

# MARCHING INTO HISTORY WITH THE IRON BRIGADE



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My wife and I started our day at the Ephraim Wisler Home on Chambersburg Pike for the unofficial “First Shot” ceremony. Later we made our way back to the Lutheran Seminary to listen to some cannons fire. We did not stay at the Seminary very long, though. We had to get to Codori Farm by 9:30 AM for a National Park Service sponsored hike – The Last March of The Iron Brigade.

She and I had done a program a bit like this at Chancellorsville where rangers led a couple of hundred people on the path that the XI Corps took as it retreated in the face of Stonewall Jackson’s surprise attack. The Last March of the Iron Brigade had the added romance of being a “real time” event. We were about where the Iron Brigade was at 9:30 AM on July 1, 1863 and would follow in their footsteps. In the two hours since Lt. Marcellus Ephraim Jones fired the first shot out on Chambersburg Pike, things have been tough for the gravely outnumbered cavalymen under John Buford. Help is on the way however.

Park historians [Scott Hartwig](#) and [Dan Welch](#) led the march with the assistance of re-enactors who belong to the [Liberty Rifles](#). This was a big deal for them. According to their website:

*The Liberty Rifles has been offered the distinction of being the only reenacting group allowed to do a march on the battlefield during the three-day anniversary. We will be assisting NPS Rangers with their program that follows the footsteps of the Iron Brigade as they entered the field and advanced towards McPherson's Ridge exactly 150 years prior on July 1st, 1863.*

Re-enacting, which requires a significant investment of time and money, is generally done by people with day jobs, making it more of a weekend activity. The really massive re-enacting events for Gettysburg are coming this weekend following some substantial ones this past weekend. Those events take place on private property. On Sunday, we witnessed a pretty good representation of Pickett's charge with about 10,000 reenactors. As I understand it, reenactors who are allowed to participate in National Park Service events are among the elite in terms of devotion to authenticity.

Reenactors representing 2nd Wisconsin Company H and the color guard of the 19th Indiana were in the vanguard. Reenactors, some in full attire others with just the distinctive "black hats" of the Iron Brigade, (the First Brigade of the First Division of the First Corps) roamed up and down the column keeping order in the ranks.

Marching 800 or 900 civilians of every possible description for two miles including crossing some busy roads is a bit of a project. There was also assistance from mounted troopers of the Pennsylvania State Police, which was a nice, but inauthentic, touch.

We were carrying at most small back packs with bottles of water. We were going at a slow pace with several breaks for interpretation and hydration. We were not wearing wool uniforms or carrying muskets. None of us were marching to our deaths. Other than that, it was just like marching with the Iron Brigade exactly 150 years before.

The re-enactors tried their best to keep us in column of fours for safety sake. Having gone to a military high school, I was very attuned to this technique. My wife - not so much. At one point, I told her that the soldiers of the Iron Brigade probably did not march to battle holding hands. She was unmoved and was undisturbed as we shifted among rows of two, three and five despite the re-enactors encouraging us to maintain our ranks.

Ironically, our march along Seminary Ridge took us past the primary Confederate monuments. Our first stop was at the North Carolina monument, which is a real work of art. We were ordered – "If you have water, drink it." I wisely had brought three bottles. The Park historians mainly told us the stories of individual men like [Burlington Cunningham](#), a color bearer in the 19th Indiana. Being a color bearer was a critical and extremely dangerous role, since the colors were what allowed men to orient themselves to their units in the smoke and confusion of battle.

We marched past the Seminary and up onto McPherson's Ridge, where the Brigade went into action. They needed to hold the ground for as long as possible to allow the rest of the Army of the Potomac to occupy the high ground south of the town. Although, the brigade would continue to exist after Gettysburg, the Park historians called this its last march, because it would never be the same as the brigade that started out in the morning. We marched in the footsteps of 1,883 men. At the end of the battle only 691 would be left.