

John Martin (Giovanni Martino): Custer's Bugler

The General raised his hand, signaling the battalion to halt. Leaning forward in his saddle, he intently studied the valley below. Nearby, four mounted men remained still while, further back, his troopers dismounted to adjust saddles and check their weapons. Instinctively, his seasoned Adjutant edged closer and after a brief exchange, the General quickly wheeled his mount towards the troopers. "Boys, have courage!" General George Custer shouted, "Be brave, and as soon as we get through with these Indians we will go home to our winter station."

Custer's Adjutant, Lt. William W. Cooke, hurriedly penciled the General's order into a small notebook. Ripping the page out, Cooke handed it to Custer who called out for an orderly to deliver it. A trooper, mounted on a white horse with a trumpet slung across his back, quickly trotted up and took the note. Before he departed, Custer instructed, "Trumpeter, go back on our trail and see if you can discover Benteen and give him this message. If you see no danger come back to us, but if you find Indians in your way stay with Benteen and return with him and when you get back to us report." Tucking the note into his gauntlet, the bugler spurred his horse back up the trail. Looking back quickly, he watched as the Seventh Cavalry troopers descended the ravine to the Little Big Horn River and history. It would be the last time the bugler would see Lt. Colonel George A. Custer and his 210 cavalrymen alive.

The bugler, though, had more urgent concerns. Dodging rounds fired from Indians perched on nearby bluffs, he rode hard and fast over the irregular terrain. A short time later, with his horse wounded, he finally located Captain Frederick Benteen's command and delivered the dispatch. A sheet of paper saved the bugler's life that day. By carrying Custer's last message, the bugler - John Martin - remains almost universally acknowledged as the "last white man to see Custer alive." Penned by Cooke, Custer's order remains arguably the most famous in American military history.

Today, the nearly complete annihilation of Custer's last command at the hands of Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors provides a continuing source of study and debate for historians and scholars alike; it remains etched in our collective history, examined as much for its myths as for the many mysteries. The exhaustive research extends to not only strategic and tactical concerns, but also to the many complex personalities involved with voluminous studies based on the lives of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and George Armstrong Custer. Much less is known about Bugler John Martin, one of the more fascinating yet enigmatic figures from Custer's Last Stand on June 25, 1876. Who was the man that fate chose to save that day and why does his place in history stretch far beyond the events at the Little Big Horn?

Origins

The one certainty in any analysis of the bugler, John Martin, is that he was born in Italy. At this point, however, the ambiguities begin. Upon his arrival in the United States in 1873, as often occurred with immigrants in their effort to 'fit in', he anglicized his name to John Martin. Most scholars and historians assume that his birth name was Giovanni Martini, a seemingly logical conclusion occasionally reinforced by Martin himself. Yet, more recent research conducted in Italy reveals that John Martin was actually named Giovan Crisostimo Martino prior to his arrival in America.

In an effort to determine his true identity, the first logical step would be to establish his actual place of birth. Two distinctly diverse Italian towns concurrently claim him as their native son. Apricale is a tiny picturesque hilltop *comune* (municipal town or village) located in the far western Italian region of Liguria. Typical of many Italian villages, Apricale is a labyrinth of mostly cobbled roads surrounding the 11th century Castello della Lucertola. Almost 1,000 kilometers away, down the Italian peninsula, lies Sala Consilina, a rugged little town perched on a Campania hillside. It remains the largest town in the Vallo di Diano in southwestern Italy. Although earlier research hinted that Apricale might be Martin's place of birth, and despite that town still claiming him as one of their own, there exists sufficient evidence to refute effectively this conclusion. Perhaps part of this confusion stems from a certain Giovanni Battista Martini, who was born in Apricale in 1847; there are others - with the same or similar names - that later fought with Giuseppe Garibaldi during the middle period of the Italian fight for unification. Another aspect for consideration is the poor quality of some parish records, often lost or damaged by flood or fire, rendering them unreadable. U.S. Army enlistment records, completed by Martin prior to his induction, list Sala as his place of birth.

Martin usually claimed he was born on January 28, 1853 in Sala Consilina. Although most biographers accept Sala Consilina as his birthplace, they may have hesitated due to a lack of primary documents substantiating this fact. Another factor likely contributing to their dilemma was Martin's own inconsistencies regarding his birth. In 1906, during an interview with the *Brooklyn Standard Union* on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Little Big Horn, it was reported that Martin was born in Sala Conizalina (sic) in 1847. Two years later, in late October 1908, Martin was interviewed extensively by Walter Mason Camp, well-respected editor and historical researcher, regarding his role at the Little Big Horn. During their meeting, Camp's notes that Martin states he was born in Italy in January, 1853. Martin never clarified the birth date contradictions, almost certainly for the reason that it was not relevant to the interviewer at that time. Martin's own less than perfect recollection begs the question: Was he inscrutable by choice or default? Speculations abound as to his reasons. One possible explanation may be that, since Martin was an orphan, issues such as birth place, date, and even surname, carried less importance to him. While never forgetting his Italian origins, he may have placed more significance to his current identity as John Martin, American citizen and soldier.

In August 1922, Martin stated he was born in Rome in 1851 while being interviewed by Colonel William A. Graham, a retired Army lawyer and one of the leading Custer scholars of his generation, for an article later published in *The Cavalry Journal*. This seeming contradiction may be a result of Martin's age. Colonel Graham notes in *The Cavalry Journal's July-August 1942* edition that Martin was "...very old and very feeble when I found him deep in the jungle of Brooklyn's Italian quarter [in August 1922]. His memory was as feeble as his body, and it was only after I had made three separate visits, each time reading to him (for he was almost blind) his testimony before the Reno Inquiry, that recollection of that fateful June day of 1876 came back. But when it did come back, it came with a wealth of incident and detail that was surprising. And so I wrote his story, just as he told it to me, and he signed it."

