

## **Willie Johnston — Band Member from 1865–1870**

Willie Johnston played in the St. Johnsbury Band from 1865 to 1870.

Willie joined Company D of the 3rd Vermont Regiment along with his father on December 1, 1861. He was born in Salem, VT and the family had moved to St. Johnsbury by the time he re-enlisted in 1864.

The Union Army was in full retreat after the disastrous 7 Days Battle in the Peninsula Campaign in 1862. These included the battles of Gain's Mill, Savage Station, and the important rearguard action at White Oak Swamp.

They retreated in what author and historian George Benedict stated was the "saddest and weariest march...in the history of the Vermont Brigade. The rain poured in torrents, the wagons and artillery had poached the roads into canals of mud; the stouter men could hardly drag one foot after the other and the weaker fell out by the hundreds."

The army reached Harrison's Landing where the troops were to board ships bound for Fort Monroe on July 3rd. There was to be a dress parade and it was only then that Willie Johnston was found to be the only drummer of the entire division who was present for duty with his drum.

To give you an idea of the significance of this, there are ten fifers and ten drummers per regiment, three to five regiments make a brigade and several brigades make a division. It is likely that many drummer's instruments were abandoned on the march along with muskets and knapsacks. The balance were burned in the baggage trains during the retreat to prevent capture by the enemy.

For this, Willie was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and is the youngest recipient of it in our nation's history. He was twelve when he drummed at Harrison's Landing. He was also wounded at the time and spent the rest of his army service in the Veteran Reserve Corps near Alexandria, Virginia.

Willie mustered out August 31, 1865 and returned to Vermont. He attended Norwich University for a short time in Northfield, in part because of the Norwich band there and played in the St. Johnsbury Band. He was fifteen or sixteen when he joined our band and played with us until 1870. It is likely that our band played familiar tunes from the Civil War such as "Washington Greys" by Claudio S. Grafulla, which we still occasionally play.

He was with the St. Johnsbury Band when the large Civil War monument that we play our summer concerts near was dedicated August 20, 1868 and Willie moved about 1870 to the Boston area where he occasionally played with military bands. His place and cause of death are unknown but it is suspected he was lost at sea in a merchant ship.

Today you can see a picture of Willie at the St. Johnsbury History and Heritage Center along with the Band's permanent display. A pair of his drumsticks are in the display. It is fitting that Willie's picture and our band display both be a part of our history.