

David Oat
First Congregational Church of Norwich

Pvt. William Morton Durr

Last month we received the painful news that Keith Heidtman had been killed on Memorial Day while serving this country in Baghdad. Upon reflection, it reminded me of other members of our church family who also gave up their lives on foreign battlefields. The story of Pvt. William M. Durr is one example.

Look across the grassy area on the west side of our church and you will see a tall Colorado spruce tree, at its base lays a granite marker with these words inscribed:

IN MEMORY OF
PVT. WILLIAM M. DURR
CO. B. 4TH INFANTRY 3RD DIVISION.
KILLED IN ACTION AT THE MARNE.
JULY 23RD 1918
Memorial Tree Planted by the W.I.T's

Every so often I'm asked if this in fact marks a gravesite. The marker is similar to many found nearby in the Yantic Cemetery and the city of Norwich includes this site on its list of city cemeteries. After searching through old copies of the Norwich Bulletin and a trip to the State Library in Hartford, here's the story behind the Durr monument. It is a memorial dedicated to the memory of William Durr and marks the nearby spruce tree planted in his honor. The granite marker was dedicated during a special Sunday service conducted by Rev. Gurdon F. Bailey on May 31, 1925, as reported in the Norwich Bulletin the following day. During the service, Rev. Bailey was reported to have said, "I have an unusual announcement this morning regarding the dedication of a marker for one of our church boys who gave his life in the World War. This club of young men, the W.I.T.s, has had it in their hearts and minds for some time to commemorate to his memory this permanent emblem of their love and esteem. A few years ago, April 26th, 1919, a Colorado spruce tree was set out by this class. This last week, these same young men purely out of the love in their hearts for one who was their first president, one who held offices in the Sunday School and Christian Endeavor Society, had this granite marker suitably inscribed and set near the memorial tree for their loved member who gave his life in this service."

William Morton Durr was born in Norwich, December 12, 1898, the son of Martin and Katie (Rafferty) Durr. Their family home was located at 7 Lathrop Avenue in Norwichtown. William was described as being an attractive young man with many lovable qualities, possessing a magnetism that made him a leader among the boys. He was valedictorian of his graduation class from the Town Street School. He was also deeply involved in sports and a member of the Young Men's Christian Association. William was an active member of Miss Jessie E. Hyde's Sunday school class at the First Congregational Church and first president of their W.I.T. club organized in 1914. In April 1917, the United States entered World War I. William was 19 years old in February 1918 when he enlisted in the army. He completed basic training at Fort Stewart and shipped out of Newport News to France that April where he became part of the 28,000 man 3rd division. In July the Germans began, what is now called the Second Battle of the Marne, located in the Aisne-Marne region of France about 75 miles northeast of Paris. Their attack focused on attempting to cross the Aisne River pushing toward the Marne and on to Paris. William's infantry unit, part of the 3rd Division was immediately called up and pressed into

service. Several days of fierce fighting followed. The enemy was pushed back and the 3rd Division began crossing the Marne River in pursuit, capturing the heights of Mt. St. Pere and the villages of Chatebes and Jaulgonne in the face of heavy machine gun and artillery fire. It was during this time that Pvt. William Durr was killed. The exact location is unknown. His father, Martin, received word that William had been killed in action on July 23, 1918. The total number of American troops involved in the battle numbered 310,000 and when it eventually ended, 67,000 were dead or wounded. Four months later, November 11, 1918, Germany signed the Armistice ending World War I. Near the peaceful village of Belleau, France, is located the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery and Memorial on 42.5 acres of landscaped lawn with rows of white crosses and Stars of David. Here lay the earthly remains of those who fought and died during the battle. A beautiful stone chapel with stained glass windows dominates the cemetery grounds. Two large oak doors with wrought iron hinges lead to the vestibule. These words are carved in the wall above the vestibule entrance: THE NAMES RECORDED ON THESE WALLS ARE THOSE OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT IN THIS REGION AND WHO SLEEP IN UNKNOWN GRAVES. The name of Pvt. William M. Durr appears among 1,060 others on the interior walls of the vestibule.



Rev. Gurdon Bailey concluded the service by saying, "It has been a very splendid thing that these boys should place this marker for the boy who went out as a volunteer, took his place, did his duty and gave his life. We must not forget that these boys who went into this war were told that it was a war to win. I believe these men felt when they went into the war 1917 – 1918, that it was the last war of the world... this war, just passed, with such a tremendous loss of young men. If we can only make that the last war, then we can make the dead a pledge and rejoice that they did not die in vain. The hymn, "From All Thy Saints Who From Their Labors Rest" was sung at the request of Rev. Bailey, who expressed his belief that it would be most fitting at this time.

Dave Oat
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