In 1997, two researchers from Sala Consilina - Professor Giuseppe Colitti and Dr. Michele Esposito - conducted an extensive search for information on Martin's birth. Their examination of birth and parish records in both Rome and Sala Consilina failed to produce any males born between 1851 and 1853 with the last name of Martini. Later that year, however, their luck changed when a special register was located in Sala Consilina. This newly discovered register was reserved for children who had been abandoned or neglected. During my research for Italian

birth records, I often found references to a “ruoto dei progetti,” literally translated to “wheel of the project.” Professor Colitti relates that these children were essentially placed or sat on a spoke of a wagon wheel in the hope that a family member might recognize or, perhaps, a stranger would adopt them.

It was in one of these ‘mixed’ registers that Colitti and Esposito found a document akin to a birth and baptismal certificate for Martin dated January 28, 1852. From the document, they learned that Martin’s actual baptismal name was Giovan Crisostimo Martino. The name had been given to him by Sala’s mayor, Fedele Alliegro, during the baby’s baptism at the Church of San Nicola. Martin has been found abandoned near the Church of the Annunciation in Sala the previous day, dressed simply in a white cloth and filthy bonnet; he appeared in good condition and was thought to be about a month old. His name and parents unknown, and with the need to baptize him quickly (greatly encouraged in the Roman Catholic Church), Alliegro apparently named the boy after Saint Giovan - or Giovanni - Crisostimo whose Feast Day was celebrated the previous day. The comune of Sala, under Alliegro’s direction, sent him to a certain Mariantonia di Gregorio (Botta), wife of Francesco Botta. Although orphaned children were often sent to a home in Naples, on this occasion, little Giovan was an exception for reasons unknown.

This information, therefore, would seem to confirm that he was born either in early January, 1852 or possibly late December, 1851. The lack of attention to detail regarding the dates seems more reasonable when considering that, in the culture of rural Italians, actual dates of birth mattered little. A niece to one of Martin’s great granddaughters, Bessie, confirms that he told the family his birth date was January 1, 1852, and that he was born in Sala. Since his exact date of birth remained essentially unknown to Martin, it allowed him the freedom to provide varying dates in his later years without remorse. For Martin, like the small town Italians of his youth, actual dates remained irrelevant facts. Professor Colitti is convinced that Martino was born in November of 1851 and his surname of Martino reflects this: Italians traditionally celebrate the Feast of San Martino on November 11.

The Italian researchers also concluded that the Italian surname Martini would support the claim of Apricale as his birthplace since the name is indigenous to the Liguria region. Consequently, the surname Martino - of Roman origins - would confirm Sala Consilina as Martin’s town of birth. Generally, Italian surnames ending in ‘o’ are more often found in southern Italy, while many surnames ending in ‘i’ are found in the northern sections. Matching one’s place of birth with their surname may seem unreliable, but in mid-19th century Italy, rural Italians were less likely to move far from their place of birth except for possibly immigrating to another country.

Finally, Martino traveled to the United States in 1873 aboard the S.S. Tyrian of the Anchor Line of Glasgow. That ship’s manifest for April 1873 lists Giovanni Martino, a 21-year-old laborer from Italy, as a passenger. This information was confirmed via The Battery Conservancy’s CastleGarden.org project. Furthermore, there is no record of any male passengers with the surname Martini arriving aboard the S.S. Tyrian in the year 1873.

The Other John Martin

At various points during research on John Martin’s life, another John Martin surfaces. The similarity of their names combined with the fact that both served in the U.S. Cavalry during the

same period often results in conflicting accounts of their lives. Although some earlier journalists assumed John Martin to be one person, more recent scholarship effectively refutes this theory.

John Albert Martin - the other John Martin - was born in England in 1849. While crossing the Atlantic a few years later, he was orphaned when the steamer sank and eventually placed in a Cleveland orphanage. He joined the U.S. Army while in Arizona in 1872, and was assigned to General George Crook's Fifth Cavalry; he mustered out in 1877 after completing his five year enlistment. Army records indicate that he had light-colored hair, a fair complexion, blue eyes, stood 5' 5", and weighed approximately 150 pounds. According to John A. Martin himself, as well as other accounts, he became a mail carrier with the Pony Express until 1882. One year later, John A. Martin moved to Indiana and, at age 39, married the much younger Virtue Cole. Martin died in 1928 and was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Plymouth, Indiana. Cliff and Yvonne Haines, residents and local historians living in Plymouth, confirmed through a series of censuses that John A. Martin's family resided in Marshall County (Indiana) from 1900 through 1930; they also found that the 1900 census states that John and Virtue had been married 11 years.

Other glaring discrepancies and inaccuracies - often overlooked by zealous researchers - abound regarding Martin's assertions. Colonel Rodney Thomas of the Little Big Horn Associates points out that, contrary to popular belief, the Pony Express only operated from April 1860 until November 1861. He adds that the names of all riders and station operators were recorded, and the only Martin listed is named Robert. This egregious error was compounded by later researchers, as evidenced from an article ("John A. Martin: Custer's Last Courier") in the April 1967 edition of *The West* magazine. The article claims that John Martin "...was a pony express rider and peace officer in several Midwest towns including Dodge City but he always referred proudly to his legacy [as Custer's last courier]." In a June 1926 article in the *Plymouth Daily Democrat*, John A. Martin claimed to have carried messages to Custer from General Crook's Fifth Cavalry, adding, "and while I was there, the fight took place." The article further states, "Mr. Martin has a nationwide distinction in that he was the last man to speak with General Custer before he went into his fatal battle with the Indians." Kristine Withers, historian and archivist for the U.S. Cavalry Association, notes, "...it is possible that Martin's story could have been mistaken by his neighbors over the years." She adds that, with the absence of today's intrusive media coverage, coupled with the general knowledge that a John Martin carried the last message, his descendants and relatives may have assumed him to be the true last messenger.

