

Baptism of Fire at Salem Church, Virginia:
Oneonta Men of the 121st NY Vol Infantry

Riverside Cemetery has a Soldiers' Monument which was dedicated in 1871, and honors twenty-seven men who died in preserving the Union. This twenty-five-foot cenotaph is inscribed with their names and eight major battles.



(F. Antonucci photo, 2024)

Twelve of the twenty-seven men inscribed on the monument were soldiers in the 121st NY, and five of these twelve died on May 3, 1863, in the Battle of Salem Church which was their baptism of fire. Company K of the 121st NY had 25 men from Oneonta, and these 25 men contributed greatly to making the 121st NY an elite fighting unit. Oneonta should always remember these men and their sacrifices.

The Formation of the 121st NY Infantry

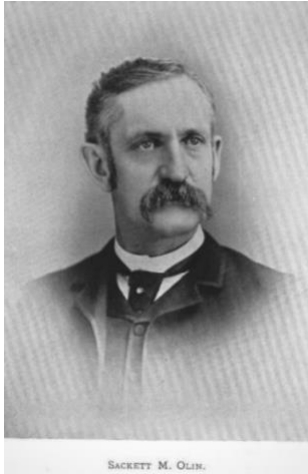
In July 1862, President Lincoln called for governors to provide 300,000 men for the Union cause; in 1861 Lincoln had called for 75,000. The 121st NY was recruited from Otsego and Herkimer Counties, and New York Governor Edwin Morgan appointed Representative Richard Franchot from Morris to organize the regiment. Nearly 1,000 men from Herkimer and Otsego County were mustered in on August 23, 1861, for three years with about a \$200 bonus (federal, state, and local) and \$23 a month pay.



Richard Franchot

Courtesy of Otsego County Historian, Cooperstown, NY

The man who recruited many from Oneonta in August 1862 was Captain Sackett Olin of Oneonta, 121st NY Co K.



Biographical Review Otsego County, 1893

Sackett Olin (age 33) had some National Guard experience and was appointed by Franchot to recruit, then lead Company K of the 121st NY Regiment (**twenty-three men from Oneonta in Co K and two in Co I**).

121st NY 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, 6th Corps

The new regiment spent a week at Fort Schuyler New York and were sent to D.C. on September 2, 1862. The regiment was assigned to Bartlett's 2nd brigade, Brooks' 1st division, 6th Corps, and stayed with this command to the end of the war. Within days of arriving in Washington they were marching towards Crampton Gap, Maryland and Antietam, Maryland (September 17, 1862) on a forced march with no tents or weapons. Many men became ill due to cold exposure, exhaustion, and diarrhea and some deserted; about 300 men were lost and put on inactive status. Upon arriving on the battlefield, they were not active in the fighting, but saw the horrors of the Antietam battle and buried the dead.

Colonel Franchot resigned on September 25, 1862 and returned to Congress as he realized he had no military experience, did not understand military protocol and bureaucracy, and his men had suffered in their first military march.

1st Lt. Emory Upton became the commander of the 121st NY on October 23, 1862; he was 23 years old, a West Point graduate and had already distinguished himself as an artillery officer at the battles of Manassas, Virginia.



Emory Upton (USAMHI)¹

Captain Sackett Olin, Company K's principal recruiter, became severely ill with chronic diarrhea and heart disease from his arrival at D.C. in September. He was hospitalized and honorably discharged on December 27, 1862. His replacement was Captain John de Peyster Douw; Douw was the nephew of Colonel R. Franchot from Morris, and the men did not trust him as they considered this nepotism. Company K was led by temporary fill-ins for weeks.

Consequently, in a short two-month period there were many leadership changes, and the men of the 121st NY Co K were still green, demoralized, undisciplined for a military unit, and untested in battle. Upton quickly needed to get this unit battle ready.

Promoted to Lt. Col., Emory Upton trained his men hard as West Point cadets with rigorous training in tactics, drills and firearms, discipline, leadership, and chain of command. Punishments, demotions, transfers and even court martials set the tone for Upton's regiment. Within six weeks Upton had his men marching towards Fredericksburg, Virginia.

At the battle of Fredericksburg, December 11-15, 1862, the 121st NY was held mostly in reserve, but did have a few killed and wounded when exposed to artillery fire. They survived the infamous Burnside Mud March defeat before heading to winter camp and more training.

