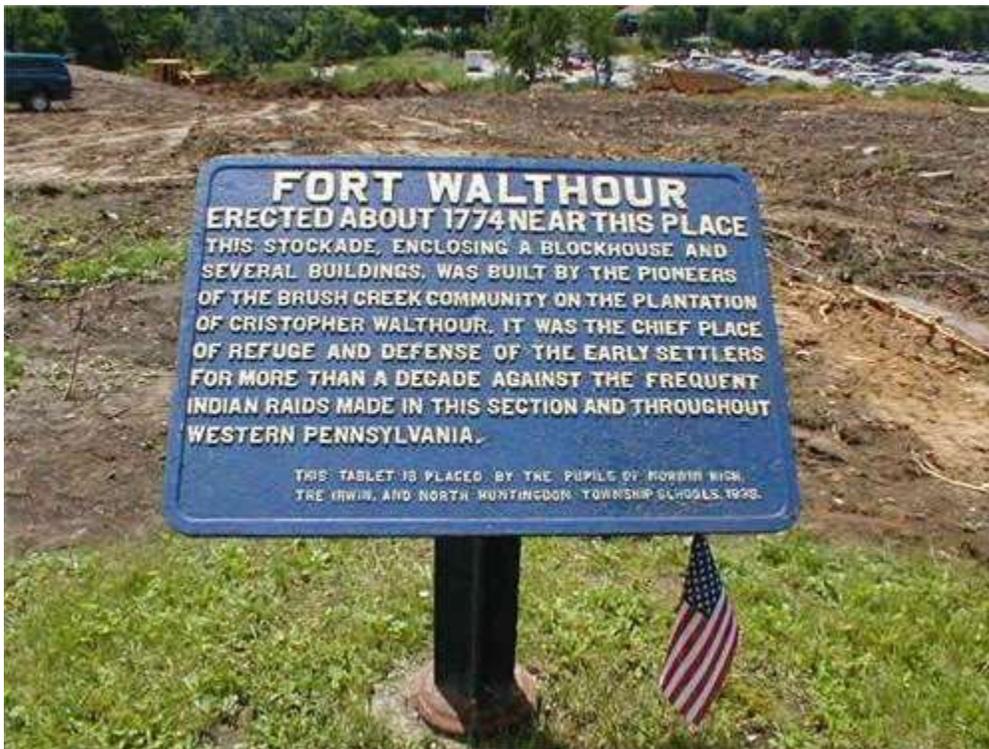


## Joseph Waltower, Drummer Boy of the McKeesport Rifle Grays

While watching a recent episode of the celebrity-genealogy TV show *Who Do You Think You Are* which featured the story of the Civil War drummer/ancestor of actress Liv Tyler and her father, rock musician Steven Tyler, my wife Jennie remarked that she believed that she also had a Civil War drummer in her family. A little research proved her to be correct. And just like the Tylers' ancestor, Jennie's relative was present at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Joseph Walter Waltower (originally spelled Walthour; it is believed that Joseph was the one who changed the spelling, probably out of weariness from hearing his name mispronounced) was born on December 29, 1831 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania (some sources say Freeport, Pennsylvania). He is descended from the Walthour family (as is Jennie), who actually had built a fort in 1774 that bore their name, in present-day North Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, which was used to protect the family and their neighbors from Indian attacks.



*You can find this historical marker beyond the far end of the Kohl's department store parking lot in North Huntingdon, along Pennsylvania Avenue.*

