***The Mystery of the Map***

By Rande Davis

Have you ever seen the hand-drawn map of Poolesville during the Civil War that accompanies this article? Framed copies hang in a number of businesses in the area and can be found in even more homes. It is intriguing in its detail and answers quite a few questions about the town, the local roads, and the military encampment at the time, but it also raises other questions. Who drew it? Is it accurate? Why was it drawn? What ever happened to the troops garrisoned here? What was life like for the troops living here at the time? In addition to these questions, most people do not know that there are a number of peculiarities about the map, and even one big error made by the artist.

During the Civil War, between troop movements and actual confrontation with the enemy, soldiers living in encampments faced long periods of boredom. Playing games such as cards, checkers, dominoes, and chess along with telling tall stories and singing songs helped to pass the time. Keeping diaries and writing home were also major activities during these lulls in action.

It was not uncommon for family members of soldiers to make a visit to their camp during these times and bring gifts and supplies to their loved ones. These items would have been things that had a touch of home or were in dire short supply. Often they were goods that were important for better health, such as patent medicines for self-doctoring, tourniquets, and handkerchiefs. Other non-regulation items were purchased by the troops from regimental sutlers, a term that describes the private sector suppliers of goods who followed the army.

The artist was John W. Sturtevant (pictured on the front page). He had plenty of time to draw this detailed map during the colder, quieter days of December just before Christmas. He drew the map to mail home to his family. He was a first sergeant in Company G of the 14th Regiment of the New Hampshire Infantry. He advanced in rank through the war. He became a second lieutenant in May of 1863, first lieutenant in January of 1864, and finally a captain in January of 1865. He was wounded twice in September 1864 at Opequan, Virginia.

When the 14th New Hampshire left Poolesville, they had their first battle on September 19, 1864 at Winchester, Virginia. In that battle, the unit had eight officers killed and five wounded. This tragic loss of the officers in just one battle placed the unit among the leaders of Federal regiments in this regrettable category. I think we can safely assume that that these unfortunate circumstances played a major role in Sturtevant’s rapid promotions.

It took nearly 115 years for the map to find its way back to Poolesville. Dr. Francis A. Lord, an American history professor specializing in the Civil War and whose maternal grandfather served in the 14th New Hampshire, eventually became the owner of the map, and his estate sold it to the Historic Medley District.

Regarding the peculiarities in the map, perhaps the most important to note is that one of the major roads leading into town does not exist today. On the map it is marked, “road to Darnestown,” and at first glance, many think it is Fisher Avenue, but it is really Coxen Road. While Coxen Road no long exists, a part remains on Whalen Commons. That small section is named Beall Street and is the location of the Poolesville Town Hall. During the Civil War, Coxen Road continued its path into town directly behind what is today Finders Keepers and advanced directly in front of the John Poole General Store.

On the map, the artist made one very personal note that is a bit hard to notice and provides the answer as to why he drew it in the first place. In depicting the tent locations of the various companies of the 14th just above the mark for the location of G Company, the artist left a tiny personal note intended for his family, simply stating “my home.” I guess if you can’t buy a post card, the next best answer is to draw your own.

It is clear he did not draw the map for strategic reasons but for personal use, but in mailing it home, he made a major breach of security. The map could have been quite valuable to Confederate troops who occasionally harassed the Union soldiers during their stay here. On the other hand, since Poolesville was primarily a confederate sympathizing town, there could have been any number of residents willing to supply the information to southern troops.

Another peculiarity is that, unlike most maps, north is at the bottom of the map not the top. Was this because the regiment was in a defensive posture located as a barrier against attack on Washington and poised to be readily able to move toward Virginia or simply because it is the bird’s eye view for his intended recipient: his family up north?

According to historian Francis Lord, the artist made a mistake in writing the date as December 29, 1863. Lord has determined that the unit left Poolesville prior to this date and did not return. If it was December 29, 1862 not 1863, perhaps the error was the kind that can be easily made at the time of yearly transition from one year to the next.

This map depicts one of the most important eras in Poolesville’s history, a history that this year is marked by the 150th anniversary of a significant skirmish in the Poolesville area. That story will be told in a later edition of the *Monocle* closer to its September date.

Note: Information for this article was obtained from the archives of the Historic Medley District and comes from an article written by Dr. Francis Lord in the May 1973 issue of *New Hampshire Profiles* and from filed correspondence between HMD and Dr. Lord.