

## Irish Brigade Memorial Wreath Laying on Sunday, December 11, 2024

Following the Battle at Antietam in mid-September 1862, the Union Army marched south to Warrenton and then headed toward Fredericksburg.

The **Battle of Fredericksburg** was fought from December 11<sup>th</sup> to December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1862, in and around Fredericksburg, Virginia. The battle between the Union Army, commanded by Major General Ambrose Burnside, and the Confederate Army, under General Robert E. Lee, included futile frontal attacks by the Union army on December 13 against entrenched [Confederate](#) defenders along the Sunken Wall on the heights behind the city. It is remembered as one of the most one-sided battles of the war, with Union casualties more than twice as heavy as those suffered by the Confederates.

Before we get to the events of December 13<sup>th</sup>, we need to understand the events that took place in the days and weeks prior that influenced the outcome of this battle.

Burnside replaced General George B. McClellan as commander of the Union Army on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1862. McClellan had stopped General Lee's forces at the Battle of Antietam, but had not been able to destroy Lee's army, nor did he pursue Lee aggressively enough back into Virginia to suit President Lincoln. Lincoln needed to demonstrate the success of the Union War effort before the Northern public lost confidence in his administration.

Burnside planned a late-fall offensive on Richmond that relied on quick movement and deception. Part of that plan required the Union army to cross the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg in mid-November and race to the Confederate capital of Richmond before General Lee's army could stop them.

To cross the Rappahannock, Burnside needed pontoon bridges which had to be transferred from the upper Potomac. Significant bureaucratic delays prevented Burnside from receiving the pontoon bridges in time, and Lee had time to move his army to block the crossings. On 10 December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1862, there were 120,000 Union soldiers on the Stafford side of the river waiting to cross and 80,000 Confederate soldiers in-place on the Fredericksburg side to oppose them. The Union engineers were finally able to build the bridges while under fire on the morning of December 11<sup>th</sup>. Thousands of Union troops, including the men of the Irish Brigade commanded by General Thomas Francis Meagher, crossed the river while combat continued within the city on December 11<sup>th</sup> and

12<sup>th</sup>. Once across the river, the Union soldiers prepared to assault Confederate defensive positions south of the city on the strongly fortified ridge known as Marye's Heights. At that time, the Irish Brigade consisted of five regiments: the 63rd New York Infantry, the 69th New York Infantry, the 88th New York Infantry, the 28th Massachusetts Infantry, and the 116th Pennsylvania Infantry.

December 13<sup>th</sup> began cold and overcast. A dense fog blanketed the ground and made it impossible for the armies to see each other. The fog started lifting at 10:00 am and the first Union infantry started their advance at 11:00 am. The Confederate Army responded with artillery and small arms fire from their defensive positions behind the stone wall.

After the four unsuccessful frontal attacks on Marye's Heights across the open field, the Irish Brigade was ordered forward for the fifth frontal attack. The tattered battle flags of the Irish Brigade units had not been replaced, so the new flag of the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts was the only green flag present on the battlefield that day. To further distinguish the Irish Brigade on the battlefield, the soldiers were given sprigs of boxwood to wear in their hats and buttonholes.

By nightfall, there had been a total of 14 frontal attacks by the Union army, all unsuccessful. Thousands of Union soldiers spent the cold December night on the fields leading to the heights, unable to move or assist the wounded because of Confederate fire. The opposing armies remained in position throughout the day on December 14<sup>th</sup>. That afternoon, Burnside asked Lee for a truce to attend to his wounded, which the latter granted. Of the 1200 men in the Irish Brigade who made the charge, 553 were casualties – meaning they were either killed or wounded, or were missing. A forty-six (46) percent casualty rate.

The next day, December 15<sup>th</sup>, the Union forces retreated across the river, and the Battle of Fredericksburg came to an end.

So, we are here today to place this boxwood wreath and to honor the brave men of the Irish Brigade memorialized by this monument.

The inscription on the monument reads as follows:

***Irish Brigade***  
***2nd Brigade, 1st Div., II Corps***  
***Army of the Potomac***

*While posted here in the early morning of Dec. 13, 1862, the men of the Irish Brigade placed sprigs of boxwood in their caps in honor of their Irish heritage. Later in the day, they took part in the futile assaults against confederate positions on Marye's Heights. After the battle, the Union dead closest to the Confederate positions wore sprigs of boxwood in their caps.*

	<b>Killed</b>	<b>Wounded</b>	<b>Missing</b>	<b>Totals</b>
69 <sup>th</sup> NY	10	95	23	128
88 <sup>th</sup> NY	17	97	13	127
63 <sup>rd</sup> NY	2	38	4	44
28 <sup>th</sup> MA	14	124	28	166
116 <sup>th</sup> PA	7	67	14	88
<b>Total</b>				<b>553</b>

*To the sons of Erin  
who put God, country, and duty before self,  
we must never forget  
the sacrifices they made for our freedom.  
Erin go braugh.*