

Civil War soldier is honored

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WINHALL — It's time for the commander of the Vermont Brigade to stop being the "other Grant" of the Civil War.

Lewis Addison Grant, born in Winhall on Jan. 17, 1829, was a brigadier general, wounded twice during the Civil War, and later became assistant secretary of war under President Benjamin Harrison. But he was a lieutenant colonel when he led the Vermont Brigade during the Battle of the Wilderness that began on May 5, 1864.

The battle and Col. Grant are not especially well remembered. Tyler Resch, a historian at the Bennington Museum, said recently he was not familiar with Grant or his part in the Civil War.

That may change thanks to the efforts of Howard Coffin, a Montpelier author with a special interest in the Civil War, and Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt. A monument, built from Barre granite and dedicated to the Vermont Brigade, will be installed at the site of the Battle of the Wilderness later this year.

Coffin believes the monument is long overdue. While researching a book, Coffin decided the Battle of the Wilderness, fought about 15 miles from Fredericksburg, Va., was Vermont's "great moment" of the Civil War.

The Vermont Brigade was led by Col. Grant, who was often referred to as the "other Grant" because of the fame of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Their mission in the Battle of the Wilderness was to hold an intersection of two roads.

Coffin believes that if the Confederate soldiers had been able to get past the Vermont troops, they might have been able to cut Gen. Sherman's army in half. In the days before radio, an army that was physically divided would have had little chance of operating effectively.

Although overshadowed by the Battle of Creek, depicted in a well-known painting at the Statehouse, Coffin said this battle was notable because there were so many Vermont casualties.

Coffin found the battlefield was still in such pristine condition that earthworks built by soldiers and graves could still be seen. But a developer had a contract to buy the land and build houses on it.

Coffin, who was once Jeffords' press secretary, approached the legislator, who was able to secure \$5.5 million to buy the land. It will be preserved as part of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

"This monument will give Vermonters who fought on the hallowed grounds of the Wilderness Battlefield the recognition they deserve. It will continue to tell their story of heroism during one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War for many generations to come," said Jeffords in a statement.

Coffin said he insisted the monument include a representation of the Camel's Hump peak in Washington County. In reading thousands of letters and diaries written by Vermont soldiers, Coffin found the most common reference made by the homesick troops was to seeing Camel's Hump again or being buried there.

The idea created some controversy in the committee created to design the monument.

"It was said to me, 'If a Virginian or Texan walks in to the battlefield, they won't know what they're looking at.' I said, 'I don't give a damn. The veterans and the ghosts will,'" Coffin said.

Members of the Vermont Legislature, including Sens. Richard Mazza, D-Grand Isle, and Vincent Illuzzi, R-

Essex/Orleans, secured the money to build the monument.

"It's important to remember and recognize the heroism and leadership role of regular Vermonters who fought in the Civil War and maybe kept the union together," Illuzzi said.

The monument, which is currently on display at the Rock of Ages quarry in Barre, is scheduled to be dedicated in Virginia on Sept. 9.

Coffin said Vermont might be ready to remember this battle, now but he understands why it took so long.

"After the war, everyone went to Gettysburg, Cedar Creek, Shenandoah, where they had reunions and monuments. But the Battle of the Wilderness was just too horrible. The soldiers didn't want to go back there. They were simply slaughtered there, but they held the line," Coffin said.

As if he knew how the battle would be remembered almost 150 years later, Grant described his feelings about what he had seen in a letter to a superior officer.

"It is with a sad heart that I inform you of so great a loss of Vermont's noble sons but it is with a certain pride that I assure you there are no dishonorable graves.

"The brigade has met the enemy in his strongholds, attacked him under murderous fire, and in the very face of death has repulsed with great slaughter repeated and vigorous attacks upon our lines, and on no occasion has it disgracefully turned its back to the foe.

"The flag of each regiment, though pierced and tattered, still flaunts in the face of the foe, and noble bands of veterans with thinned ranks, and but few officers to command, still stand by them; and they seem determined to stand so long as there is a man to bear their flag aloft or and enemy in the field," he wrote.