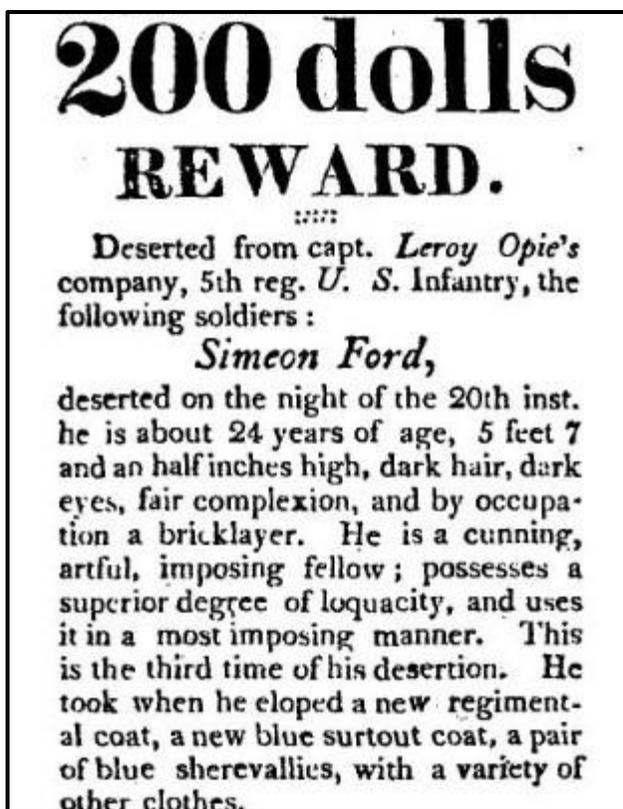


This Week in Saratoga County History

Simeon Ford – Battle-Hardened Veteran or Deserter?

Submitted by Don Carola November 9, 2022

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Plattsburgh Republican, August 27, 1814

In August 1814, Capt. Opie of the 5th Regiment of U.S. Infantry placed a bounty in the Plattsburgh Republican offering a \$200 reward for the return of four deserters, including Simeon Ford, who was accused of deserting for the third time.

Ford was described as 24 years of age, 5-feet-7 and a half inches tall, with dark hair and eyes and a fair complexion. His occupation: brick layer. He was also described as a cunning, artful, imposing fellow possessing a “superior degree of loquacity” which he used “in a most imposing manner.”

The bounty posting said when Ford fled, he took with him his new regimental uniform, a theft which surely angered Capt. Opie, who later would report Simeon’s desertion when applying for a pension.

Simeon Ford was the eldest son of Sanbun Ford, Revolutionary War patriot and early resident of Ballston. Born June 7, 1788, in Connecticut, Simeon made the migration to Ballston Spa with his parents in 1792, first stopping at Hillsdale, Columbia County, where the family is listed in the 1790 U.S. Census. The Ford family consisted of Sanbun, wife Hannah, Simeon, daughter Anna, and their newborn brother William, born Feb. 27, 1792.

Simeon signed up in the 5th Regiment in 1808 for an enlistment of five years. Documents written six years later in March 1814 by U.S. Rep. John W. Taylor (Charlton, Saratoga County) sought Simeon's honorable discharge from the Army because he was thought to have deserted.

In the various letters, Taylor tried to set the record straight. He stated that Simeon was taken ill at Fort Columbus (Governors Island in New York Harbor) two or three years into his service and was allowed to return home to recuperate and visit with friends and family.

It appears that he didn't return to duty. When war was declared against Britain on June 17, 1812, President James Madison issued an edict that allowed AWOL soldiers to return to service with no penalties. Simeon took advantage of the pardon and returned to the Army.

During Simeon's absence, the 5th Regiment, had been dispatched to the southern part of the United States. Upon re-entry to service, Simeon was placed under command of Capt. George Nelson, 6th Regiment of U.S. Infantry, a unit training at the Greenbush cantonment, now the site of the Red Mill Elementary School in East Greenbush, Rensselaer County.

Simeon soon was off to war. According to Robert Malcomson in his book "A Very Brilliant Affair" on the battle of Queenston Heights, Ontario, two companies under Capt. Nelson were accompanying artillery commanded by Lt. Col. Fenwick as it headed to Fort Niagara in the first week of August 1812.

The Battle of Queenston Heights occurred on October 13, 1812. Capt. Nelson's unit was under command of a Maj. Mullany. Fenwick and Mullany's unit were ordered to Lewiston just before the battle commenced, arriving at the embarkation site just north of Lewiston Heights, on the American side of the Niagara River, with 240 men.

The British targeted the site and poured in shot and shell. Upon seeing the carnage, Lt. Col. Fenwick ordered the men to seek high ground and hide behind the remaining trees. Capt. Nelson turned his unit about to seek shelter when he was killed by cannon fire. An American mortar unit silenced the British artillery position, upon which Fenwick noticed the reduction in artillery fire and ordered his men back to the embarkation site to cross the river into Ontario. By noon 600 American regulars were put across the river.

Of the 74 officers and men listed in his unit, Nelson was killed, another officer wounded and 15 were taken as prisoner. The first wave with Fenwick was decimated. Fenwick suffered wounds to his eye, right elbow and side. Afterward nine musket ball holes were counted in his cloak.

What appeared to be an American victory in the end became a defeat. American troops were pushed back and had to retreat across the river. Poor planning was to blame, for there weren't enough bateaux on hand to transport more troops across to the Canadian side of the river.

It is interesting to note that Simeon served with two future famous U.S. Generals, Capt. John E. Wool and Lt. Col. Winfield Scott. Simeon served under and would have seen two early power players of Albany and New York state, Stephen and Solomon Van Rensselaer, who were second cousins. Stephen would later become lieutenant governor of New York and Solomon was adjutant general of the militia 1800-1811 and elected to Congress in 1819 for two terms.

Simeon states in his pension record that he was at the battle of 40 Mile Creek in Ontario on June 8, 1813. The U.S. 6th Regiment was at the battle of Fort George in Ontario, fought two weeks earlier, so I believe he participated in both conflicts.

His brother Amasiah places him at Plattsburgh in March 1815 as well, while early newspaper ads show mail waiting at the post office for Simeon in Plattsburgh. His records note he was discharged in April 1814, yet on Aug. 25, 1814, Capt. Opie published a notice in the Plattsburgh newspaper offering a reward for his return as a deserter. The war formally ended Feb. 18, 1815 and in the end, Simeon, with the help of John Taylor, was granted a pension.

Simeon married Hannah Randall in Rensselaer on Feb. 23, 1823. They would have four children: Charlotte (born 1827), Elizabeth (b. 1836), John (b. 1838) and Sanborn (b. 1842). Simeon died Feb. 14, 1859, and is buried in the Ford plot at the Ballston Spa Village Cemetery alongside the other fighting Fords. His wife Hannah died in 1886 in Green Island, Albany County.

Was Simeon Ford a deserter or a hero? He certainly saw his share of carnage and performed his share of soldiering. As a direct descendant my vote is skewed. Two centuries later, I know where to find Simeon Ford, but I'm not sure how to collect the bounty.