

THE WILDER BRIGADE

At the outbreak of the Civil War, John Thomas Wilder, who was living in Greensburg, Indiana and operating a successful foundry, joined the 17th Indiana Infantry. During early fighting Wilder distinguished himself and by March of 1862 was a Colonel commanding the 17th Indiana.

On 22 December 1862, Colonel Wilder was given command of a Brigade, consisting of the 17th, 72nd, 75th Indiana and the 92nd and 98th Illinois Infantry Regiments.



Colonel John T Wilder

Wilder had observed the rapid movement of cavalry troops and was convinced that infantry, if mounted could be much more effective in rapidly deploying. His concept was that the brigade would travel rapidly by horse to contact the enemy and then fight dismounted as infantry.

In February 1863, Wilder convinced General Rosecrans of the concept and was given permission to procure mounts for the brigade.

The regiments voted to become mounted infantry and all but the 75th Indiana voted to do so. The 75th Indiana was transferred to Hall's Brigade and on 6 May 1863, the 123rd Illinois Infantry, commanded by Mattoon's Colonel James Monroe was assigned to Wilder's Brigade.

Colonel Wilder was also convinced of the superiority of the new repeating rifles saying:

"The Spencer magazine rifle was a most formidable weapon. I believe them to be the best arm for army use that I have seen."

Wilder endeavored to have the army equip his brigade with his troops and when he was rebuffed he went to his hometown bank and using his foundry as collateral, secured funds to buy Spencer Repeating rifles for the Brigade. The men all agreed to pay for their own rifles, through deductions from their meager pay.

The Brigade had its first chance to prove the effectiveness of mounted infantry as well as the increased firepower of the Spencer Rifle on 24 June 1863. Wilder's Brigade made a dash and captured a critical 7 mile long opening at Hoover's Gap in Middle Tennessee. Colonel Monroe's 123rd Infantry played a critical role in that action. General Rosecrans's army was still six miles away and the Wilder Brigade successfully held Hoover's Gap, rebuffing several attacks by Confederates under General Bates and General Johnson. The Confederates outnumbered Wilder's men 4 to 1, but the tenacity of his command and the heavy rate of fire by the Spencer's held the day until the rest of the Union army could come up.

WILDER'S BRIGADE AT HOOVER'S
GAP.
HEADQUARTERS, 123D REG. ILL. VOL.,
CAMP NEAR WARTRACE, TENN.,
July 8th, 1863.



William S Rosecrans



On 24 June, General Rosecrans published a special order to be read to all the commands:

"The conduct of Wilder's brigade should be emulated by all."

Rosecrans also directed that the brigade should thereafter be known as: "Wilder's Lightning Brigade."

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 Rosecrans and Confederate General Braxton Bragg loomed, Wilder and his Brigade along with Colonel Minty's cavalry were dispatched to defend vital bridges over the Chickamauga at Reed's and Alexander's bridges. The 123rd Infantry was instrumental in holding the Alexander bridge. These bridges were all that stood in the way of Bragg's effort to cut the Union army off from Chattanooga.

In the next two days as the battle progressed, the Lightning Brigade was seemingly everywhere. When the right flank of the Union army was falling back in disarray, Wilder's Brigade repulsed repetitive charges by a Confederate division and then counter-attacked to buy the army time to regroup. This action is credited with forcing General Bragg to revise his entire plan of battle.

Thus the Wilder Lightning Brigade became one of the first and one of the last units engaged in the Battle of Chickamauga.

Shortly after the Battle of Chickamauga the Army of the Cumberland was reorganized and the Wilder Brigade was disbanded. The individual regiments, including the 123rd Illinois Infantry were absorbed into other commands.

Colonel Wilder was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General on 7 August 1864. After the war he was active in many business ventures and died at the age of 87 in Jacksonville, Florida.

On 20 September 1899, the 36th anniversary of the Battle of Chickamauga, an 85 foot high tower was dedicated to the Wilder Brigade at the battlefield. Funds for the monument, were raised by veterans of the Brigade.

General Wilder was on hand to give the keynote address and the dedication address was given by Major James Connolly, of Charleston, who had served as Adjutant of the 123rd Illinois Infantry since its mustering in on 6 September 1862.