Salem Church Battle, Virginia, May 3, 1863

The Baptism of Fire...this defining moment set the standard for the 121st being a “fighting regiment”.

Nine months after being mustered into the army, the 121st NY had undergone extensive training and became accustomed to military life but had not yet been battle tested. Lt. Col. Upton had developed a strong leadership team within the regiment, in particular Lt. Col. Egbert Olcott of Cherry Valley, Capt. John Kidder of Laurens, and 1 Lt. James Cronkite of Portlandville. The 121st NY was ready for the Spring campaign in May 1863.

Lt. Colonel Emory Upton's leadership at the Battle of Salem Church (See Figures 1 and 2), fought on May 3, 1863, was a pivotal moment in the larger Chancellorsville campaign. The Union 6th Corps led by Gen. John Sedgwick was advancing towards Chancellorsville along Orange Plank Road to reinforce the Union Commander Gen. Joe Hooker. Hooker had been roused by Gen. Stonewall Jackson in a surprise flanking movement and wanted Sedgwick to quickly support him.

General Robert E Lee took advantage of the terrain at Salem Heights along the Orange Plank Road and set up a strong defense near Salem Church. Due to poor communication and intelligence Sedgwick did not expect a strong force. Pressured to meet up with Hooker, Sedgwick ordered his division commander General William Brooks to take the heights, but was surprised by the strength of the rebel defenses, and could be considered an ambush.

This was the first time the 121st NY seriously engaged the enemy, and Upton felt his men were ready to prove themselves. Upton led his regiment and other units in a bold assault against Confederate forces at Salem Church. His men had to fight through about 300 yards of thick undergrowth, timber, smoke, and skirmishers before reaching about 50 yards of open ground to the brick church. Despite facing strong enemy positions and heavy fire, Upton's leadership and coolness under fire inspired his men to push forward with determination and courage.



Figure 1: Salem Church where under deadly fire Upton led his men in a direct attack, and briefly captured the building.

