



## Beyond the Irish Brigade in the Army of the Potomac

Bert Dunkerly, March 19, 2021

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"A Donnybrook at Dusk" by Bradley Shmel, depicting the Union field hospital after the battle of Savage Station, Virginia, on June 21, 1862 | [Library of Congress](https://www.libraryofcongress.org)

March brings milder weather and the greening of the grass, and with St. Patrick's Day, it's an appropriate time to think about Irish connections to the Civil War. While the Irish Brigade of the Union Second Corps (consisting of, at different times the 63, 69, 88 NY, 28, 29 MA, and 116 PA) is often thought of, there were several Irish units on both sides.

The 9th Massachusetts from Boston had many Irish-born men in its ranks. One of only two Massachusetts regiments allowed to have a non-regulation flag, they proudly carried a green flag into battle. It featured shamrocks around the edges, but in the center was an American eagle and shield, signifying their roots and their current cause. Joining the Army of the Potomac, in 1862 they fought in the Seven Days' Battles and encountered a few Irish in the ranks of the enemy.

On June 26 at Beaver Dam Creek, they were on the periphery of the fighting and lost three men, then they fought at Gaines' Mill the next day. Here they were heavily engaged near the center of the Union line and repulsed numerous Confederate attacks. That evening they formed a rearguard above the Grapevine Bridge, allowing more disorganized Union troops to escape. They lost 231 men at Gaines' Mill.



Green Ensign of the 1st Regiment (69th N.Y. Volunteer Infantry), Irish Brigade, Union Army | U.S. Government

A few days later at Malvern Hill, they fought on the crest near the current gun line on display at the battlefield park. Here they repulsed several Confederate attacks. Daniel McNamara of the unit wrote, "Great gaps were instantly seen in the still advancing lines of gray. But they were as quickly closed without seeming to check their advance." Then the regiment charged with bayonets out to stop the Confederates. McNamara wrote that from the nearby artillery, "double-shotted canister cut great swaths in their ranks as they approached . . . They are doomed to disappointment."

Later as casualties mounted, Lt. John Doherty was wounded but did not leave the field. He used his body to shield two soldiers who were firing. He explained that although he was "useless for further service the best use he could make of himself was as a bulwark for protection to us who were not wounded." At Malvern Hill, the 9th Massachusetts lost their Colonel and Major, along with 166 more men. Altogether the 9th Massachusetts lost nearly 400 men in the Seven Days' Battles.

Ironically, fighting them at Gaines' Mill was the 1st Louisiana Special Battalion, better known as Wheat's Louisiana Tigers. Recruited from the docks of New Orleans, there were many Irish in the ranks of this unit. They wore Zouaves and wore colorful uniforms of red shirts and striped blue and white baggy pants.



Maj. Roberdeau Wheat | Wikipedia

Led by Maj. Roberdeau Wheat, the Louisiana Tigers were a tough bunch. One observer noted, "They were always ready to fight, and it made little difference to them who they fought." Wheat was killed at Gaines' Mill, and by the end of the Seven Days only 60 men were left. Because the unit suffered so heavily and Wheat's leadership was gone, the unit was disbanded and its men joined other Louisiana units

The Confederates did not form entire Irish regiments as the Union did; there was often a company composed of ethnic groups in a Confederate regiment. Examples include the Emerald Guards of the 9th Louisiana, which fought at Malvern Hill. They would end up in front of the 9th Massachusetts that afternoon

While the Irish Brigade of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac, is the most celebrated, there were so many other Irish units, on both sides whose stories should be remembered.



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