

Almost 150 years after their ancestors crossed over the James River on a pontoon bridge in preparation for the initial Federal assault on Petersburg, descendants of Company K of The First Michigan Sharpshooters have returned to Petersburg National Battlefield to meet with Superintendent Lewis Rogers and park staff and pay homage to some unsung heroes of the Civil War. Company K consisted entirely of American Indians from Michigan who enlisted in the Union Army.

The tombstones in Poplar Grove National Cemetery, the final resting place of over 6,000 Union Civil War soldiers, lie flat on the ground. The park, which maintains the cemetery, has a project in the planning phase to replace the stones with new, upright markers that match the original Civil War design and do other work to rehabilitate the cultural landscape. Studies for the project revealed that some of the men of Company K were buried at Poplar Grove. “So far, five named Indian graves have been identified, but there are probably more unnamed individuals that have not yet been identified as Indians buried here,” explained the Battlefield’s Cultural Resources Manager, Julia Steele. “Of all the amazing stories that occurred here during the war, this is one of the most striking. When we started to research the role of Company K, we were touched by how deeply they were involved in the whole campaign,” Steele said.

The 1st Michigan Sharpshooters fought valiantly in every major battle in the Petersburg Campaign. The American Indians were a memorable presence at the Battle of the Crater, where they were noticed for their composure under adversity. A Union officer described watching a group of them pull their jackets over their faces and sing their death chant when trapped in the crater under Confederate fire. When Petersburg fell in April, 1865, after a nine and half month siege, the First Michigan raised the first United States flag above the city.

When the park realized there were American Indians buried at Poplar Grove, “we contacted the tribes to arrange a nation to nation consultation on how to move forward with the cemetery restoration project under the provisions of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act”, said Steele. On December 1 and 2, representatives from those tribes, including several descendants of Jacko Penaswonquot, one of the Indians buried at Poplar Grove and whose son also fought at Petersburg, have been visiting to pay respects to the men who died here in 1864 and 1865 and consult on the project.

Eric Hemenway, a Tribal Repatriation Specialist who works with the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, is one of those tribal representatives. He thinks the communication related to the graves will usher in a partnership between the Park Service and the Odawa (Ottawa), Ojibwe (Chippewa), and Potawatomi tribes, the three main groups in Michigan.

Not only will they be consulted when work occurs on known Indian graves, they will also provide information for further interpretive efforts. Hemenway would like to see an interpretive display at the cemetery mentioning the Indian graves and the contribution of

the Indian soldiers to the war. “We want to have Company K’s story told from our perspective.”

That story is one many people outside of Indian communities in Michigan have not yet heard. Hemenway said, “It’s been a local legend passed down in our community...but outside of our community, it’s like a secret. No one really knows about Company K.”

The sacrifice of the men is all the more noteworthy given the position of Indians at that time. “Their rights aren’t fully recognized, yet they voluntarily go and fight. They weren’t drafted or forced...That’s kind of amazing.” Hemenway said. In 1820, the United States Army tried to push them out of Michigan, but 40 years later, the men of Company K joined that same Army. “They went above and beyond the normal call of duty,” Hemenway said.

As for what did persuade them to fight for a nation that did not fully recognize them, Hemenway thinks it was the “warrior culture within our tribe. These men had a long lineage of fighting for their homeland and rights.” He said there was also a fear that if the Confederacy won, American Indians would join African Americans in slavery. Mingled with that fear was the hope that, if they fought for the United States, they would gain the same rights white citizens enjoyed.

The six Indians visiting this week have been moved by their experience. “To me, this is great. To me, there is no greater honor than to come here and shake hands with our ancestors in this way,” said Earl Meshigaud from the Potawatomi tribe. “They brought honor to their families and tribes.”

He described putting tobacco on the graves of the Indian men. “My thoughts, my prayers, my feelings, everything I have goes into that...that’s our good will offering to that person.” He said the experience brought tears to his eyes. “We heal together. Through tears is another way of healing, but a lot of people equate that with sadness,” he said. “They know we’re here,” he added of the spirits of the men buried in Poplar Grove.

Chuck Smythe, the ethnography program manager for the Northeast region of the National Park Service, is assisting the Park with the consultation, as is Margo Brooks, Cultural Resource Specialist at the Denver Service Center. “We’ve reunited them with ancestors who are here, who we just learned about,” he said walking amongst the graves. “We hope it will be the beginning of new connections.”

“We’re just happy the Park is being proactive and asking input from the tribes to tell their story,” Hemenway said. Despite the intervening century and a half, the tribes the men buried here belonged to are still very much alive. “We’re still here and we have a story to tell,” Hemenway concluded.