

Oliver Bickford, Civil War ‘Deserter’?

From *The History of Bear Island* by John Hopper

In August 1862, Bear Island farmer Oliver Bickford enlisted in Company I, 12th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry when that Civil War regiment was first being organized in Meredith. He was paid a bounty of \$25. The 12th was deployed to the Virginia theatre during the fall of 1862, not long after the battle of Antietam, the bloodiest battle of the war. In December, his unit was lightly engaged in the Battle of Fredericksburg, which proved to be a major loss for the Union forces. Then in the spring of 1863, Oliver’s unit was involved in the thick of the devastating battle at Chancellorsville. The 12th NH Regiment suffered heavy losses with 41 killed, 213 wounded and 63 missing out of a total strength of 558 men. Ten Meredith men died on the battlefield or from wounds received during the fighting. Captain J.W. Lang, for whom Lang Street was named, was severely wounded. The reports of the losses “cast a pall over Meredith.”¹

Oliver Bickford was one of the missing. He was captured by the Confederate Army on May 3, 1863.² He was confined in Richmond until May 9th and then transferred to nearby City Point on the James River from where he was ‘paroled’ on May 15th. ‘Parole’ was a process by which the Union and the Confederacy exchanged prisoners with the agreement that the individuals would not reenter active service. Two days later, Oliver was sent to the Union’s ‘Camp Parole’ at Annapolis, Maryland.³ The camp, established in 1862, was an overcrowded and increasingly squalid place where the parolees apparently did little more than busy work while trying to survive on meager rations.

Oliver deserted from Annapolis on July 21, 1863. It was rumored that he had returned to Meredith. On March 12, 1864 the Provost Marshall, Nathaniel Wiggin, wrote to the Meredith sheriff, Hanson Bedee, asking for his help in capturing Oliver. Wiggin’s letter said that he understood that Oliver was hiding out on Bear Island. He asked Bedee to investigate and arrest him. Bedee followed up on the request without success. He reported back to Wiggin on March 18th that there was no trace of Oliver anywhere, including the surrounding towns. He said that the story of Oliver being out on Bear had been around for six months, but Bedee believed that Oliver had left the area the previous fall.⁴

¹ Van Veghten, “Chancellorsville and the Twelfth New Hampshire Volunteers,” mhswweb.org. The 1864 Meredith Annual Report indicated that 45% of the 500 male voters in town served in the war. Some 122 of them served as officers and enlisted men, and another 105 entered as substitutes for others. Annual Town Report, 1865.

² Civil War records of Oliver L. Bickford. Muster Roll, May & June, 1863.

³ Memorandum from Prisoner of War Records, No. 328

⁴ Civil War records of Oliver L. Bickford.

Meredith lore holds that Oliver was hiding on Bear Island when Bedee supposedly went out across the ice to search for him. The story goes that Oliver evaded Bedee by using a hidden passageway between two of the cellar holes under the houses on Lot 4. The story makes good telling, but there is no indication that Bedee even went out to the island to search for Oliver, much less was fooled by him. A viewing of the cellar holes makes the story seem highly unlikely. Rather, one has the suspicion that Bedee was not really interested in finding Oliver and never really pursued him.⁵

There were no repercussions for Oliver once the war was over. His war records show that he was simply mustered out of the army in July 1863 (the month he deserted) with no negative references around his discharge. He resumed his life in Meredith and became an active citizen.⁶ By 1868, Oliver was back in the good graces of Meredith. He bought a farm on the Neck Road from former Bear Islander, Thomas Nichols, and his wife, Climena, who happened to be Oliver's cousin.⁷ In 1871, he donated (or repaired) the Village watering trough; between 1870 and 1886, he was the Prudential (school) Committee representative in charge of a Neck school district on six different occasions; and in 1897, at age 65, he was selected to be a Fish and Game Warden.⁸ He died in 1912 and was buried in the Meetinghouse cemetery.

Oliver's place in Meredith historical literature is that of a deserter; and he technically was a 'deserter'. But he hardly warrants the negative implications associated with the term. Oliver was a man who served quite honorably in one of the most devastating battles of the Civil War, the same conflict during which Stonewall Jackson was mortally wounded. His desertion was not from duty but from the tedium and squalor of the parolee camp while he was prohibited from active duty in the army anyway. This was assuredly recognized by his subsequent welcome back to Meredith.

Oliver Bickford was one of three men who lived at some point on Bear Island and who served in the Civil War.⁹ The other two were Theophilus Dockham's son, Luther, and Nathaniel Nichols' son, Nathaniel. Luther served during the entire war and came

⁵ Hanson Bedee served many years as deputy or sheriff of Meredith from the early 1850s. He had a reputation for being very fair with townspeople. See E.H. Wilcomb, "Sheriff Played Santa Claus," in Rambles About the Weirs, 2nd part, pp. 14-16. Wilcomb says that Bedee was exempt from Civil War duty because he was poor and had five kids. He died in 1903 at the age of 92. He was buried in the Meredith Village cemetery.

⁶ Meredith tax records for 1866 and 1867 list him along with everyone else. In 1866, his only asset was a cow. In 1867 he had four cows and four sheep. Meredith Tax Records, 1866 and 1867, Meredith Historical Society archives.

⁷ BCRI, B/P 47/457. The transaction was another family affair. Oliver's wife, Julia A., was the sister of Thomas and a daughter of Nathaniel Nichols. Thomas had taken over the family farm after Nathaniel was killed in the 1855 collapse of the new Meredith town meetinghouse. Climena was the daughter of Brackett Bickford. The current address for this farm is 206 Meredith Neck Road.

⁸ Meredith Annual Reports, 1871, 1879, 1880, 1883, 1886, and 1897.

⁹ Another Meredith man who served was Dolly's grandson, George F. Nichols. The son of Robert M. Nichols, George enlisted in the same unit (Co. I, 12th NH) at the same time (Sep 9, 1862) that Oliver Bickford did. However, he apparently died of illness at Knoxville, MD less than two months after mustering in.

home unscathed. Nathaniel became ill during his service and died in 1866. Several others were drafted but did not serve, cognizant as they certainly were of Oliver's experiences. Two of them, Alonzo and James E. Bickford, were Oliver's brothers and were drafted in 1864. They were able to provide substitutes to take their places. The same was true for Charles S. and Joseph L. Bickford, the two sons of Oliver's cousin, Charles Bickford. Three others connected to Bear, Jesse Lovejoy's sons, Ezra and Solomon, and Stephen B. Meloon, also found substitutes.¹⁰ Another member of the 12th NH Regiment was indirectly connected to the island. This was George Nichols, the son of Robert M. Nichols and the grandson of Aunt Dolly Nichols. George signed on in August 1862 when that regiment was first being established. His service, however, was extremely short. He fell ill within a matter of weeks, like so many others did during the war. He died of pneumonia in October.

¹⁰ Meredith Annual Report, 1865. Substitution was a widespread, fully accepted practice during the Civil War which came to be called a "rich man's war but a poor man's fight."