Colonel Thomas verifies that the U.S. Fifth Cavalry was ordered to the Northern Plains *after* the Little Big Horn battle. Assuming John A. Martin was with the Fifth Cavalry in June 1876, he and the Regiment would have been in at least 250 miles away on the day of battle. "Coupled with these facts demonstrating rather convincingly that Private John Albert Martin was in Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas at the time of the Little Big Horn," writes Colonel Thomas, "is the simple fact that the vast majority of the Seventh Regiment all knew Martini [Martino] carried the last message." Throughout the years, surviving Seventh Cavalry officers uniformly agreed that Trumpeter John D. Martin carried the famous "come quick" message. Thomas adds that noted researcher Walter M. Camp confirmed this fact on numerous occasions. John D. Martin's original language was Italian, and there seems to be no reference to this fact in any John A. Martin's accounts or interviews.

The Marshall County Historical Museum in Plymouth recently confirmed - through the courtesy of Cliff and Yvonne Haines - that a plaque placed on Martin's tombstone many years ago was an error, and the Museum no longer believes that John A. Martin was Custer's bugler that day. The

plaque reads: Bearer of Custer's Last Message: Battle of the Little Big Horn. In light of the many inconsistencies with John A. Martin's claims, author Michael Nunnally succinctly notes, "He wasn't."

The Early Years

Little is known of Giovan Martino during his early years in Sala, although a tantalizing episode has been related by a dedicated Martin/Martino researcher based in Italy, Pasquale Petrocelli. In 1860, as his men marched north to Naples during the legendary Spedizione dei Mille (Expedition of the 1,000), General Giuseppe Garibaldi made a triumphant entrance into Sala. An Italian patriot and devout republican, Garibaldi had assembled a small force of 1,000 men, more commonly known as the Corpo Volontari Italiani (Italian Corps of Volunteers), in Sicily; they started north with the intention of overthrowing the Bourbon Kingdom of Two Sicilies, which was based in Naples. The march - and eventual victory - greatly furthered the movement for Italian unification (commonly acknowledged as the *Risorgimento*). Already celebrated as a hero in Sicily and other parts of southern Italy, Garibaldi's arrival in Sala was obviously a momentous occasion. As the festivities ended, Garibaldi was invited to dine with a leading citizen, Giuseppe De Petrinis.

One can only imagine the excitement felt by 8-year-old Giovanni. The impression left on him by Garibaldi's visit remained, enhanced over the next few years by news of Garibaldi's victories. By age 14, Martino left Sala to join Garibaldi's forces in the north as volunteers from all parts of Italy gathered in the northern towns of Varese, Como and Bergamo. Led by Garibaldi, these men were formed into the Cacciatori delle Alpi (Hunters of the Alps) brigade with the aim of liberating the northern Italian regions of Veneto and Trentino from Austrian rule. Serving as a drummer boy, Martino participated in the Trentino campaign of 1866-67, and possibly the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (the Italian Army supported the newly declared French Republic). This entire period, however, is difficult to confirm primarily due to the scarcity of documents verifying Martino's experiences; much of this information comes from Martino himself.

When Martino was approximately 20 years old, he apparently had returned to Sala Consilina and met his natural father. Poring through Sala's Registry of Births, Petrocelli located an appendix dated 1872 listing the names of Sala's residents who had emigrated abroad. In this section, he discovered a short transcription relating the event. The Notary of Salerno, Giuseppe Arcieri de Sanza, recorded on October 24, 1872 that 50-year-old peasant named Giuseppe Perrone formally acknowledged Giovan Crisostimo Martino as his son. While it is difficult to speculate what effect this may have had on Giovanni emotionally, he neither adopted Perrone as his surname nor ever mentioned it publicly during his lifetime; he continued to list Francesco and Mariantonia (or Maria) Botta as his parents on each of his of many five-year re-enlistment documents.

Arriving in America

In March of 1873, Martino chose to leave Italy, likely hoping to find a better life in America, and boarded the Anchor Line of Glasgow's S.S. Tyrian in Naples. Petrocelli notes in his book, *John Martin: Un Salese a Little Big Horn*, that during this period, most of the shipping companies carrying passengers to America rarely traveled directly from Italy. The large vessels used to cross the Atlantic infrequently sailed into the Mediterranean Sea, preferring to conduct their

business at the Atlantic ports. Brief stops in the ports of Marseilles and Glasgow preceded a nearly month long voyage across the Atlantic. Martino, along with a number of other immigrants from Sala, disembarked at Castle Garden (now Castle Clinton) in the Battery Park section of lower Manhattan. As previously mentioned, it was at this time that Giovan Crisostimo Martino anglicized his name to John Martin.

Soon after his arrival, Martino - now Martin - moved to Brooklyn, a New York City borough filled with Italians. His arrival coincided with a severe national recession, also known as the Panic of 1873. Immigrants to America had few employment choices in the late 19th century, and Martin worked a variety of low-paying manual labor jobs. Italians faced many difficulties in their new country, beginning with language. Other broader and more complex issues surfaced as Americans, in general, preferred their immigrants to be of similar ethnic and religious backgrounds. In general, northern Europeans - mostly Protestant and often from Germany and various Scandinavian countries - met less resistance than their darker-skinned counterparts from southern Europe. Although manual labor opportunities existed, work like this only ensured more poverty.

Immigrants looked for alternatives and the U.S. Army opened its arms to recent arrivals in search of employment. Italy, in particular, endured decades of revolutionary activity and intermittent war in the period preceding unification. The almost constant strife produced battle-hardened men anxious to prove their worth and earn a living in their new country. Martino was no different. While passing an Army enlistment center in New York, he was approached by Army recruiter Lieutenant Edward Hunter with promises of a steady job and superior wages. With few options left, he enlisted on June 1, 1874 as a trumpeter and received an assignment to Company H of the U.S. Army's Seventh Cavalry. He was not alone, however, and other Italian-Americans serving in the U.S. Army included Charles Camillus DeRudio (born Count Carlo Camillo Di Rudio), John James (Giovanni Casella), Frank Lombardy (Francesco Lombardi), and Felix Vinatieri (Felice Villiet Vinatieri). DeRudio, in fact, was attached to one of Custer's battalions, and he survives the battle after a harrowing night hiding in a copse of trees.

