

# JAMES MCKAY RORTY

*In Recognition.*



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## INTRODUCTION

To identify the origin of photographic and printed media possibly attributed to Lt. James McKay Rorty (1837 - 1863).

## HYPOTHESIS

The location of the original images can be determined by examining published works and repositories. In searching, other images may also be available online.

## MATERIALS

1. Illustrations in “James McKay Rorty: An Appreciation” by Brian C. Pohanka
2. “Lt. Rufus King, Lt. Alonzo Cushing, Lt. Evan Thomas and three other artillery officers in front of tent, Antietam, Md.” (LC-USZ62-67904)
3. Other images found online.

## PROCEDURE

1. Examine references in source material to identify the image's origin.
2. Cross-reference with other credible secondary sources to confirm.
3. Overview all found material to determine credibility.

## DATA

Image	Citation	Notes
<div data-bbox="230 718 548 1066" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="207 1075 568 1171">Printed engraving assumed to be taken from an original photograph.</p> <p data-bbox="207 1201 568 1520">Based on the depiction of his dress uniform, this image dates around the time of Rorty's commission around Nov. 15, 1861. The numeral "5" insignia would further suggest the 5th Cavalry of the Irish brigade before he ultimately transferred to a different artillery battalion.</p>	<ul data-bbox="649 1058 964 1150" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"James McKay Rorty: An Appreciation." (Pohanka)</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="1013 453 1373 579">While he provides some references with other captions, Pohanka does not under this particular image.</p> <p data-bbox="1013 613 1354 705">The image may have come from other sources he mentions in the article:</p> <ul data-bbox="1062 739 1403 1785" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Michael Scanlan, "Captain O'Hay," <i>The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator</i>: June 18, 1887. (Pohanka 2)</li> <li>• Two short paragraphs in Gettysburg book; direct account saying, "as if on review at West Point" and "with an energy almost superhuman." (Ibid., 5)</li> <li>• Stephen Rorty Blount Family Papers (Spring, TX). (Ibid., 5)</li> <li>• "Artist's impression," <i>Irish World</i> (New York), 1887. (Ibid., 18)</li> <li>• George R. Stewart, <i>Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg</i> (Houghton Mifflin: 1959). (Ibid., 21)</li> <li>• David P. Conyngham, <i>The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns</i> (R&amp;T Washbourne: 1866). (Ibid., 24)</li> <li>• <i>Irish American</i> (New York), December 7/14, 1866: 268-69.</li> </ul>



“Artist’s impression of Rorty manning a Parrott gun alone.”

- "James McKay Rorty: An Appreciation." Irish World, 1887. (Pohanka)

Although a drawing, the artist provides interesting facial details: Rorty’s moustache and long sideburns, seen in other prints.

He is depicted loading the gun at Gettysburg in his shirt-sleeves, his cap strewn on the ground below it. This may have been derived from the accounts of the 19th Massachusetts and or the report of Col. James Mallon, 42nd Ny.(Pohanka 18)



“Lt. Rufus King, Lt. Alonzo Cushing, Lt. Evan Thomas and three other artillery officers in front of tent, Antietam, Md.” (Library of Congress)

The man sitting third in the front row is depicted as Rorty by:

- The Gettysburg Foundation
- Find-a-grave.com

The claim for this comes from:




- Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander. (Brown)

The caption on p. 187 states:

“Officers of Batteries A and C, 4th U.S. Artillery, at East Woods, Antietam Battlefield, September 21, 1862. Seated left to right: Lt. Evan Thomas, Lt. Rufus King, Jr., and (it is believed) Lt. James McKay Rorty. Standing: Lt. Arthur Morris, Lt. Alonzo Cushing, and Lt. Edward Field. The photograph was taken on the day Cushing accepted an assignment to the Topographical Engineers.”

