

## Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer Stationed in Elizabethtown



A battalion (two companies) of the Seventh Cavalry arrived in Elizabethtown, Kentucky on April 3, 1871. Also assigned to this post was a battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer assumed command of the post upon his arrival on Sept. 3, 1871. Custer, the “boy-wonder”, was the youngest Brigadier General in the Union Army in the Civil War at age 23. By the war’s end, he commanded the Third Cavalry Division under General Philip Sheridan. Though he attained the rank of Brevet Major General of Volunteers, Custer’s rank in the Army line was only Captain. When the Regular Army was reorganized in 1866, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the newly formed Seventh Cavalry. In 1871, the Seventh Cavalry had been on active duty, engaged in fighting hostile Indians on the plains, for five years. Their most celebrated victory was at the battle of the Washita in November of 1868. This strenuous duty had worn the troops gaunt and the Seventh was in need of a rest.

The Federal Government at this time was stationing troops in many sections of the South. The intent was to control the Ku Klux Klan and Carpet Baggers and to break up illicit distilleries. As a result, the Seventh Cavalry was broken up and portions were stationed over various parts of the South. As Elizabethtown was not affected by anything more than a small amount of “moonshining,” the Seventh settled into a well-deserved respite from action.

Cavalry headquarters was established on South Main Street and the horses were kept in adjoining stables and across the street from the site. In 1936, the Hardin County Historical Society placed a bronze marker on the site of the stable where Company A kept their horses. The troops were quartered in houses in the town and in the small local hotels. Some men from Company A were quartered in the Eagle House on North Main Street. During their stay in Elizabethtown, Custer and the troops were able to procure horses for the Seventh Cavalry. When the regiment was ordered west, all the officers were mounted on thoroughbred horses. Custer wrote to his sister in 1871 informing her “We sent Tom’s troop 24 very handsome black horses. ‘M’ is to be mounted like ‘D’ on black.” The Troop often drilled on the parade grounds and presented a magnificent site for the local townspeople.

Custer and his wife made their home, for a time, in part of the Hill House, which was operated by “Aunt Beck” Hill. The Hill House was in its zenith during the early eighteen seventies when Custer and his command were stationed in Elizabethtown. Many higher-ranking officers boarded with Mrs. Hill. The greater part of this building is standing today and is known as the Brown-Pusey Community House. The meals of all the guests were taken in the dining room of the Hill House. The day after his arrival, Custer wrote to his wife Libby:



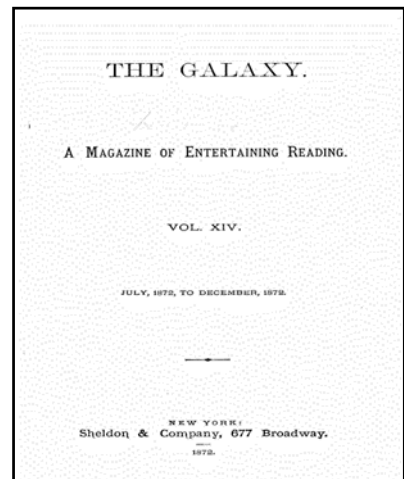
**The Brown – Pusey House**

*Darling Standby...I think “Betsy” (Elizabethtown) and I will not be out. The climate is pure and healthful, the citizens so far have been cordial, no one churlish or unfriendly. Col. Thomas called upon me at once. I enjoy this old-fashioned hotel, its quaint landlady who is everything in one. The meals are not so dreadful; apple-sauce and hot biscuit at each meal, and I have appetite for both. The table runs the length of the room; the landlady has placed me at the head. On my left is an exmember of Congress, survivor of many duels, carrying in his person as many bullets, as mementos. The system of bells passes comprehension. Four are rung for breakfast, also a small darkey knocks at the door to say ‘Ready an’ waiting.*

Private William Nugent, who enlisted in the Seventh during its stay in Elizabethtown, stated that the Custers later established residence on South Main Street beside the headquarters.

Custer kept a stable of fine Kentucky thoroughbred horses and a pack of Russian wolfhounds and English staghounds. According to Private John Burkman, Custer’s striker, there were about eighty dogs by the time they left Elizabethtown. At times the pack would elude Burkman’s watchful eye and slaughter many farmers’ pigs and townspeople’s dogs. Armstrong was very fond of hunting. While residing here he frequently hunted small game and would occasionally go to sections of Kentucky to hunt deer. Custer probably preferred hunting and horse racing to any form of recreation here.

With no such distraction such as the Ku Klux Klan in Elizabethtown, Custer found time to write articles for *the Galaxy*, a New York magazine. In 1875 the articles were embodied in a book *My Life on the Plains*. He also took time to play chess with Judge Quince Johnson. Church festivals were upon occasion postponed, to be sure that Custer had returned from duty out of town. His presence added much to local dances. It is recorded that it was a great social time in Elizabethtown.



Custer made many trips to Louisville, the regimental headquarters, the band, and Colonel Sturgis were stationed

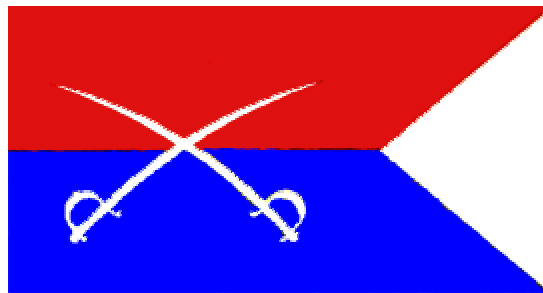
there. Being an ardent democrat, Custer attended political meetings in Louisville. On one occasion a certain Colonel Blanton Duncan made a remark in Custer's presence that was offensive. Custer immediately slapped Duncan in the face. Friends intervened to prevent any further difficulty.

In October 1871, Custer (according to some local sources) and part of his command were called to Chicago. They were summoned to aid General Philip Sheridan in military police work following the great fire. They remained there for several months before orders came to return to Elizabethtown.

In January of 1872, General Philip Sheridan invited the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia on a buffalo hunt. General Sheridan asked Custer to accompany the entourage. Buffalo Bill Cody was to be the guide, and Custer was assigned the duty of initiating the Duke into the art of buffalo hunting. Apparently the Duke took quite a liking to Custer. Following the hunt Alexis resumed his tour of the United States. When the Duke's special train arrived in Louisville, Custer was part of the welcoming committee. The Gault House was the scene of an elaborate dinner and ball held for the Duke. The Custer's were in attendance. Grand Duke Alexis invited the Custer's to accompany his royal party on the tour from Louisville to New Orleans. En route from Louisville, the special train stopped in Elizabethtown. The town dignitaries and probably most of the townspeople were there to meet the Duke. A speech was given in the Duke's honor. However, Alexis spied Custer's fine horses and his pack of hounds and went to inspect the animals while the speech was going on.

Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were ordered to the Dakota Territory in March of 1873. Life in Elizabethtown had probably become monotonous for Custer and the Seventh. Immediately upon receiving orders, they hurriedly packed and left Elizabethtown over the L & N Railroad bound for Louisville, then Memphis. The regiment was to rendezvous in Memphis. From Memphis steamers were boarded for transport to Cairo. From there rail and horse carried the Seventh to the Dakota Territory. Once there the Seventh Cavalry was reunited and prepared for active operations.

Mrs. Custer returned to Elizabethtown for a day in 1880. Many of her friends from her stay in Elizabethtown went to the hotel to see her and offer her condolences.



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