Photo Courtesy of the U.S. National Park Service

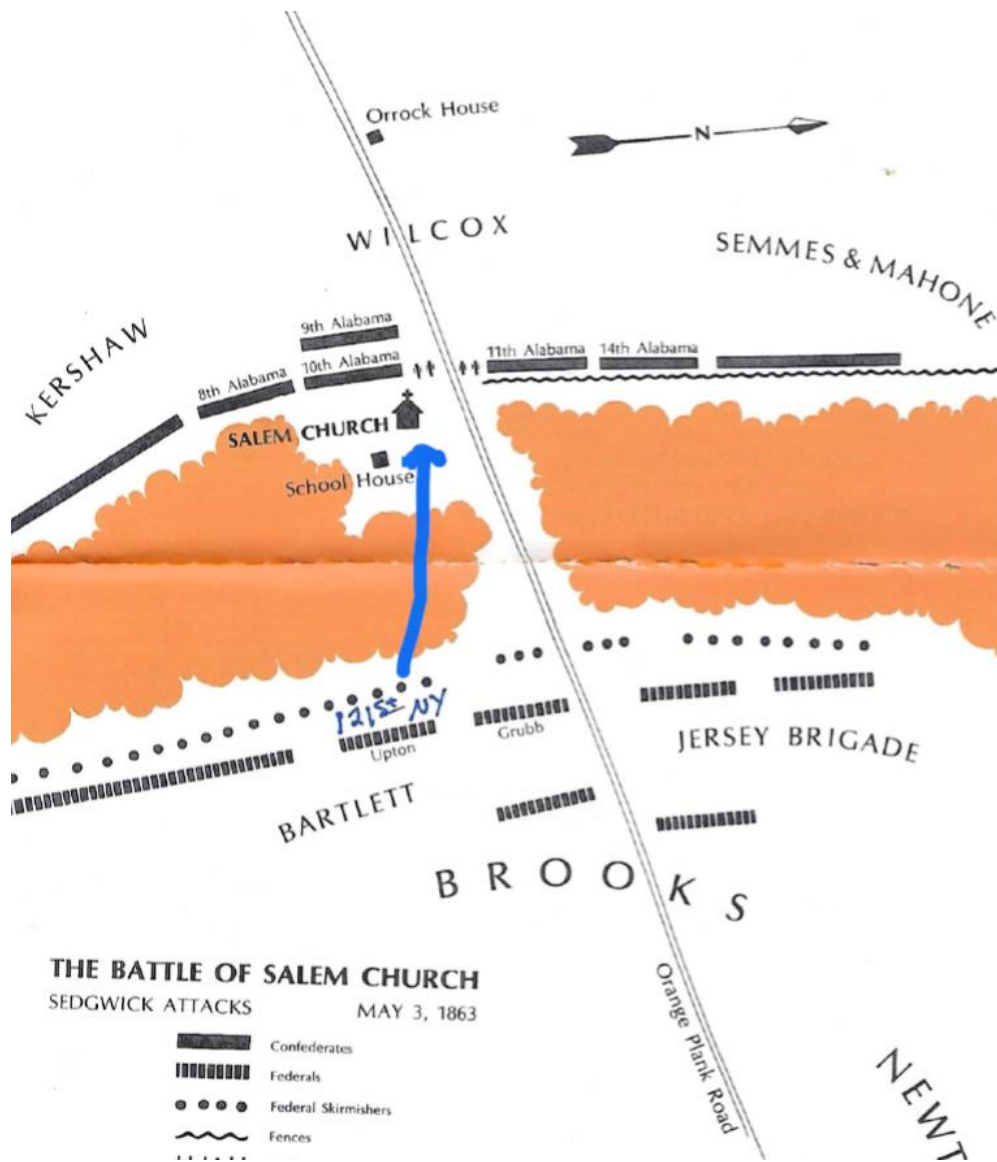


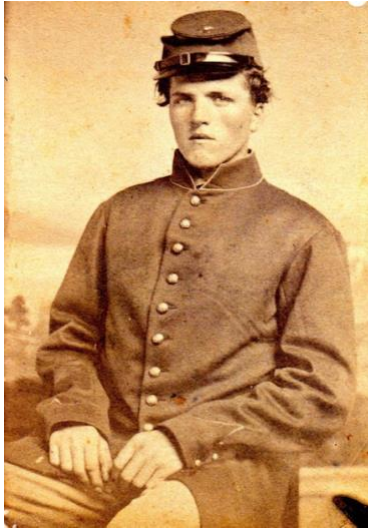
Figure 2: Salem Church Battle Map showing Upton’s Charge through the undergrowth (in red) to the clearing before the brick church (*Happel*²)

The regiment did not fall back under tremendous fire. They maintained their lines, entered the church, and captured some rebels from the 10th Alabama Regiment. However, the rebels rallied and pushed back the decimated 121st NY, which was not supported by the other NJ and Penn regiments due to heavy flanking fire from entrenchments. In the twenty-minute battle

the 121st NY went in with 453 men and lost 278, which was the **highest loss of any unit at the Chancellorsville battle (forty men from Otsego County and five from Oneonta)**. This is when Otsego and Herkimer County men showed character, stood their ground, and set the standard for this regiment's status as a "**fighting regiment**". Men from other regiments were later brought in to fill the ranks of the dead and wounded. Salem Church Battle was the event where the original men from Oneonta, Otsego/Herkimer Counties were the most united before future battles and disease decreased their numbers more.

This battle is Oneonta's and Otsego County's most defining battle, and five from Oneonta are on the Riverside Cemetery's Soldiers Monument. The men killed in action from Co. K were Edwin Barnes, Willis Ceperley, Elvin Farmer, Orin Gifford, and from Co. I, Julian Hogoboom. A couple days after the battle Confederates either buried these men in a trench pit or burned their bodies. After the war, remains were recovered and transported to Fredericksburg National Cemetery for burial with headstones.

Willis Ceperley typified the private soldiers who fought and died in those deadly twenty minutes at Salem Church.



Courtesy of David Ceperley, Ancestry Family Tree

Killed in action at Salem Church Battle on May 3, 1863. He had enlisted in Oneonta on July 28, 1862, for three years as a private. He was 18 years old, a farmer, single, 6' tall with blue eyes and brown hair. He had ten brothers and five sisters, and his parents were Martin and Desiah. He is buried at Fredericksburg National Cemetery, Virginia.

Willis had three brothers (Chauncey, Francis, and Orlando) who enlisted/drafted in 1864, served in the 90th NY Regiment, and survived the war.

After Salem Church, the 121st NY regrouped to defend General Sedgwick's retreat across the Rappahannock River.

Chancellorsville is considered Lee's greatest victory and gave him confidence to advance into Pennsylvania in order to pressure Lincoln to compromise and possibly end the war.