Army life for troops stationed on the frontier, while preferable to living in poverty, was difficult and deadly, at best. Food and sanitation were equally atrocious, and rampant alcoholism was a byproduct of the endless tedium endured by the troopers. Training in horsemanship to recruits often unaccustomed to horses was inadequate, while drill and marksmanship practice were nearly non-existent; troopers were limited to only 15 rounds of ammunition per month. Martino's Seventh Cavalry Regiment was comprised of equal parts immigrant and American-born troopers; although Italians accounted for a significant number, most of the foreigners hailed from Ireland and Germany. Many of the officers were Civil War veterans trained and experienced in combat. It was a polyglot force that Custer led onto the western plains, and this lack of cohesion coupled with poor training certainly contributed to the disaster ahead.

Going West

Between late 1874 and early 1875, a geological study - led by renowned Indian fighter and Civil War hero, Lt. Col. George A. Custer - discovered gold in the Black Hills, then considered part of the Department of Missouri. News of the find leaked out and hundreds of prospectors rushed to the area. The Black Hills, however, were considered sacred by the American Indians and existing treaties with the U.S. government forbade any settlement there. Offers to purchase the

Black Hills were rejected and the U.S. Secretary of War issued an ultimatum declaring that all Indians would have to move to designated reservations within two months. While most of the Plains Indians resigned themselves to life on the government Reservations, others – outraged by the incursion and encouraged by holy man and spiritual leader, Sitting Bull - banded together, determined that war was their only recourse. In response, Sitting Bull's Lakota and Cheyenne warriors initiated hostilities against the interlopers, hoping to drive off the increasing number of white prospectors and speculators.

Determining that military intervention was required, troops were assembled to resolve the issue under the leadership of Brigadier General Alfred A. Terry. By the spring of 1876, an intricate three-pronged campaign was mobilized for the Little Big Horn vicinity in an effort to force the "hostiles" onto the reservations. On May 17, Custer and his Seventh Cavalry Regiment left Fort Abraham Lincoln (located near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota), riding out in columns of four. Accompanying Custer and his cavalymen was the Regimental Band, as well as assorted Arikara and Crow Indian scouts. Some tribes like the Arikara and Crow decided that allying themselves with the Army would provide better opportunities in reclaiming land taken by the aggressive Lakota.

Little thought was given to understanding the Plains Indians, which were composed primarily of Lakota (Sioux), Arapahos, and Cheyennes along with other contingents of Kiowas and Comanches. For their common defense, the various bands began uniting into one immense camp, totaling perhaps 10,000 men, women and children by some estimates. Subtracting non-combatants from this total still leaves approximately 5,000 warriors in the field. While Terry accompanied one column himself, Colonel John Gibbon and General George Crook commanded the other two, with the primary goal of converging on the Indian village and blocking any route of escape.

Attached to Terry's column was Lt. Colonel George A. Custer. Impetuous, courageous and often reckless, Custer sought glory and a quick end to the Indian problem. He had earned popular acclaim as a Civil War cavalry leader and spent a few years fighting various Indian tribes. In a lengthy interview with the Washington Times (published November 4, 1906), Martin allowed the journalist to review his diary, which provides exceptional details of Custer and the troops in the period leading up to the battle. In mid-1876, Martin writes, "We are at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, and it was the first time in years that Seventh Cavalry had been united. General Terry and staff arrived and the General took command about the 12th of May, 1876...General Custer came from Washington, but did not have much to say, for at that time, he was in trouble with General (then President) Grant. But he had the spirit."

On May 17, 1876, Custer and his troops prepared to leave Fort Lincoln. Martin details the brigade's make-up and disposition, "The troops for this expedition consisted of twelve troops of the Seventh Cavalry, four companies of infantry, ten of fifteen Indian scouts, and twenty-five or thirty civilians. We took the field...at 6:30 AM. 'Boots and Saddles' was sounded, and at 7 AM, stand, horse and mount. Then we passed in review and bade farewell to our friends and though the band was playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' it seemed like a funeral procession. Later it played Custer's favorite tune, 'Garrison' [Garry Owen]." He continues, "After leaving the post, the march was taken up in columns of fours, route step, General Terry and staff in front, followed by General Custer and staff (Mrs. Custer rode on the left of the General). That day we made Little Heart River and camped for the night. After pitching camp assembly was sounded (I was a bugler) and we fell in for payment. It was a pretty sober crowd, everybody felt the

position we were in. Some made deposits for their money, and I, for one, put \$50 with the Paymaster. Next morning general call was sounded at 6:30, boots and saddles at 7, and we took up the march again. But the paymaster and poor Mrs. Lincoln went back to Fort Abraham Lincoln, and it proved to be the last farewell for her and the General.”

Martin’s diary describes several days of “tireless and ceaseless marching.” Tempers flared and discipline slipped during the movement. He notes in detail one episode involving himself and Henry Voss, Custer’s Chief trumpeter. On May 29, they camped by the Little Missionary River, and Voss “...detailed me as mounted orderly for headquarters; but as it was not my turn, I refused to do the duty, and after some words the chief trumpeter had me tied up on the picket line for two hours (strung up by the thumbs). I reported it to my Captain, who told General Custer. He sent for me and said he would have it investigated as soon as we got back to quarters.” The Washington Times article records that many days of “dreary, heart-breaking marches” followed, with “...a hot sun and dusty plains as constant sources of discomfort to the men.”

As Custer and his 647 troopers moved south to form one part of the projected envelopment, Martin noted, “We passed through many Indian camping places, in one of which we found the scalp of a white man. Here we halted, one of the scouts having reported the discovery of a large fresh camp. About this time the headquarters flag was stuck in the ground, but the wind blew it down three times and many of us believed it to be a warning of disaster.” Custer’s Indian scouts had located an enormous Indian encampment by the Little Big Horn River (in present-day Montana) in the late afternoon of June 24. The following morning, one of the Seventh Cavalry’s scouts, a half-breed named Mitch Bouyer (or Boyer), met with Custer to determine the size and strength of the Indian encampment. Bouyer purportedly related to Custer, “Well, General, if you don’t find more Indians in that valley than you ever saw together, you can hang me.” The sheer size of the village and number of Indians was unfathomable to Custer.

