

Living History: Bringing New Life to Alton's Jaeger Guard (and Other Heroes of Old)

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – In the years before the Civil War, Alton was home to a group of German and Swiss immigrants who formed a militia company called the Alton Jaeger Guards.

While information on these men is sparse, a group of modern Altonians are reenacting their legacy. Current Alton Jaeger Guard reenactor, Zach Hardin said most of the references to the militiamen are found in old newspaper clippings and out-of-print books of Madison County History. They were first mentioned in 1851, and subsequently “answered the call of Lincoln,” when the Civil War began in 1861. Many of these Jaeger Guards went from Alton to Springfield to get marching orders.

“They were not how you'd consider a modern militia today,” Hardin said in a Facebook message. “Drill companies were popular during that time period and most local towns had one – if not several – militia units.”

They were joined in “answering the call of Lincoln” by the Alton City Guards, Alton Union Guards and the Buckmaster Guards. Hardin and his fellow reenactors remember this oft-forgotten warriors through “living history.” While he has experience in historical reenactments of soldiers from many major conflicts (even being featured in a

World War II historical drama as a German soldier), Hardin and his group have been specifically attempting to bring life to former Alton militia groups.

“Our primary focus is to represent a myriad of units from Alton, Illinois, such as the 9th Illinois, 22nd Illinois, 32nd Illinois, 97th Illinois and 144th Illinois, all regiments with strong ties to Alton,” he said. “We took our name from a Pre-War Militia Unit from Alton, which was among the first to volunteer to serve the Union in the Civil War, however we do not intend to only focus on the Alton Jaeger Guard volunteers. The goal of the re-created Alton Jaeger Guards is to preserve the memory of the sons of Alton, who sacrificed everything during the American Civil War.

“Once we are further established, we'd like to help with the preservation of some of Alton's Civil War sites, and perhaps bring some sort of event to the town. Men from Alton, Illinois fired some of the first shots of the war and served until the end with honor and distinction. Their legacy in Alton is now nothing more than the rubble of a prison wall and Union cannon, built by local veterans of the Civil War. Hopefully, through education, we can remind not only Altonians, but Americans all around, of the sacrifices made by men of Alton in the American Civil War.”



To remember the sacrifices of Altonians of the past, Hardin and his group mustered about 25 men at Camp DuBois in Wood River to prepare for the 2019 event season. Next month, around 20 Altonians will be heading to Fort Blakely outside Mobile, Alabama to recreate the assault on that fort, which lasted from April 2-9, 1865. They will be portraying men from the 37th Illinois Volunteer Infantry – originally from Northern Illinois, but refreshed with men from the 97th Illinois, which is often referred to as “The Alton Regiment.”

The event the group is most excited to do, though, is participating in the Alton Memorial Day Parade, which is the oldest in the United States.

“We plan to bring a large number of soldiers to recreate the 32nd Illinois Infantry Company F from Alton, Illinois, when they returned on veteran furlough,” Hardin said. “It will be an honor to portray Altonians from Lincoln's Grand Army in front of Altonians for the first time in over 150 years.”



As for the Jaeger Guards of old, they were led by John H. Kuhn. They became part of Company A of the 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, and served until the war's

bloody conclusion. Hardin said they were one of the first units on the line in the Battle of Shiloh, where they suffered tremendous casualties. They continued serving in the war's Western Front and took part in Sherman's March to the Sea. Many of the Jaeger Guards gave their lives for the cause and, therefore, earned the nickname "The Bloody Ninth." They suffered more casualties than any other Illinois Unit at that time. As many as 426 from an estimated 1,000 troops were killed during the war's course.

"The Alton Jaeger Guards represent something that is often overlooked when it comes to the Civil War, and the success and growth of our nation," Hardin said. "Over 200,000 German and 150,000 Irish-born men volunteered to serve and answer Lincoln's call, prepared to put their lives on the line for their adopted country. Many natives disliked the influx of immigrants – much like today – but their willingness to put aside differences for something greater than themselves is something we can all learn from today. Not only do they represent sacrifices made by immigrants, but also the sacrifices made by the millions of volunteers during the Civil War."

More information on the Alton Jaeger Guards, including where they may appear next, can be found on their Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/altonjaegerguards/>