Upton's decimated unit rested and reorganized, and along with the 6th Corps command monitored Lee's movements to Gettysburg. Gen. Meade replaced Gen. Hooker days before the Gettysburg battle.

The 121st NY marched 109 miles in six days to get to Gettysburg on July 2, 1863. They marched 32 miles in sixteen hours and then provided support for artillery on Little Roundtop on July 3. There were no casualties, but ironically this is the only monument for the 121st NY, and this might be the only battle monument that recognizes Otsego County by **name** (see Figures 3 and 4).

There were many more battles for the 121st NY, and the Gettysburg Monument details the battles and losses, but as the war continued there were fewer men from Oneonta, Otsego/Herkimer Counties in the ranks.



121ST NEW YORK INFANTRY.
On the northerly slope of Little Round Top.

Figure 3: Gettysburg Monument for the 121st NY dedicated in 1889, which lists the twenty-five battles from Crampton Pass (September 1862) to Spotsylvania (May 1864), and finally Appomattox C.H. (April 9, 1865).

New York State Military Museum, museum.dmna.ny.gov

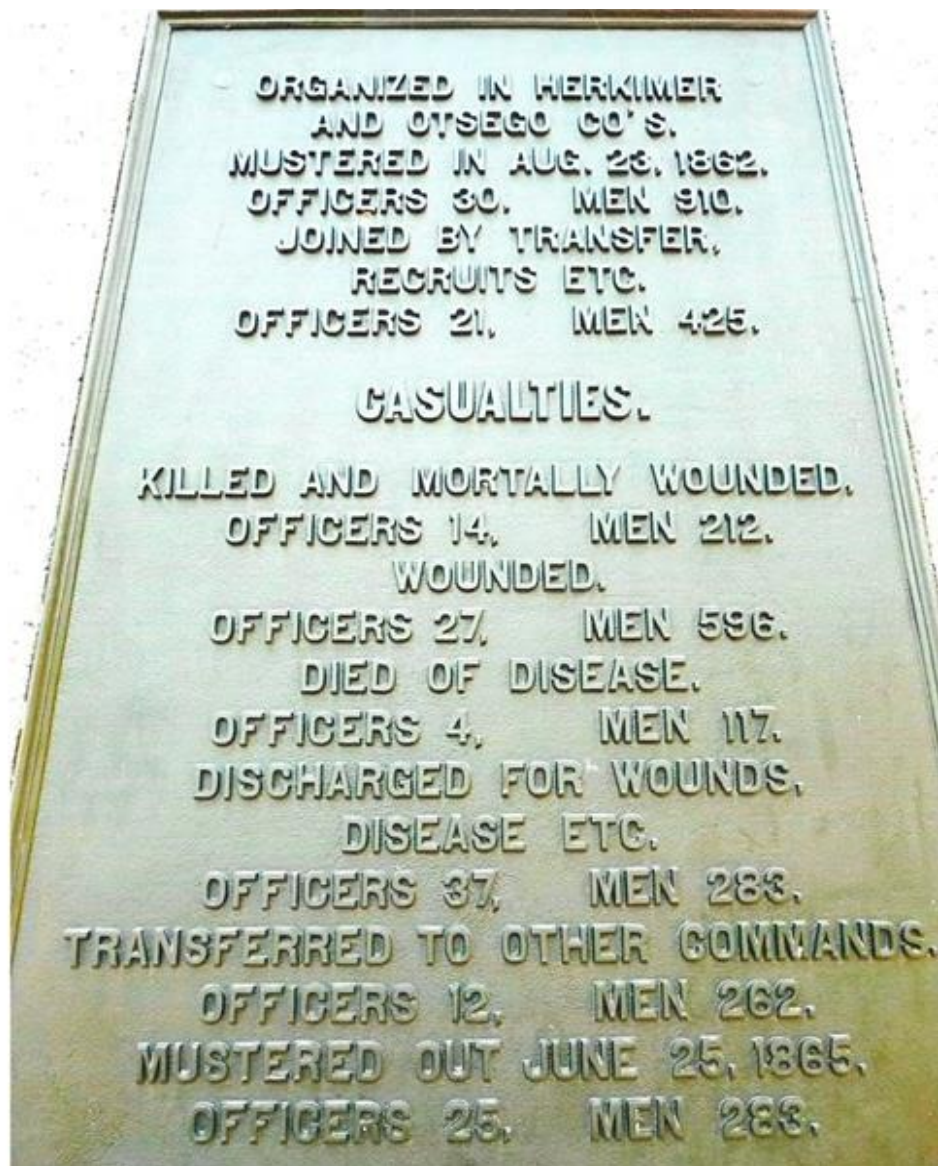


Figure 4: Plaque on the Gettysburg Monument for the 121st NY which has the name “Otsego Co” and the deadly numbers.