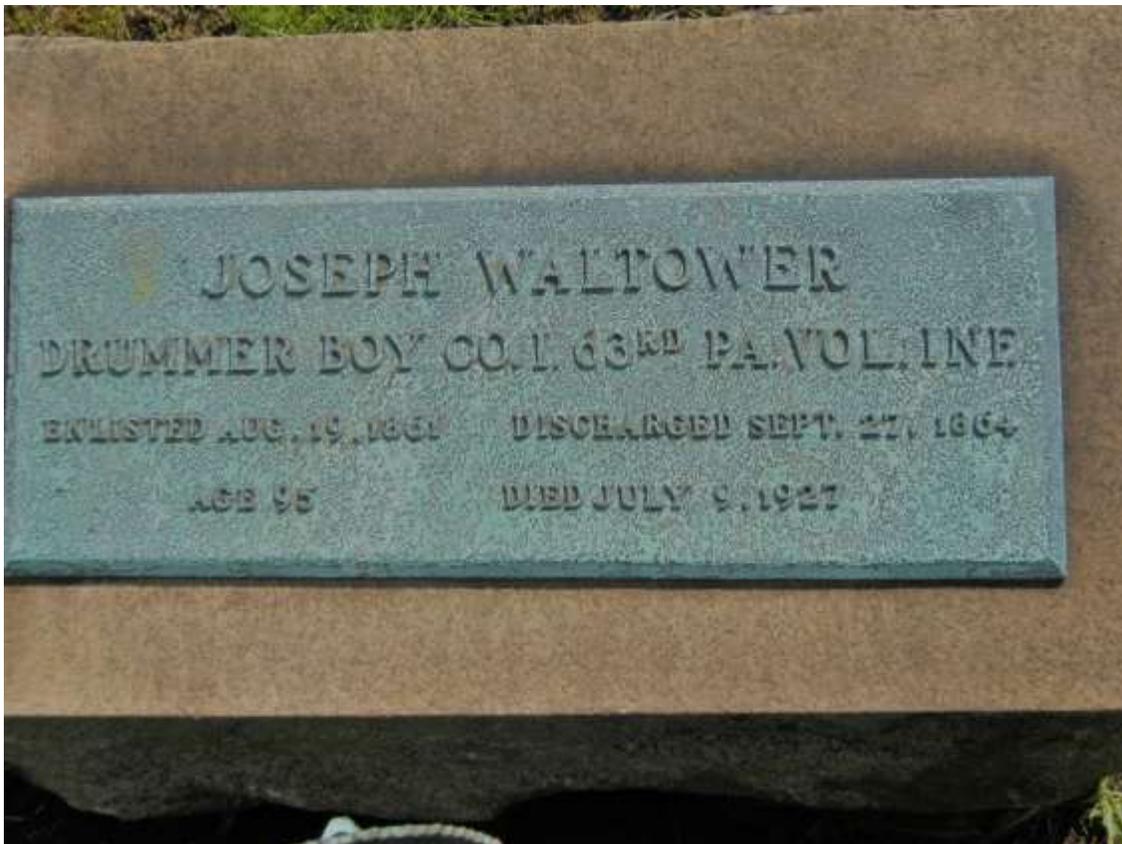
Joseph (who was not a direct ancestor of Jennie, but was a first-cousin of Jennie's 3x great-grandfather Levi Kifer, who also served in the Civil War; Joseph's father and Levi's mother were brother and sister) signed up as a "musician" (a drummer) for a 3-year enlistment on August 12, 1861 with Company I of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer

Infantry Regiment. Company I was also known as “The McKeesport Rifle Grays,” and their founding is described as follows:

“At a meeting called August 12, 1861, in Aliquippa Hall, [at the] foot of Market Street, McKeesport, Pa., for the enrollment and enlistment of a company, Rev. D. K. Rine [gave] a very stirring and patriotic speech and at its close some sixty-one young men enrolled their names. Two days after, they left on the steamer Bayard for Camp Wilkins, near Pittsburgh [Lawrenceville], command of James F. Ryan, who was the unanimous choice as Captain.”

(Excerpt from *Under the Red Patch: Story of the Sixty-third Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-1864* by Gilbert Adams Hays, 1908)

Though memorialized as a drummer “boy,” he was nearly 30 years old when he signed up. He was officially mustered in a week later, on August 19, 1861.



*Plaque at his gravesite at Mount Vernon Cemetery in Elizabeth Township, Pennsylvania.*

The original commander of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania, Colonel Alexander Hays, who later rose to command a division to heroic feats at Gettysburg, before losing his life at The Wilderness, very likely was including Joseph Waltower in the following comment in a letter to his family dated September 26, 1861: “The regiment is now entirely full, with a fine band of field music. I would like to have the children hear the fourteen drums and ten fifes roll of reveille. I have also nearly a full regimental band.”