On the following morning, as Custer’s men moved into position for an attack planned for the next day, some troopers were spotted by a small band of Indians. This development angered Custer, who assumed it eliminated the crucial element of surprise. Neglecting his general orders to wait for General Terry’s main column and severely underestimating the Indian warriors’ numerical superiority and resolve, he opted for an immediate attack. Utilizing tactics successfully employed in earlier battles, he chose to divide his men into three smaller battalions with the intent of encircling the encampment; Indian warriors, although brave and resilient combatants, were inclined to flee with their families when attacked within their villages. At noon, Martin reported that three companies were sent off with Major Marcus Reno to “...march down the Little Big Horn valley and charge everything before him...” Reno and his troopers accordingly attacked from the southern end of the village, while Captain Frederick Benteen, also with three companies, rode off to the southwest with orders to “attack all he came across.” Lastly, one company was to guard the pack train of ammunition and supplies, under the command of Captain Thomas McDougall. Custer and the remaining companies would eventually head in a northwesterly direction with the aim of attacking from the east.

The Attack Begins

Custer and Reno’s columns rode together for a few miles along a creek leading to the Little Big Horn. As Reno moved off to begin his attack, Custer and his five companies climbed a bluff overlooking the valley. They continued riding east, in columns of two, eventually stopping by a

narrow ravine. As the troopers checked their saddles and weapons, Custer rode to the crest of the bluff, accompanied by his adjutants and Martin. The latter, though normally assigned to Benteen's H Company, was attached to Custer's column on this day. Martin explained this development in his diary: "Trumpeter Vose [Voss] called back to me to report as orderly to General Custer, and although, again, it was not my turn, I did as he commanded. General Custer told me to keep close behind him, and we began the march which took up to the top of the hill, from which we saw all of Sitting Bull's village." Custer and Cooke scrutinized the encampment carefully, and Martin noted, "It seemed deserted as we would only see a few squaws, papooses, ponies, and dog." According to Martin, Custer assumed the Indian warriors were away, perhaps buffalo hunting. Following a brief consultation with Cooke, Custer wheeled his horse, waved his hat and exhorted the men in his high-pitched voice: "Boys, have courage! Be brave, and as soon as we get through with these Indians we will go home to our winter station." The troopers replied with three quick cheers.

It was approximately 3:35, moments before Custer launched his attack. Perhaps realizing that this would be a bigger battle than expected, Custer asked Cooke to send a dispatch to Benteen urgently requesting men and ammunition ("packs"). Pulling a notepad from his pocket, the Canadian-born Cooke wrote quickly:

Benteen

Come on. Big Village.

Be quick. Bring packs.

W. W. Cooke

P.S. Bring Packs.

Martin's diary recounted the next fateful moments. General Custer perused the note before calling for an orderly to deliver it. An unidentified trooper stepped out to which Custer replied, "No, no, the other man." Martin nudged his mount forward and tucked the dispatch into his gauntlet. Before he departed, Custer instructed, "Trumpeter, go back on our trail and see if you can discover Benteen and give him this message. If you see no danger come back to us, but if you find Indians in your way stay with Benteen and return with him and when you get back to us report." It has been noted that Cooke penned the note to overcome concern about Martin's broken English, but Martin does not mention it. The language issue would loom later in the day.

As Martin hurried off, Custer and his five doomed companies began their slow descent into the valley below. "Riding fast," continued Martin in his diary, "I soon reached the crest of the hill, and looking back, I could see that the Indians had already attacked, and our boys were acting very excitedly. I rested my horse on the brow of the hill for a minute and sat watching the action in the distance. At the time, I did not think it was the last time any one of these men would ever been seen in life." Carrying the message would not only save his life, it would be Martin's defining moment in American history: One that would earn him the unenviable renown as 'the last white man to see Custer alive.'

Martin pushed his mount hard as rounds fired by nearby Indians slammed into the ground by him. Spurring his mount, he rode out of their rifle range quickly. Within a few minutes, Martin spotted a solitary rider heading in his direction. It was Custer's younger brother, Boston, a civilian who had accompanied the column as a guide and forager, among other duties. Boston had been with McDougall's pack train when an earlier messenger had arrived with a request for ammunition; he immediately set out to locate Custer's command. Seeing Martin along the way,

Boston excitedly asked for his brother's exact location and, before pressing on, told Martin that his horse was limping from a bullet wound. Boston would be one of three Custer brothers - the other, Tom - who would perish that afternoon. Ironically, this brief meeting would unite the last trooper to see Custer alive and the last man to join the doomed column.

Finally locating Benteen and his command around 4:00 p.m., a relieved Martin rode down and handed over the dispatch. Benteen scanned the note quickly, passed it to Captain Thomas Weir, and asked Martin for Custer's location. Martin breathlessly replied that Custer and his troopers were three miles away to the north. "Is [Custer] being attacked or not?" implored Benteen. Martin tersely - perhaps nervously - replied, "Yes, [he] is being attacked." Martin's response provokes historical debate. Eyewitnesses to this encounter report that an animated Martin added - in a heavy Italian accent - that the Indians were 'skedaddling' (army slang for retreating). In a 1908 interview with Walter Mason Camp, Martin denies using the work 'skedaddling' although it is generally acknowledged to have been part of the troopers' lexicon in that era. There exist scant witnesses to this conversation and its veracity is questionable in light of Martin's recollection. Benteen's version may have been altered to justify his later actions. Any version of this brief meeting must be viewed in the light of that particular moment's circumstances: The troopers, including their commanders, were under severe stress exacerbated by days of relentless riding and imminent battle with an opponent of unknown strength. This was truly the "heat of battle" and history is filled with seemingly obvious miscommunications occurring at these moments.