Photo Courtesy of Jason Cameron

We must recognize and take pride in the service and sacrifice of the men from Oneonta who fought in the war, particularly those from the 121st NY. This regiment distinguished itself as a top-tier "fighting regiment," with the qualification of having over 130 soldiers killed in action.

Of the 300 NY regiments, the 121st NY ranks second in losses with the 69th NY being first.

Of the 2000 Union regiments, the 121st NY is 16th in Fox's list of the 300 Fighting Regiments.³

The 121st NY mustered out of service on June 25, 1865, with just 275 of the original 946 men who left Herkimer and Otsego Counties with only 4 of the original 25 Oneonta men.

The character of the soldiers in the 121st NY Regiment was marked by resilience and bravery. They came from diverse backgrounds—immigrants, students, farmers, merchants, and businessmen, united by a strong sense of duty and a desire to prove themselves. Their commitment to the Union cause and loyalty to their comrades was evident in their willingness to face deadly odds at Salem Church and the battles that followed, for example Rappahannock in November 1863, Spotsylvania in May 1864, and Sailor's Creek in April 1865.



Figure 5: Photograph by Andrew Russell of men from 6th Corps, Brooks' Division, 2nd Brigade in trenches near Fredericksburg on May 3, 1863. We may be looking at men from Oneonta and the 121st NY just hours before the assault on Salem Church. *Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress, [loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.34476](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.34476)*

Oneonta Men in 121st NY Co K⁴

1. **Pvt. David Alger**
35 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin*.
Enlisted on August 9, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
mustered out June 21, 1865, at Fair Ground Hospital,
Petersburg, Virginia.

2. **Pvt. Elliot E. Barnes**
38 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 30, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
killed in action May 3, 1863, at Salem Church, Virginia.

3. **Cpl. Theodore H Briggs**
34 years old, recruited by E.C. Weaver**.
Enlisted on August 11, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three
years; mustered in as a Corporal on August 23, 1862. He
was wounded in action May 10, 1864, at Spotsylvania,
Virginia; promoted to Sergeant on March 1, 1865, and
mustered out with company on June 25, 1865, near Hall's
Hill, Virginia. Also borne as Thomas H. Briggs.

4. **Pvt. Willis Ceperley**
18 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
killed in action on May 3, 1863, at Salem Church, Virginia.
Also borne as Cipperley.

5. **Pvt. Homer W. Emmons**
18 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on August 2, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;

killed in action on May 10, 1863, at Spotsylvania, Virginia.

6. **Pvt. Elvin D. Farmer**

19 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.

Enlisted on June 26, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; killed in action on May 3, 1863, at Salem Church, Virginia.

7. **Pvt. Erastus Fritts**

21 years old, recruited by E. C. Weaver.

Enlisted on August 9, 1862 at Oneonta to serve three years and later promoted to Corporal (no date); killed in action on May 12, 1864, at Spotsylvania, Virginia.

8. **Pvt. Orin Gifford**

18 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.

Enlisted on July 26, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; wounded in action May 3, 1863, at Salem Church, Virginia, and died of his wounds on May 18, 1863.

9. **Pvt. William Hungaford**

28 years old, recruited by E.C. Weaver.

Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; deserted January 10, 1863.

10. **Pvt. James Jenks**

19 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.

Enlisted on July 26, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; promoted to Sergeant (no date). Wounded in action on October 19, 1864, near Middletown, Virginia, and died of his wounds on November 10, 1864. Also borne as Jenks.

11. **Cpl. Peter Mickel**
35 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years.
Wounded in action on May 12, 1864, at Spotsylvania, Virginia, and transferred to Veteran Reserve Corps on January 10, 1865; mustered out on June 28, 1865, as of Co. H, 9th Regiment at Washington, D.C. Also borne as Muchel and Nickle.

12. **Pvt. Wm Mickel**
38 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta for three years; discharged for disability on December 29, 1864. Also borne as Mickle.

13. **Pvt. Chas. B. Niles**
22 years old, recruited by S.M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 27, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; discharged on September 21, 1863 at Albany, New York.