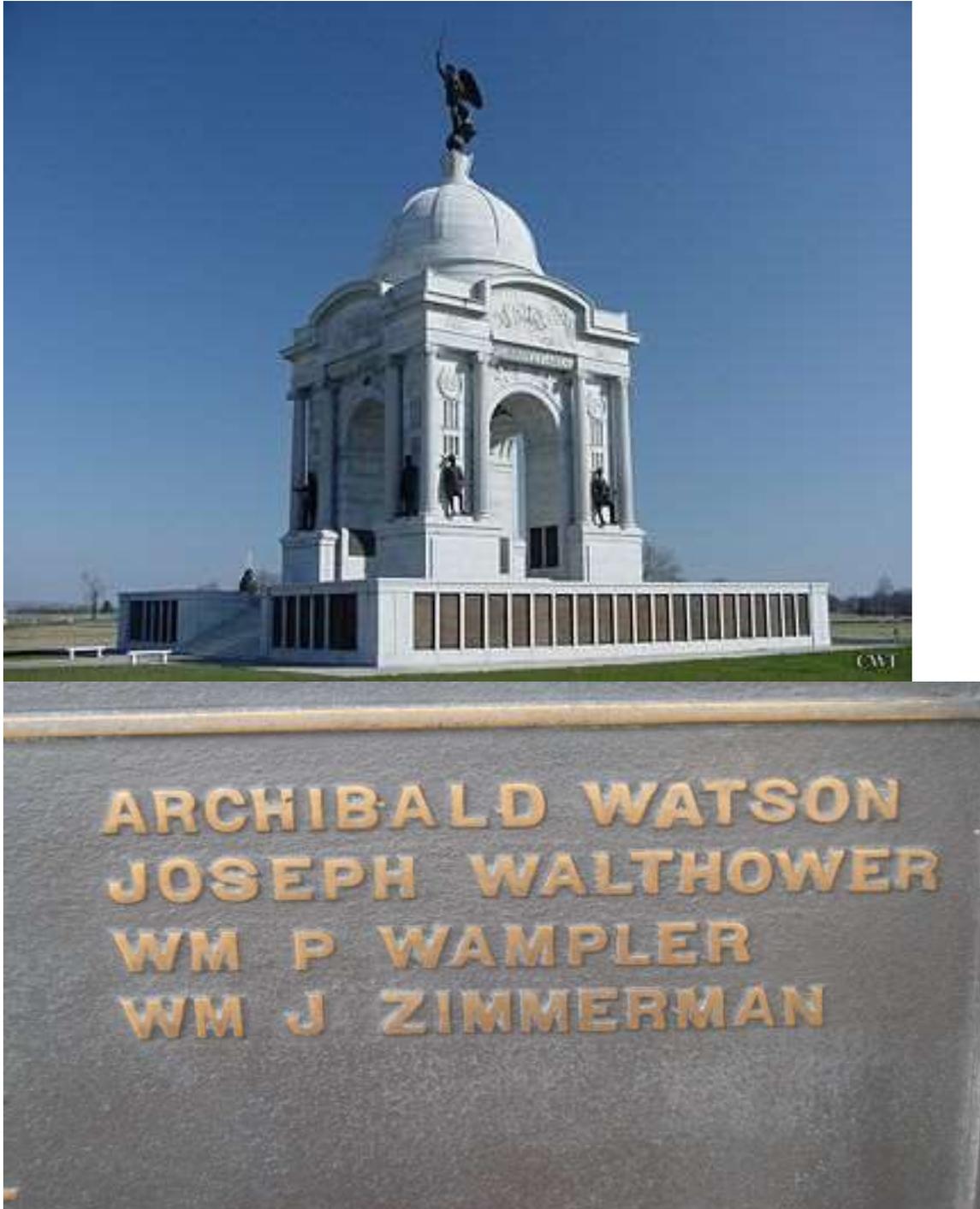
During their 3-year enlistment period, Joseph Waltower and the McKeesport Rifle Grays found themselves in the thick of some seriously horrific battles, from the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, through the Siege of Petersburg in 1864, including the Second Battle of Bull Run (where the company suffered significant casualties), Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, The Wilderness (where they again endured a disproportionate number of casualties), Spotsylvania Court House, and Cold Harbor.

At Gettysburg, the McKeesport Rifle Grays and the rest of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania fought under General Dan Sickles in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Army of the Potomac. They saw action along the Emittsburg Road in the vicinity of the Peach Orchard on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863. A monument to the 63<sup>rd</sup>'s service stands in that location, and records the following:

*Present at Gettysburg 296 officers and men  
Killed 1 man: Wounded 3 officers and 26 men  
Captured or missing 4 men*



There is no record that any of the members of The McKeesport Rifle Grays were among the regiment's casualties at Gettysburg. The names of the men of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania, including that of Joseph "Walthower", are inscribed on the Pennsylvania Monument at Gettysburg.



