

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Museum director recounts Belfast's role in Civil War



Walter Griffin | BDN

Belfast Museum and Historical Society director Megan Pinette with the first annual Preservation Leadership Award presented by the Belfast Area Chamber of Commerce during its 51st annual awards ceremony at Point Lookout last month. Besides operating the city's museum, the historical society also provides outreach programs to local schools, monthly presentations and informational walks through the historic downtown and Grove Cemetery.

By [Walter Griffin](#)

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BELFAST, Maine — For its final presentation of the year, the Belfast Museum and Historical Society focused on “Belfast During the Civil War,” in advance of Veterans Day.

Approximately 100 residents filled the Abbott Room at the Belfast Free Library as museum director Megan Pinette described the city's reaction to the rebellion and the toll it took on those who went to war and volunteered to defend the home front.

“The Civil War is an enormous subject,” Pinette told the gathering. “It touched just about every aspect of people's lives at that time.”

More than 1,400 men from Belfast and the surrounding communities enlisted and saw action across the South with the 70,000 other Mainers who served with the Union Army and Navy. Ten thousand people gathered in Rockland to see the “Fighting Tigers” embark for war on the steamship Daniel Webster.

Since the end of the Civil War, Pinette said, Rockland high school athletes carried the nickname the Fighting Tigers — until this year when the school district merged with Thomaston to become the Oceanside High School Mariners.

The “Fighting Tigers” were farmers, seamen, clerks and laborers. Of them, 170 were killed in action, 137 died of disease, 40 died while being held prisoner and 443 were wounded, a casualty rate of 55 percent. Grove Cemetery is filled with the graves of Civil War victims and veterans.

Belfast being a major port and center for shipbuilding at the time, city leaders also recruited scores of men who were unable to enlist to staff batteries on the western and eastern approaches to the harbor.

“Belfast was on high alert, it was still an active port,” Pinette said.

Also on the home front, women gathered in groups to make bandages by scraping lint from pieces of cotton and linen cloth. They sent packages of needed items such as sweets, writing paper and stamps to the men in the field. They also sent a steady stream of letters with news from back home.

Daily telegraph reports of the war’s progress were displayed in Post Office Square, and local merchants included war themes in many of their advertisements for dry goods and groceries.

Pinette read from letters that had been sent from the battlefields. William Burgess, who was killed in the war, wrote after one battle that being in “Boston Bay reefing top sails in the dead of winter” would be a better place than on the front lines. Burgess, who suffered a minor head wound at Spotsylvania, wrote from Chickahominy Swamp on June 10, 1864, that he already had been in five engagements “where the bullets fly around most all of the time.” He noted that his wound was “nothing but a flesh wound ... I have the bullet in my pocket.”

However, on July 15, he notified his brother Albert, “Today when going after water I was wounded in the breast by a rebel sharpshooter. It is a rather serious wound and I trust you will be prepared for whatever may happen.” He went on to give his love to his mother and sisters and asked his brother to remind all that “If God calls me to him, remember I was a true soldier and served my country like a man.” He died a few days later.

Alden Chase wrote to his brother Hiram from outside Richmond that the Maine regiments formed the army’s “advanced guard” and that the “heavy work has got to be done by the boys from the Pine Tree State.” Chase had nothing but disdain for his officers whom he described as “aristocracy,” unwilling to go into the rural districts because “they must be where they can get ice water and first class hotel fare. ... The men have great antipathy against them and not altogether without foundation.”

Lt. Col. Philo Hersey, who settled in California after the war, returned to Belfast for the 32nd reunion of the 26th Maine Volunteers. On his way across the country, Hersey stopped at some of the battlefield sites, including Irish Bend, where he was severely wounded in the right arm. Nothing appeared familiar until a local farmer pointed out that the mill and homes in the area had been removed.

“When I asked him if he was absolutely sure of what he was telling me he said he ought to be, he was fighting on the other side in that famous scrap,” he told the gathering as reported by the Republican Journal. “He asked me if I would like something to take with me to remember the battle and although I have a pretty good reminder with me all the time, I answered yes and so he began digging around with his foot and soon handed me a bullet. We found several, which I brought back to Belfast for the boys.”