



### **Charles A. Keeler**

Thursday, August 10, 2023, is the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of early St. Joseph citizen Charles A. Keeler. You might have seen his tombstone if you're one of the many residents who enjoy strolling through City Cemetery. From its form, you would recognize it as a veteran's grave marker and note his rank as a sergeant. If you're a bit of a historian, you might read that he was a member of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Veteran Reserve Corps and recognize that he was specifically a Civil War veteran. You might quietly appreciate Sgt. Keeler's service.

In this case, though, Sgt. Keeler's marker barely scratches the surface.

Charles Augustus Keeler was born November 6, 1840, in Buffalo, New York. Charles' father, Augustus L. Keeler, was a ship's captain, and young Charles sailed with him from 1850 to 1860. The Keeler family—Augustus, his wife, Vienna; their older son, George; and Charles—moved to St. Joseph in 1851 and became successful fruit growers. Captain Keeler owned 15 acres of land, which included 682 peach trees by 1866.

With the coming of the Civil War, both George and Charles enlisted in the army.

George enlisted as a sergeant in the 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry on August 20, 1861. He served in that regiment for two years, marrying his wife, Maggie, on February 4, 1862. On August 13, 1863, George left the 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan and was promoted as a lieutenant into the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Corps d'Afrique, in Port Hudson, Texas. Unfortunately, his service with the Corps d'Afrique was short-lived, as he died on September 1, 1863. Maggie remarried and moved to Des Moines, Iowa, but died in December 1870.

Charles may have been a member of Captain Edmunds' militia company, which was formed in the St. Joseph area in May 1861, following the outbreak of the war. The Governor was petitioned to commission the company officers and to assign the company to a Michigan regiment for active service, but did not do so. Captain Edmunds drowned in an accident after returning from Lansing. The company's members abandoned hope of being assigned to a regiment as a body, and many sought other opportunities to enlist individually, many going to other states. Nineteen men, including Charles Keeler,

traveled to Wisconsin, joining the 6th Wisconsin Infantry. Charles enlisted as a private in Company B, in Prescott, Wisconsin.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin was one of four regiments that initially made up the famed "Iron Brigade" of the Army of the Potomac. It saw action at Brawner's Farm, South Mountain, and Antietam, where the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin lost 150 of the 280 men it brought into action. Due to losses, the Iron Brigade was reinforced by the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan in time for the Battle of Fredericksburg, in December 1862, and Chancellorsville in May 1862. One can only imagine Charles' experiences.

On July 1, 1863, the Iron Brigade, recently designated as the First Brigade, of the First Division, of the First Corps of the Army of the Potomac, was the first infantry unit arriving in Gettysburg to reinforce cavalry that had been fighting to slow the approaching Army of Northern Virginia. The 6th Wisconsin was led by Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Dawes, grandson of William Dawes, who rode, along with Paul Revere, to warn colonists at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. During three days of terrible fighting at Gettysburg, the regiment lost 30 killed, 116 wounded, and 22 missing of the 340 men it brought to the field, 49% of its strength, and the Iron Brigade as a whole lost 61% of its men.

Among the wounded was Private Keeler, a ball passing through one ankle and lodging in the other.

After more than six months of convalescence, Charles returned to duty, this time as a private of Co. E, 22nd Veteran Reserve Corps, on January 15, 1864. The Veteran Reserve Corps was organized to use men not fully fit for field service but who could perform limited duty and free up more able men for active service. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's principal duties included guarding supplies, recruiting, and guarding prisoners of war and military prisons. During his service in the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Charles was promoted to sergeant.

Following the war, Charles returned to St. Joseph, marrying his wife, Sara, on November 6, 1866. Unfortunately, Charles' father did not live to see the wedding, as he had passed on February 6 of that year. Charles and Sara had three children. Eugene was born in 1868 but died in September, at age seven months. Charles was born in 1870, and Bessie in 1885, and both grew to adulthood and married in time.

The 1870 census indicated Charles' occupation was "fishery." He injured his ankle in 1875, moving a safe in the railroad office, but in 1876 was the secretary of the St. Joseph fire company. He was a member of the United States Lifesaving Service Station crew in 1879, serving under the renowned Captain Joseph Napier. He served in the crew for 12 years, including 1879-1888. He took part in the rescue of the crew of the *Arab* in November 1883, off Saugatuck, the St. Joseph lifesaving crew traveling by train and boat to reach the scene.

Charles was elected "Recorder" of the Village, what today we would call the "Clerk," in 1890-1892. He was the last Village Recorder, as St. Joseph became a city in 1892, and he supervised the first election to select officials for the newly formed city.

He ran for City Clerk in that first election, on April 4, 1892, but lost to Frank Napier, 471 – 336.

He celebrated the birth of his first grandchild the same year, but Chester Keeler died in February 1898, before his sixth birthday. He saw his family line continue, with the births of granddaughters Florence, Lucile, and Virginia Lane in 1906, 1908, and 1910.

Charles remained active in his community, as a member of several fraternal organizations, in local politics, and as an election inspector. His health deteriorated in 1911, and newspaper stories indicate he was homebound.

Charles Keeler died on August 10, 1913, at his home, 807 Main Street, St. Joseph, and was buried in City Cemetery. He was an early St. Joseph pioneer whose service to the nation and our community is worth remembering.

Indeed, “Sergeant, Company E, 22<sup>nd</sup> Veteran Reserve Corps,” is only a small part of his story.

We can’t meet Charles Keeler...but we are very, very lucky. We can put a face to his name, and to his life story.



*Private Charles A. Keeler, Company B, 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry*

Do you have more information on Charles or George Keeler? Do you have an idea for a future story about our community and its history and heritage? Please send suggestions to [info@sjcity.com](mailto:info@sjcity.com) !

*August 10, 2023*