*(His last name is listed in its original spelling of Walthour in the 63<sup>rd</sup>'s Regimental history book written by Gilbert Adams Hays. On another regimental roster page it is spelled Walthower, as it is shown on the Pennsylvania Monument).*

Joseph Waltower was mustered out with the rest of Company I on either September 8 or 27<sup>th</sup>, 1864 (both dates are listed in different sources).

In postwar years he became a riverboat captain, and is mentioned in the following account from *Old Versailles Township* by Frank J. Kordalski Jr. and Michael R. Kordalski (2015):

“Around 1870, a steamboat named *Boston*—owned and operated by Walter B. Harrison and Joseph Waltower—provided transportation [on the Youghiogeny River] between the Market Street Wharf in McKeesport and Greenock (Elizabeth Township). At least two other boats were purchased by Joseph Waltower in subsequent years: *Scout* and *Nellie England*.”



*Photo of Joseph Waltower participating in a Memorial Day parade in Versailles, Pennsylvania, some time during one of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He is the drummer directly behind the flute player, with his drum partially concealed.*

And here is his drum, which is on permanent public display at the McKeesport History & Heritage Center.



Because of his post-war life as a riverboat owner and operator, some family wag (perhaps Joseph himself) created the line, “He went in as a drummer boy and came out a Captain.” Humorously, it seems that over the years some people have misunderstood the tongue-in-cheek nature of this comment, and believed that he literally rose from a musician to a captain in his Civil War regiment! There is, of course, no record that would substantiate this meteoric rise. But the line can be found quoted in all seriousness in more than one genealogical source, as well as in the McKeesport History & Heritage Center!



Form MAGO-41—200M—6-35  
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania  
Department of Military Affairs

RECORD OF  
BURIAL PLACE OF VETERAN

Allegheny County

NAME Waltower, Joseph		DATE OF BIRTH 12/29/1831	DATE OF DEATH 7/9/1927
VETERAN OF Civil WAR		SERVED IN ARMY ( <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ) NAVY ( ) MARINE CORPS ( )	
DATES OF SERVICE 8/19/1861 9/8/1864		ORGANIZATION(S) Co "I" 63rd Vol Inf.	RANK Drummer
CEMETERY OR PLACE OF INTERMENT NAME Mt. Vernon, Elizabeth Twp. LOCATION Elizabeth, Pa.			
LOCATION OF GRAVE IN CEMETERY		HEADSTONE Yes	
SECTION LOT No. 87	RANGE GRAVE No.	GOVERNMENT ( <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ) COUNTY ( ) FAMILY ( )	
INFORMATION GIVEN BY Ray Tucker		REMARKS	
DATE 2/14/35			

After being Recorded in the County Veterans' Grave Registration Record This card is to be sent to THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for final Record.  
RW

*Waltower Joseph*  
Co I 63 Pennsylvania Inf.  
Drummer Drummer

REFERENCE CARD.  
Original filed under  
*Waltower Joseph*

GENERAL INDEX CARD.  
(This card must not be taken from the file.)

DEAD				
NAME OF SOLDIER <i>Waltower, Joseph</i>				
SERVICE <i>Music. Co. I, 63 Regt Pa Inf.</i>				
TERM OF SERVICE <i>Enlisted 8-19-1861 Discharged Sept. 8, 1864</i>				
DATE OF FILING <i>1887, Sept. 26</i>	CLASS <i>Invalid</i>	APPLICATION NO. <i>624,016</i>	AGE <i>57</i>	CERTIFICATE NO. <i>850,014</i>
ADDITIONAL SERVICES				
REMARKS <i>Widow.</i> <i>Minor.</i>				
<i>Wm. 627 1887-1888</i> <i>Wid. Tucker 9-1927. in Mt. Vernon, Pa.</i>				



*Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century photo of Joseph Waltower with three members of his extended family.*

Joseph Walter Waltower married Lydia Ann Newell in 1858 (thus making him a married drummer “boy” as he marched off to the Civil War). Together they would have six children. He lived to the ripe old age of 95. He died on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1927 in Versailles, Pennsylvania. He is buried in Mount Vernon Cemetery in Elizabeth Township, Pennsylvania.

*Note: The Borough of Versailles, Pennsylvania, where Joseph lived out his post-war life, is pronounced—to the doubtless horror of the French if they ever found out—ver-SALES.*



*By Paul Blackham 2017*