

Westtown Township History

Westtown Hosted A P.O.W. Camp After Battle Of Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, is the most famous and, to many, the most crucial battle of the American Civil War. Westtown residents may be surprised to know that our Township hosted a Prisoner Of War camp for several weeks after the battle.

Union Captain James Elder had selected a piece of the Enoch Williams farm as a training camp for African-American soldiers. Before it could be established, however, the Union army had to deal with 2,000 Union prisoners paroled and released by the Confederate Army as they withdrew from Gettysburg. The decision was made to use the Williams farm as the P.O.W. camp where these troops would remain under guard until exchanged for Confederate prisoners, under the prisoner exchange cartel in place at the time. "Camp Elder" was located along the railroad and stream at South Concord and Oakbourne Roads, the site today of two residential communities, Wild Goose Farms and Liberty Square. The Williams Farmhouse, much remodeled, still stands on the northeast corner.

The paroled prisoners marched into camp on July 14, 1863, where they lived in tents. A hospital was erected for those wounded or ill, attended by local doctors and nurses. Several who died during their captivity were buried at Green Mount Cemetery on Westtown Road in West Chester. The people in the surrounding communities opened their hearts to these real heroes of the victorious battlefield who came from all over the loyal United States and were far from home and kinfolk.

Contemporary reports on the Camp population reveal soldiers from Pennsylvania, Maine, Michigan, Wisconsin, West Virginia, New York, Delaware, Vermont, Ohio, and Massachusetts. The camp commandant was Captain Irwin of Indiana. Some soldiers were natives of Germany, Ireland, Scotland, and England. Visitors would arrive daily at the camp with treats, food, and other supplies for the soldiers. Many soldiers worked for hire, helping local farmers bring in hay, fruits, and other crops. Several romances, and subsequent marriages, developed with the local young ladies.

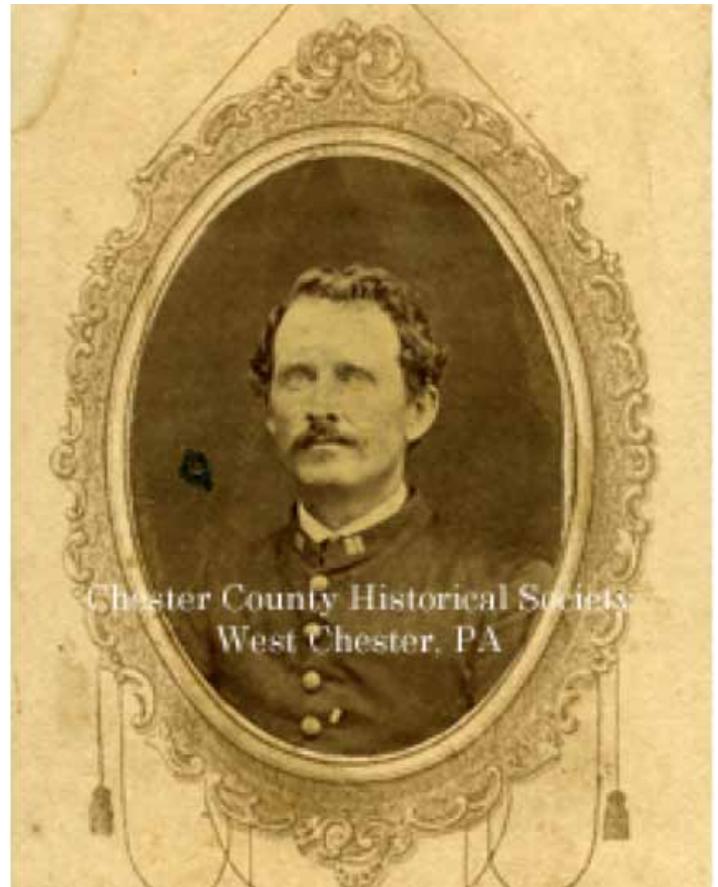
By the end of August 1863, the government decided the paroles were invalid and all the soldiers were shipped back to their regiments. Over time, the presence of a P.O.W. camp in Westtown Township was forgotten. Through the efforts of the Brandywine Valley Civil War Roundtable, the Pennsylvania Historical

and Museum Commission has approved a roadside historical marker for Camp Elder. On Saturday, September 7, 2013 at 1:00pm a dedication ceremony will be held when the marker is installed at Oakbourne Road and Trellis Lane, forever commemorating Westtown's historic connection to the Battle of Gettysburg and the Union victory.

The new Westtown Historical Commission has been established to foster a community appreciation of the rich and varied history of the Township. The Historical Commission invites those who lived or worked in Westtown prior to 1960 to share stories, old photos, anecdotes or remembrances about life in our community more than 50 years ago. These will be shared and stored in the Township archives to further educate present and future residents on the Township's rich and diverse past.

Dave Walter,

Westtown Historical Commission Chairman



Captain Irwin, Camp Commandant