were photographed in camp by the famous Mathew Brady. And when it was heard at home that their soldiers were discomfited by the growing heat of Washington in late spring, the fashionable ladies of Manhattan banded together in "Havelock Associations" to sew one-thousand white linen havelocks to cover the heads of the men, just as the British had worn in the Crimean War.

Except for the mortal wounding of a fellow soldier in the Eighth Company by the accidental discharge of a stand of poorly stacked rifle-muskets, Private Henry Phillips saw little of the crimson side of war. On June 3, he was back at the regimental armory in New York, standing with the other veterans of the "dandy Seventh" bidding each other farewell at the completion of their thirty-days service. Although many in the Seventh would remain in the regiment, dutifully serving later in the War, or would presently leave to join more bloodied regiments on distant battlefields, Henry Phillips returned home, his military career concluded.

The march of the Seventh was but the vanguard of long columns of men to flow southward to fight the Civil War. In the following two years, the War ground on at such places as Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, resulting in a continuing need for new enlistments. Nevertheless, the only black faces to be seen on the battlefield were most often those dirtied by the powder of artillery shell or minie ball. At the time, the Union government in Washington did not officially sanction the use of black soldiers. However, Northern abolitionists and others, black and white, for many different motives, increasingly called for the use of black troops in the service of the Union.

By the summer of 1863, with the introduction of conscription and the draft riots that soon followed, black federal regiments were finally authorized to meet the growing demand to fill the ranks of the Union Army. Eight miles outside Philadelphia, Camp William Penn was established to form volunteer regiments of United States Colored Troops ("USCT"). It was the largest such camp during the Civil War, and where most black soldiers from New Jersey enlisted. Many thousands of black men rendezvoused there to answer the call of Frederick Douglass: "I urge you to fly to arms and smite to death the power that would bury the Government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave!"

On August 24, 1864, twenty-one-year-old Henry Vanderver of Pluckemin, New Jersey, enrolled as a private in Company C of the 127th USCT, the last of eleven regiments to be formed at Camp William Penn. Like all such segregated regiments of the time, the enlisted men were black and their officers white. And while the government had recently abolished its policy of paying black soldiers only a fraction of what their white counterparts received, the men of the 127th faced even greater obstacles. The Confederates had promised to immediately hang or enslave any black soldier found in a Union uniform when captured in the South. Nevertheless, several weeks after mustering in, Private Henry Vanderver left Camp William Penn for City Point, Virginia, marching under the regimental flag bearing the motto of the 127th USCT, "We will prove ourselves men."

Private Henry Vanderver and his regiment put in many months of hard service at the front in the trenches before Richmond and Petersburg, where they dug earthworks, held Union lines, and pressed rebel defenses. Scores of men in the 127th regiment perished from disease and the rigors of long combat service in the field. At the battle of Deep Bottom, the regiment lost some of its

members to Confederate action. And on April 9, 1865, under the brigade command of Colonel Ulysses Doubleday—brother of Abner Doubleday, who fired the first Union shell at Fort Sumter—Private Vanderver served at Appomattox Court House when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant. However, when the Union generals and their armies paraded victoriously through Washington at the end of May for the two-day Grand Review marking the end of the Civil War, Private Vanderver and his regiment—like most black regiments—were excluded from the celebration. Instead, the 127th remained in Virginia into June, when it was moved to Texas for duty through the hot summer along the Rio Grande. Private Henry Vanderver was quietly mustered out of Union service on September 8, 1865.



Henry Vanderver's grave, Fairview Cemetery, Westfield, New Jersey

Both Henry Phillips and Henry Vanderver settled in Cranford, New Jersey, after the Civil War, choosing to spend the remainder of their lives here. Henry Phillips resided at 124 North Union Avenue—now a landmark museum—for many years. He died there on May 6, 1911, at the age of 84, and was buried at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn. Henry Vanderver lived out his life at 12 Johnson Avenue, where he died on March 3, 1932, at the age of 89. He was buried with full military honors in the Soldier's Plot at Fairview Cemetery in Westfield, where his grave is marked with the standard-issue stone of a Civil War Soldier.