By no means is Brown definitively identifying the man as Rorty. Similarly, in Swank’s *Maryland in the Civil War*, the author chooses to leave the entire front row completely unidentified, as does the original Library of Congress title.(Swank 53)

A different article by Brian Downey on Behind Antietam on the Web seeks to identify the individuals as well, but differs between Morris and Field. He does not identify the man either, but suggests others have claimed him as Field as well. No mention of him as Rorty. Ultimately, we

		<p>may never fully know who he is and no source definitively makes a claim.</p>
 <p>“Rorty and Kelly making their escape.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leslie’s Pictorial History (Bilby)</li> </ul>	<p>Depicts Rorty and Kelly crossing the Potomac River, greeting the gunboat Penguin in the distance. Leslie’s published remarkable stories for the public as the war commenced.</p>
 <p>“Peter Kelly, James McKay Rorty, and William O’Donohue, as officers of units in the Irish Brigade, post Bull Run and 69th NYSM.”</p>  <p>(Smeltzer) One of two ambrotypes owned by Mr. Regan of Ireland and is</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bull Runnings: A Journal of the Digitization of a Civil War Battle.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Image was provided by Matt Regan, a descendent of Peter Kelly. Smeltzer states, “Photo IDs are per Mr. Regan.”</p> <p>If this was taken during their commissions, that would approximately date it to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 2d Lt. Peter Kelly, Co. K, 69th NYSV - <b>Nov. 28/30, 1861*</b></li> <li>2. 2d Lt. James McKay Rorty, Co. D - <b>Dec. 1, 1861*</b></li> <li>3. Lt. William O’Donohue, 2nd Ny. Artillery - ?</li> </ol> <p>A biography written about Kelly, mentions the owner of the photograph cannot positively identify the men.(Smeltzer) However, a good supporting claim that Kelly and Rorty were both off-duty at Fort Schuyler, Ny. on Nov. 28 - Dec. 1, 1861. In my opinion, this strengthens the photographic evidence of it being a studio produced image. Notice the wood flooring, painted backdrop, and head-body rests. Obviously, a locality such as Throgs Neck in the Bronx would have access to numerous studios.</p>

in “relatively good condition.”  
The other is a cartes-de-visite of  
Lt. Kelly. (see below)



\*On these dates, each was  
presented with officer’s  
accoutrements. (The Irish  
American, Dec. 1, 1861)

## RESULTS

While the three printed images attributed to Rorty are renderings by artists, all show features consistent with the historical record. Rorty’s exploits were popularized even at the time for large readership in the North. But supporting documentation seems to indicate much of it actually happened and the accompanying images accurately depict it. Of the photographs, one does not seem credible enough to be attributed to Rorty. The original title does not seek to identify half of the individuals in the image and subsequent publications likewise do not place much emphasis on identification either. To conclude, we may never truly discover their identity. However, the other photograph depicting one known associate of Rorty has much more credible provenance and fits the historical record well.

## CONCLUSION

Our strong inclinations to put names to faces becomes far too convenient rather than commencing a comprehensive investigation into the details. Furthermore, too often are we forced to only conclude that some things continue to remain unknown despite our best attempts.

## REFERENCES

1. Pohanka, Brian C. 1993. "James McKay Rorty: An Appreciation." Edited by Sean O'Mahony. (Irish Brigade Association) 23. Accessed November 30, 2020. <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000665707>.
2. Brown, Kent Materson. 2014. *Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 187.
3. Swank, Mark Andrew. 2013. *Maryland in the Civil War*. Arcadia Publishing, 53.
4. Downey, Brian. 2019. *Antietam Faces, Artillery Edition*. May 9. Accessed November 30, 2020. <http://behind.aotw.org/2019/05/09/antietam-faces-artillery-edition/>.
5. Joseph G. Bilby, 1998. *Irish Brigade in the Civil War*. Hachette Books, 14.
6. Smeltzer, Harry. 2020. *Bull Runnings: A Journal of the Digitization of a Civil War Battle*. April 14. Accessed November 30, 2020. <https://bullrunnings.wordpress.com/2020/04/16/photo-members-of-69th-nysm/>.
7. 2007. "Lieut. Peter Kelly 69th. New York Vols. Born Straw Draperstown Co. Derry." *Bull Runnings: A Journal of the Digitization of a Civil War Battle*. April 4. Accessed November 30, 2020. [www.69thpa.co.uk](http://www.69thpa.co.uk).