



MATTOON, ILLS., APRIL 26, 1861.

#### Departure of the Volunteers.

On Monday, 15th inst., the first Company of Mattoon Volunteers, Capt. Jas. Monroe, left the place for the rendezvous at Springfield. The separation of soldiers, relatives and friends was one of the most affecting scenes we have ever witnessed.

The echoes of the bombardment of Fort Sumter were still reverberating throughout the North, when on 15 April 1861, James Monroe led the first volunteers from Mattoon, the "Mattoon Guards", to Camp Yates in Springfield.

Before leaving by train for Camp Yates, the volunteers of Captain Monroe's Mattoon Company were honored with a dinner at the Pennsylvania House Hotel and a rousing send off by the throngs of citizens gathered on Broadway. After the meal, the Ladies of Mattoon presented the Company with a flag.

James Monroe had been unanimously elected Captain of the newly formed company and when they arrived in Springfield the "Mattoon Guards" were designated as Company B of the 7<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry.

James Monroe was then 29 years old, a successful dry-goods and grocery merchant in Mattoon. He had married Mary J Cunningham, the daughter of one of Mattoon's most prominent citizens, on 1 December 1857. He had also recently been elected city president, a position he resigned to form the company of volunteers.

### 7TH ILLINOIS INFANTRY

The 7<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry was the first regiment formed in Illinois in response to President Lincoln's call for volunteers. Company A of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry was comprised of men from the Springfield area, thus Mattoon's Company B constituted the first company from elsewhere in the state to arrive and be accepted for duty.

The 7th Illinois Infantry was assigned to General U S Grant's command as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. The regiment was held in reserve at the Battle of Fort Henry.

Captain Monroe led his company into battle for the first time at Fort Donelson, Tennessee, 11 February 1862. In his report of the battle, General Charles F Smith made particular note of

*"The bravery, devotion, and efficiency of the 7<sup>th</sup> Illinois, and Captain Monroe."*

For his gallantry in action, Monroe was promoted to Major on 21 March 1862.

At the Battle of Shiloh, just a few weeks later, Major Monroe was lightly wounded and had his horse shot out from under him. Colonel Richard Rowett, commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry commended Monroe:

*"I am permitted only to mention the name of Major Monroe, who gallantly sustained his share of the command of the regiment during the whole engagement."*

This was not his only accolade from that fight, as Monroe was drawing the attention of senior commanders.

W P Anderson, Assistant Adjutant General of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry commented in his Shiloh report:

*"The conduct of Major Monroe is worthy of notice on account of his personal bravery and efforts to rally his men."*

### 123RD ILLINOIS INFANTRY

In August of 1862, the 123<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Infantry was being formed at Camp Perry in Mattoon and Major Monroe's father-in-law, James T Cunningham, a friend of President Lincoln's, travelled by train to Washington and secured a note from Lincoln to Secretary of War Stanton, authorizing Monroe to transfer to the newly formed 123<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, where he was unanimously elected Colonel.

The 123<sup>rd</sup> was mustered into service on 6 September 1862 at Camp Perry, Mattoon, Colonel James Monroe, commanding.

The 123<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Infantry was comprised of men from Coles, Clark, and Cumberland Counties. One hundred sixty-two men were from Mattoon, Companies D, H, and I containing the majority of those men. The Regiment also had 14 officers from Mattoon, the highest number from Mattoon in any regiment. There were two-2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants, two-1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants, 8-Captains, and 1-Lt Colonel, in addition to Colonel Monroe.

Notable among those officers were Lt. Colonel Jonathan Biggs and Major James A Connolly who was from Charleston.

On 19 September 1862, the Regiment was loaded onto freight cars in Mattoon and transported to Louisville, Kentucky.

On 8 October 1862, just nineteen days after leaving Mattoon, the Regiment was engaged in the battle of Perryville, Kentucky, where it lost 36 men killed and 180 wounded. This high casualty rate was largely attributed to the inexperience of the Regiment, which was rushed into battle with little training.

While the Regiment did not distinguish itself, Monroe did. During the battle, Colonel J R Taylor of the 50<sup>th</sup> Ohio fled the battlefield and Monroe was placed in charge of the Brigade.

In April of 1863, the officers of the Regiment presented Monroe with a "fine sword and belt."

On 6 May 1863, the 123<sup>rd</sup> was attached to what became known as the Wilder Lightning Brigade, Commanded by Colonel John T Wilder. By this time, Monroe had instituted a solid training regimen and the 123<sup>rd</sup> was regarded to be a well-led and trained regiment.

While part of the Wilder Brigade, Monroe made several independent raids in command of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Illinois and the 17<sup>th</sup> Indiana.

As part of the Wilder Brigade, the 123<sup>rd</sup> saw action at Hoover's Gap, on 24 June 1863, the first battle in which the recently issued Spencer repeating rifles played a significant role by multiplying the firepower of the regiment tremendously.

The Wilder's Brigade made a dash and captured a critical 7 mile long opening at Hoover's Gap in Middle Tennessee. Monroe's 123<sup>rd</sup> Infantry played a critical role in that action.

In July of 1863, James Monroe submitted his resignation in order to return to Mattoon and take care of his languishing business affairs. Colonel Wilder refused to accept the resignation, telling Monroe he was "too valuable to lose."

A few months later, On 18 September 1863, the Lightning Brigade became one of the first units engaged at what became the Battle of Chickamauga. As a clash between General William S Rosecrans and Confederate General Braxton Bragg loomed, Wilder and his Brigade along with Colonel Robert Minty's cavalry were dispatched to defend vital bridges over Chickamauga Creek at Reed's and Alexander's Bridges. Monroe's 123<sup>rd</sup> Infantry was instrumental in holding Alexander's Bridge. These bridges were all that stood in the way of Bragg's effort to cut the Union army off from Chattanooga.

After what was deemed a Confederate victory at Chickamauga, General Braxton Bragg sent Major General Joseph Wheeler on an expedition through central Tennessee to cut off the Union line of communications and supply between Chattanooga and Nashville.

It was at the village of Farmington, Tennessee that Colonel Monroe met his fate. The pursuit of Wheeler from Shelbyville, Tennessee towards Farmington, resulted in a clash of forces just east of Farmington, on 7 October 1863.

While leading his Regiment in the assault of a rebel artillery battery protected in a thicket of cedar trees, Monroe was shot through the heart. His last words were reported to be: "Don't yield, boys!"

Upon hearing of Monroe's death, Major John Levering, Chief of Staff to Major General Reynolds commented:

*"As a soldier, Colonel Monroe was faithful and fearless. He possessed a judgement which knew no flattery, a patriotism which knew no compromise with rebels."*

Colonel Monroe's body was shipped to Mattoon, where he was buried in Dodge Grove Cemetery on 15 October 1863.

On 19-20 September 1912, the 50<sup>th</sup> annual reunion of the Wilder Brigade was held in Mattoon. General Wilder travelled from his home in Chattanooga, where he had retired, to Mattoon for the event. It would be the last reunion he travelled to. In making the trip he commented:

*"I will go to the reunion only in one place. That is the spot where Colonel Monroe is buried: Mattoon."*

Colonel Monroe led an illustrious military career and is regarded as one of the true heroes from Mattoon. He had the distinction of serving in the first Regiment raised from Illinois and subsequently, commanding one of the most honored regiments in the state, the 123<sup>rd</sup>. Had Colonel James Monroe lived, he would have almost assuredly risen to the rank of a General officer.



James Monroe's  
Tombstone  
Dodge Grove Cemetery