

Lincoln Abroad

Submitted by Steve Glazer, Lt. Col., US Army (Ret)

Abraham Lincoln is said to have never traveled overseas. Nevertheless, long ago on a damp, windswept platform in Edinburgh, Scotland, Private Henry Heath stared into the face of the president who had secured his freedom from a Confederate prison, saving him from almost certain death. Heath had sailed thousands of miles to see his commander in chief that afternoon. As they both stood in the rain, Heath doubtlessly thought back to how they first came to meet.

Henry Roswell Heath was only sixteen in August 1861 when he lied about his age to enlist in the 20th Massachusetts Infantry. Less than two months later he was at the center of the battle of Ball's Bluff, near Leesburg, Virginia. Heath's regiment was trapped on the bluff between rapidly advancing Confederate troops to its front, and a high, steep cliff overhanging the rain-swollen Potomac River at its rear. Managing to avoid being shot or drowned, young Heath was one of several hundred Union soldiers taken prisoner that day. However, before surrendering, a federal cannon wheel struck him in the chest, severely injuring him.

After a two-day forced march through mud and rain, the Union POWs were crowded onto railcars and brought to Richmond for imprisonment. There, Heath spent the war's first winter, almost dying of his wounds. In late February 1862, one of the first formal prisoner exchanges of the Civil War was arranged by Lincoln's administration. According to published accounts, Heath was at the head of the line of returning men to be personally greeted by Lincoln in Washington, with Heath gratefully shaking the president's hand. Two weeks after his seventeenth birthday, Heath was given a medical discharge. He was not expected to survive the year.

Nevertheless, Heath slowly regained his health and attended Claverack College in the scenic Hudson Valley. The wounded veteran prospered. He married well and acquired numerous business interests, as well as his own idyllic retreat in upstate New York's Thousand Islands, the summer playground of millionaires during America's Gilded Age. He also formed and ran the Cranford Realty Company, one of the largest landholders and developers in the expanding New Jersey town.



Henry R. Heath

Lincoln Abroad

Through the years, Heath never forgot his former army comrades, nor the man to whom he owed his life and prosperity. So he was especially receptive when told a touching story by his old college friend, Wallace Bruce, then U.S. consul at Edinburgh, who vacationed in September 1892 on Heath's Nobby Island in New York.



Wallace Bruce

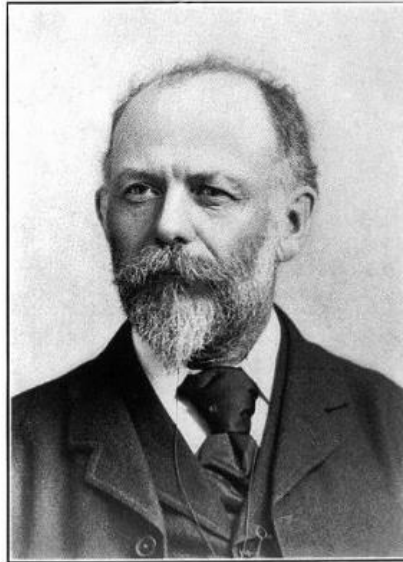
Bruce had told Heath of how in Scotland he and his wife were visited by the destitute widow of Sergeant John McEwan, Co. H, 65th Illinois ("Second Scotch Regiment"). Margaret McEwan was seeking the consul's assistance in obtaining a Civil War widow's pension from the federal government. But when Mrs. Bruce asked to pay her respects by laying flowers at the grave of the deceased man, Mrs. McEwan replied that she was unable to locate her husband's site because they were too poor to have had it marked and it had since been leveled. So that such an affront to the memory of a Union soldier should never again occur, Bruce and his wife resolved to obtain a specially marked place in Edinburgh for the burial of Scottish-American veterans of the Civil War.



John and Margaret McEwan

Lincoln Abroad

Upon hearing his friend's story, Heath was quick to offer assistance in formulating a fitting plan to honor both his fellow soldiers and their wartime leader. Heath volunteered to chair the committee of arrangements and to raise funds to pay for a grand monument of Abraham Lincoln freeing a slave, appropriately marked as a veterans memorial. Heath had little difficulty in quickly securing the funds from prominent Scottish Americans, such as Andrew Carnegie. And to execute the bronze statue of Lincoln, prominent sculptor George E. Bissell was retained, which was entirely appropriate as Bissell had served in both the Union army (as a private in the 23rd Connecticut Infantry) and later in the Union navy (as acting assistant paymaster in the South Atlantic Squadron).



George E. Bissell

Thus it came to pass that on the afternoon of August 21, 1893, Heath and Bruce looked upon Lincoln in Edinburgh's Old Calton Hill Cemetery. Carved in red Aberdeen granite at the monument's base were Lincoln's words, "To preserve the jewel of liberty in the framework of freedom." The memorial's plinth also bore the names of fallen Scotsmen who had served in the Union army. At the very top of the list was inscribed the name of John McEwan.



Scottish-American Civil War Monument

Given the dreary weather that day, abbreviated versions of dedication speeches were delivered in the pelting rain. Nevertheless, it was a solemn and momentous occasion marking the very first overseas memorial erected to honor Abraham Lincoln, and to this day, the only monument on foreign soil dedicated to the men who fought during the Civil War.