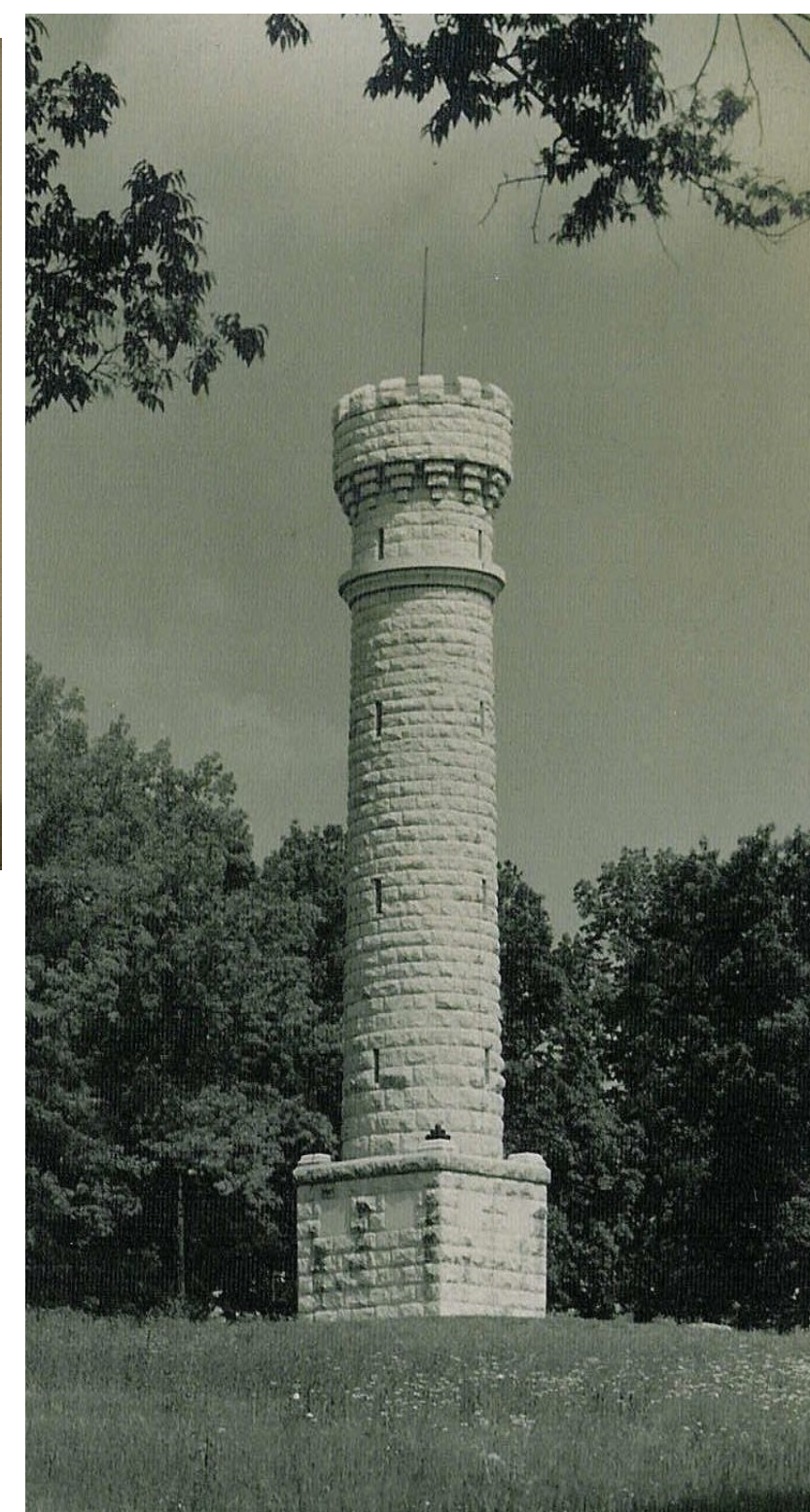


James A Connolly

On 19-20 September 1912, the 50th 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."

Over 350 veterans of the Brigade attended the reunion. In addition to Illinois veterans, members of the Brigade travelled to Mattoon from Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia and Tennessee.

REUNION NOW
IS BEING HELD
VETERANS OF WILDER'S BRIGADE
ARRIVE IN CITY FOR TWO
DAYS "JOLLIFICATION."
GEN. WILDER ACTIVE



Wilder Brigade Memorial
Chickamauga Battlefield