Martin, for his part, does not delve into the detail of this conversation. His diary, as reported by the Washington Times Magazine in a 1906 column, summarized the conversation as a quick exchange. Then, Benteen "hurried forward, joined Reno [who had fallen back with the remains of his command], and we pushed to Custer's aid." Instead of deploying immediately to support Custer's attack, Benteen moved to a nearby saucer-shaped hill to reinforce the third battalion led by Major Marcus Reno. The latter's column suffered a severe mauling after beginning their assault and retreated to what is now called Reno Hill. Reno and his men were almost certainly saved from destruction by Benteen's timely arrival. These troops remained in their defensive position on the hill for another two days fending off attacks, vainly hoping for Custer to relieve them.

One can imagine what these soldiers endured during this time: Cursing and sweating soldiers frantically scraping the hard ground to create cover from the enemy fire; dust swirling about, limiting vision, and accompanied by unremitting heat; bewildered and terrified horse and mules whinnying wildly; shots plunking into the ground and unfortunate soldiers who would in turn scream from shock and pain; and, unrelenting thirst for both man and animal. As these events unfolded, great courage was evident in some of the men. Many soldiers, including Martin, would later testify that many lives were certainly saved by a cool and composed Benteen. While Reno covered in the center of the position, Benteen repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire, even being hit in the heel of his boot. Although they occasionally ventured out to chase off snipers or obtain water, they were unable or unwilling to locate Custer's column with the exception of one failed foray.

It would have made little difference, however, as Custer's forces were swiftly surrounded and annihilated within an hour. Two long days passed before the main U.S. Army force arrived, led by General Terry. Their arrival, noted Martin, was "too late for Custer and just in time for us - for we were about 400 against 5,000." Gathering up Reno and Benteen's surviving troops,

Terry's command rode to the battle site. Martin's description is chilling and detailed: "When we got to the place where they had made their stand, we found everything dead except Captain Keogh's horse. The men had been cut and mangled badly, heads all smashed in, arms and legs twisted like rope, and twenty or thirty arrows struck in each body. It was the worst sight imaginable. Toward the middle of the battleground, we found the body of Custer's grey horse, with the general's head resting on its stomach. There was a bullet hole in his left breast and one other in his right temple. His clothes, except hat, coat and boots, were on him, but his watch was gone." After burying the dead where they had fallen, Terry retreated to the mouth of the Big Horn river, eventually arriving at Fort Abraham Lincoln by the Army's river steamer, The Far West. Reinforcements were ordered and over the next few years, Federal troops streamed into the Black Hills. Recalcitrant Indians were either rounded up and shipped to government reservations, or hunted down and killed.

After the Little Big Horn

The following year, Martin, still a bugler with the now reconstituted Seventh Cavalry, took part in the campaign against Chief Joseph and the Nez Percé, including the battle of Canyon Creek in Montana (June 1877).

In early 1879, Martin found himself in Chicago preparing to offer testimony in the Court of Inquiry's proceedings concerning the events at the Little Big Horn. Specifically, the Court's primary focus was on the conduct of both Major Reno and Captain Benteen. It should be noted that Major Reno requested the inquiry in the interest of defending his questionable actions. On March 1, 1879, the Court of Inquiry closed the proceedings and both Reno and Benteen were cleared of any wrongdoing, although intense debates continue today regarding their actions at the battle. Regardless of the Court's decision, public opinion - swayed by Custer's widow, Libby, and from the cumulative testimony - ensured that these officers' reputations were forever damaged.

Martin was honorably discharged at Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 31, 1879 after completing his original five-year enlistment with the Seventh Cavalry. Less than a month later, Martin reenlisted (June 24, 1879), but this time with the Third Artillery Regiment, Battery G, for five years. Perhaps this was due to his impending marriage to Julia Higgins, a 19-year-old Irish girl living in Oswego, New York. They met while Martin was stationed at nearby Fort Schuyler and wed on October 7 at St. Raymond's Catholic Church in Westchester County. Soon after, Martin was assigned to the shore battery duty in Baltimore. *Initially, they lived in Fort McHenry, and eventually settled in a home at 1410 Woodall Street in the Locust Point community of south Baltimore.* Here they began to raise their family as Martin reenlisted in 1884, and again in 1889. A July 4, 1885 newspaper article from the Baltimore Sun confirms Martin's stationing at the Fort McHenry as a musician with Battery D of the Fourth Regular Artillery. His celebrity as Custer's bugler was growing, and although the article reports primarily on the Fort's improved physical appearance, the byline reads "Sole Survivor of the Custer Massacre."

According to a New York Times article dated October 21, 1886, General Philip Sheridan was visited by "a neatly dressed artilleryman named Martin, the sole white survivor of Custer's command." Martin traveled to Washington, D.C. in the hope of obtaining a messenger position with the War Department. General Sheridan was the Commanding General of the U.S. Army at that time, and he "promised to further his [Martin's] application as far as it lay in his power to do

so.” Since Martin remained with his Coastal Artillery unit stationed at Fort McHenry, it does not appear that Sheridan’s assistance was successful.

They lived in relative peace and stability with their growing family until the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Martin was transferred to the 4th Artillery Regiment, Battery D, stationed in Tampa, Florida. Two years later, as hostilities ended, Martin re-enlisted for the final time and spent some time in Cuba, returning in May 1901. By July of that year, though, Martin transferred to the 90th Coastal Artillery Regiment stationed at Fort McHenry, serving until late September, 1903, when he was promoted to Corporal. Shortly before his mandatory retirement (age limitation) in January, 1904, he received one final promotion to Master Sergeant. His discharge document bears the statement, “Service honest and faithful,” a recurring theme in Martin’s service record. He retained a moderate level of popularity and his retirement was mentioned in a January 1904 article appearing in the National Tribune. The piece noted that he would receive “three quarters of his regular pay [roughly \$30 per month].” It added that Martin, “...has in his possession a handsomely engrossed certificate signed by Captain Benteen which contains the dates of the various engagements in which he fought.”

Post-Army Life

The Martins owned and operated a small confectionery shop on Fort Avenue, near the gates of Fort McHenry, until 1906. They lived in a small home on Hull Street. By now, their family had grown to eight children: Julia, Mary, George, May, Jane, John Joseph, Frank William and Lawrence. Three of his sons would eventually serve in the military with George - named after Custer - eventually becoming a General in the U.S. Army.