14. **Capt. Sackett M Olin (S. M. Olin)**
27 years old, recruited by A. Ferguson^{***}.
Although from Oneonta, he enrolled at Mohawk on August 18, 1862, to serve three years; discharged for disability on December 27, 1862.

15. **Pvt. Alonzo O. Pratt**
21 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; discharged for disability on August 26, 1862.

16. **Pvt. John B. Shove**
21 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on August 9, 1862 at Oneonta to serve three years;
transferred to Veterans Reserve Corps on July 1, 1863, and
mustered out on June 27, 1865 with Co. H, 10th Regiment
at Washington, D.C.

17. **Pvt. Geo. I Spoor**
19 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on August 7, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
died on July 16, 1863 in hospital.

18. **Musician W. P. Stockland**
18 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on August 2, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
mustered out with company on June 25, 1865 near Hall's
Hill, Virginia; also borne as Strickland.

19. **Pvt. Franklin Strait**
42 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 30, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years;
mustered out with company on June 25, 1865 near Hall's
Hill, Virginia, as Straight; also borne as Francis Strait.

20. **Cpl. Orlando Waldron**
27 years old, recruited by S. M. Olin.
Enlisted on July 30, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years.
Wounded in action on May 3, 1863, at Salem Church,
Virginia, returned to ranks and discharged August 1, 1865
at Finley Hospital, Washington, D.C.

21. **Pvt. Peter Wiles**
40 years old, recruited by E.C. Weaver
Enlisted on July 30, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years.;
mustered out with company on June 25, 1865, near Hall's
Hill, Virginia; also borne as Wills.

22. **Pvt. Sam'l T. Wright**
35 years old, recruited by E. C. Weaver.
Enlisted on August 11, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three
years; killed in action on May 6, 1864, at the Wilderness,
Virginia.

23. **Sgt. Myron Yager**
24 years old, recruited by E.C. Weaver.
Enlisted on July 28, 1862, at Oneonta for three years;
wounded in action on May 10, 1864, at Spotsylvania,
Virginia, and in hospital at muster out of company.

Oneonta men in 121st NY Co I⁴

1. **Pvt. Albert Fuller**
18 years old, recruited by J. S. Kidder.
Enlisted on August 11, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three
years; wounded in action on May 3, 1863, at Mary's
Heights, Virginia; transferred to Veteran Reserve Corps on
February 15, 1864, and mustered out as of 114th Co, 2nd
Battalion on July 18, 1865, at Washington, D.C.

2. **Pvt. Levi H. Hogaboom**
21 years old, recruited by J.S. Kidder.

Enlisted on August 21, 1862, at Oneonta to serve three years; killed in action on May 3, 1863, at Salem Church, Virginia; also borne as Levy J. Hogaboom.

Recruiters in July-August 1862

* Capt. S.M. Olin – Sackett Olin (see above)

** E. C. Weaver, 33 – Enrolled August 14, 1862, at Laurens to serve three years as 1st Sgt Co K; discharged with rank of 1st Lt on February 14, 1865.

*** A. Ferguson – Enrolled, 42, enrolled at Albany to serve three years and mustered in as 1st Lt and adjutant on July 21, 1862; transferred to 152nd NY Infantry on August 30, 1862.

References

1. USAMHI, United States Army Military History Institute, Photo Division, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
2. Happel, Ralph, *Salem Church Embattled*, Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1980.
3. Fox, William F. *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War 1861-1865*. Albany, N.Y.: Albany Publishing, 1889.
4. New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, Saratoga, NY (museum.dmna.ny.gov).

Other Resource Material

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs On-line Collection.
([www.loc.gov>civwar](http://www.loc.gov/civwar))

Hurd D. Hamilton, *History of Otsego County, New York*, Philadelphia: Everts and Fariss, 1878.

Best, Isaac O., *History of the 121st New York State Infantry*, Chicago: Lt. Jas. H. Smith, 1921.

Cilella, Salvatore G., Jr, *Upton's Regulars: The 121st New York Infantry in the Civil War*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009.

New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War. Ca. 1861-1865.

U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1700s-Current.

U.S. Registers of Officers and Enlisted Men Mustered Into Federal Service, 1861-1865. Vol. 6: Volunteers Who Have Died While in Service.

New York, U.S., Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861- 1865.
Antonucci, Frank, *Oneonta's Civil War Soldiers: Remember the Fallen*, Greater Oneonta Historical Society, oneontahistory.org.