

A FORGOTTEN WAR HERO GETS HIS DUE ONCE MORE

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

Ten thousand people attended the funeral of Brig. Gen. Isaac Peace Rodman in October of 1862. Mortally wounded at the battle of Antietam on Sept. 17, Rodman was the highest-ranking Rhode Island soldier to fall in battle during the Civil War. The native of Peace Dale was a co-owner of the Rodman Textile Mills, helped found three banks in South County and served at nearly every level of town government. Elected to the General Assembly as State Senator in 1860, Rodman was well-loved throughout the state.

"He was more than just a businessman," said Lori Urso, director of the exhibit celebrating Isaac P. Rodman that went on display at the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society on the 150th anniversary of his mortal wounding. "He had to be perceived as a leader. I can imagine him as someone that could connect with people on many levels."

Rodman recruited Company E of the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers from the local militia and workers from his own mills. Elected captain, he was promoted to command of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers and then brigadier general in command of the 3rd Division of the 9th Corps after distinguishing himself in battle. On Sept. 17, 1862, Rodman discovered the ford on Antietam Creek that allowed the 9th Corps to outflank and nearly destroy the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, yet he fell mortally wounded in that attack. Rodman was laid to rest in the family cemetery on a hill overlooking Peace Dale. A tall marble obelisk marks his final resting place and served as a gathering place for Civil War veterans into the 20th century. Today, the obelisk still stands but the gravesite of South Kingstown's great hero is neglected and forgotten.

Surrounded on three sides by a gravel quarry, what is now known as South Kingstown Historic Cemetery No. 30 is accessible only by a right of way across from the Peace Dale Elementary School. The site was overgrown with weeds and bushes that left only the top of the obelisk still visible until a few days prior to the 150th anniversary of the battle of Antietam.

"They've fallen through the cracks," said Urso about many historical sites in the Ocean State. "It's hard to advocate for public money when the state is in financial trouble."

Efforts to publicize the Rodman exhibit led to Joshua Beck and Boy Scout Troop 1 of Kingston coming to the rescue. In one day, they cleared the cemetery and the access to it from Emmett Road in time for the opening of the Rodman exhibit.

The exhibit displays mementos of Gen. Rodman that tell his story as a businessman, local leader and military man.

Perhaps most poignant is a single Minié ball, similar to the one that killed Isaac Rodman, dug out of the ground near Antietam. The .58 caliber soft lead bullet was the primary weapon of destruction in the Civil War, mangling those it did not kill. Next to the bullet is a diary of one of the men that Rodman led while captain of the 2nd RI, which describes the shock and dejection of the men as they learned of the mortal wounding of their former commander.

Several of the objects on display at the Rodman exhibit, including the general's sword, have just returned from an exhibit that Urso organized for Rhode Island Day at the Antietam Visitors Center in Maryland. The contrast between how Gen. Rodman is memorialized at Antietam and nearly forgotten here in his home state is "stark," according to Urso. That neglect is something she hopes to rectify with this exhibit.

"You can talk about the battles," said Urso, "but [these objects] connect to the person; why he was so important that 10,000 people attended his funeral."

The Rodman exhibit is on display until Nov. 17 at the Old Washington County Jail, directly across Route 138 from the Upper College Road entrance to the University of Rhode Island.

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