Martin moved to Brooklyn - possibly in 1906 - and lived with his daughter Mary for a short period before finding a furnished room in the neighborhood near the Manhattan Bridge with the Coico (or Coicco) family. By the 1920 census, Martin was listed as an “uncle-in-law” living with the Coicos at 168 Prospect Street in Brooklyn. A scandalous rumor involving his move to New York emerged. It alleged that Martin had an affair with a woman of ‘loose’ morals and may have contracted venereal disease from her. Upon Julia’s discovery, Martin moved out of their Baltimore home and left for New York. In 1908, an article appearing in the Brooklyn Eagle revealed that, at the behest of Julia Martin, the police tracked Martin to Brooklyn. He told the police that he had no ill will against his wife and was glad to hear she was doing well. “He was not going back to her, he said, and that was the end of it,” added the reporter. It must be emphasized that these rumors remain unsubstantiated. Italian researcher Pasquale Petrocelli believes Martin remained at least moderately honorable in attending to his family, adding that despite his meager pension, he sought to assist the family in other ways. Many weekends were spent traveling to Baltimore via train courtesy of the free passes provided by his daughter, Julia, an employee of a railroad company. My correspondence with his few remaining relatives, including Patricia Ditch, seem to confirm that - regardless of his moving to Brooklyn - he remained very much loved by his immediate family. Martin’s personal history does not indicate that he possessed any tendencies to shirk his duties and obligations.

A National Tribune article, dated August 1906, notes that Martin began working that year as a ‘ticket chopper’ in the 103rd Street Station on the recently opened New York City subway system. He obtained the position with the help of Major Francis M. Gibson of the New York Street Cleaning Department. Gibson had served as a First Lieutenant with Benteen’s Troop H in

the Seventh Cavalry during the Sitting Bull campaign. The article stated that Martin's Army pension was \$30 per month, and that the subway job paid an additional \$45 each month; it further noted, "...so that he has a good living assured him, but it is monotonous work from 1 o'clock in the morning until 7 [o'clock] in the evening."

On June 24, 1906, Martin and many former Seventh Cavalry comrades traveled to the United States Military Academy at West Point to honor Custer on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the battle. Fondly called 'Bugler' Martin by his fellow veterans, he played "Taps" over Custer's grave as they laid garlands down in tribute. Many Seventh Cavalry troopers, including Martin, revered their former commander. The following year saw Martin attend a Seventh Cavalry reunion held at Canandaigua, New York.

Martin never forgot his Indian Wars experiences, remaining very proud of his service, and particularly of his role in the Battle of Little Big Horn. He supplemented his income by appearing in New York City stage productions, often playing bugle calls between acts or telling war stories. Various newspaper accounts from the New York Times mention Martin's appearance - as the guest of honor - at the American Theatre's production of "Custer's Last Fight" on May 1, 1907. Martin's relatives and numerous newspaper articles assert Martin's popularity during his time in New York City. It was not unusual for schoolchildren to visit, primarily to hear his retelling of the famous battle.

As the years went by, Martin happily continued to be interviewed by historians and journalists alike regarding his memories of the Little Big Horn. Perhaps thoughtlessly, Martin occasionally amended a few details of the battle and his life. Often, his intent was to correct an inaccuracy or discrepancy in the deposition taken at the 1879 Court of Inquiry. Conversely, as his command of the English language improved over the years, his memory inevitably began to fail as evidenced by the sometime contradictory information provided during interviews. A newspaper article from 1906 mentions that he had a "slight Italian accent to his English."

The Washington Times Magazine published a detailed article about John Martin in November 1906, which provides an intriguing view into his life. At 53 years of age, Martin was "still an active clear-eyed man whose strong face and perfect poise clearly indicate the active and perfect training he has had since infancy...he is straight and sturdy as ever, and rises with a merry twinkle and a regulation military salute for every one of the many patrons of the subway who know him personally, and who never fail to stop for a minute with the old veteran of at least three active campaigns." Martin, the author reveals, kept a detailed diary of his entire military service. Evidently, he prized the memoirs but allowed the interviewer to use it for the purposes of verification.

The reporter visited with Martin at his New York apartment and on his walls hung priceless memorabilia. The bugle he used throughout his thirty year Army career hung on one wall while a "slightly tarnished cornet hangs opposite the bugle." The cornet, Martin explained, had belonged to a Spanish bugler who gifted it to him after the truce since "Martin could play it better than its owner." Another wall held a "slightly tarnished and battered saber" to which Martin provided a short history. He related that when the troop was mustered out in 1879, the soldiers turned in all of their equipment, but Martin was allowed to keep his bugle since it was personal property. Years later, while serving in Cuba, he was summoned to his sergeant's tent and told, "John, you were with Custer. I have a relic from his command and I am going to give it to you." The sergeant presented the saber to Martin who examined it carefully. To his

astonishment, he "...found my initials, J.D.M., with the date 'June, 1876' where I had scratched them with a nail years ago. I was mighty glad to get it back..." Fittingly, Martin also kept an 1874 photograph of General Custer described, as "yellow and grimy with age and exposure."

As his small frame began to grow, he readily traded in his subway job for a better one at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he spent the rest of his working days. In a second long interview with Walter Mason Camp in May 1910, Martin recounted speaking to General Terry two days after the battle while leading the relief column to the battle site. After querying Martin on certain specifics relating to the battle, Terry closed the conversation with, "Well, you are a lucky man and I wish you good fortune."

John Martin's good fortune came to an end on December 18, 1922: While crossing a Brooklyn street, he was hit by a truck and hospitalized at Cumberland Hospital. Although the truck accident was enough to hospitalize him, a more devastating medical problem was discovered. Six days passed as Martin struggled with complications arising from a bronchial pulmonary issue. At 10:15 on the morning of December 24, 1922, with only a son-in-law present, Martin lost his final battle and passed away at the age of 69. He was laid to rest in the nearby military cemetery at Cypress Hills in Brooklyn three days later; it was Bugler Martin's final bivouac.

Shortly after his death, his widow, Julia, applied for a pension assignment. In order to validate her claim as his wife, she was required to provide proof that their separation was only that, and not a divorce. Depositions were collected from family and neighbors, and the matter was resolved in Julia's favor on March 23, 1923. In a sidebar, as a result of her dementia, Julia spent her remaining years at Spring Grove Hospital in Catonsville, Maryland.

Taps

Over 130 years later, sharp debate and controversy still surround the events of the Little Big Horn valley. It easily remains one of America history's most famous battles, and its allure never seems to fade. Tactics and personalities are examined endlessly through a wide array of books, monographs, essays, movies and websites. More recent archaeological discoveries at the sprawling battlefield have only served to enhance and fuel further studies and discussions. Dedicated volunteer groups like the Friends of the Little Big Horn Battlefield, Little Big Horn Associates, and Little Bighorn History Alliance promote serious research of the battle, leading to more detailed studies of the individuals involved.

Our John Martin, Giovanni Martino, has not been forgotten. Interest in Martin's life has grown in recent years, especially in his native Italy. Some of this appeal derives from a general European interest in the lore and legends of the American Wild West. Much of the research regarding his birth comes from the diligent efforts of Italian professional and amateur historians: Professor Giuseppe Colliti; Dr. Michele Esposito; Pasquale Petrocelli; and, Claudio Busi. Their research, enhanced by their proximity to primary source documents, is free of the restrictions and biases accumulated through seemingly endless and often conflicting analyses of the participants and events surrounding the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Although not directly involved with examining Martin's life outside of his services with the Seventh Cavalry, more prominent historians and authors - Robert Utley, James Donovan and John Koster - help to keep his story alive. Don Horn of the Little Big Horn Associates helped to

provide Martin's gravesite with a new tombstone in 1991 which bears the following inscription: "Carried Gen. Custer's Last Message - Battle of the Little Big Horn - June 25, 1876".

Other individuals also help to keep his life and contributions alive and relevant. In 1999, his services were recognized and honored by the Arlington National Cemetery's "Taps Project," a permanent exhibit created by Jari A. Villanueva that pays tribute to nine famous buglers in U.S. Army history. The exhibit is moving, not only with respect to Martin, but to other often forgotten buglers. Awareness of Martin and his service to the Seventh Cavalry extends even further: John Chiarella and the Five Borough Bicycle Club of New York honored Martin during their Annual Memorial Day Ride in 2007.

His fellow veterans always referred to him as "Bugler" Martin. The old troopers had great regard for Martin, and respected him for both his actions and demeanor. Other accounts by family members consistently paint him as good and happy man, who loved and valued his family dearly. He was sometimes affectionately referred to as "Dry Martini." Petrocelli eloquently writes that, "...we do not find a hero per se, but rather a normal man. One with qualities both good and bad. He very much represents the humble and rarely acknowledged aspects of the Italian immigrants of his era, who also worked and sacrificed for their adopted homeland."

In his venerated book, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book for Custeriana*, Colonel W.A. Graham eloquently notes that Martin "...is a rather remarkable old soldier, who never misses an occasion to honor the Stars and Stripes, and who turns out in the old blue, his left arm literally covered to the elbow with service stripes, every time the call of patriotism sounds, whether it be to honor the dead or greet the living." Graham, who had interviewed Martin a few months before the latter's death, properly adds "...he is well worthy of your respectful attention."

Giovanni Martino lived an historical odyssey, and his experiences may likely remain unparalleled. For most, however, his life and experiences are summed up in one untidy yet incomplete statement: The last white man to see Custer alive.

Photographs

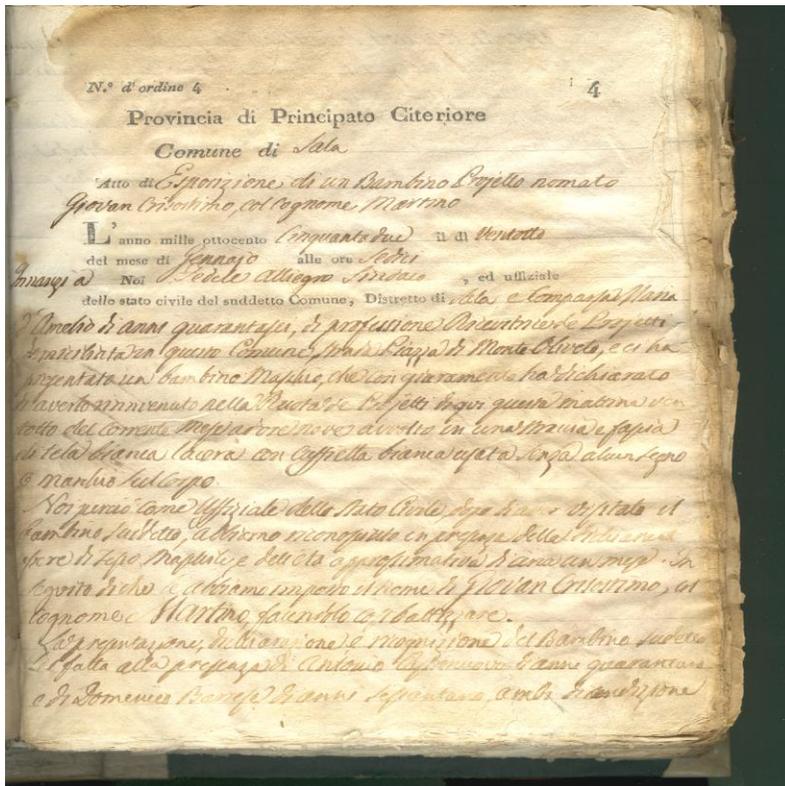


Trumpeter John Martin (Giovanni Cristostimo Martino) in a photograph taken by D.F. Barry shortly before or after his retirement from the U.S. Army in 1904. Martin's uniform bears six service stripes corresponding with his thirty years of continuous service and three medals. The latter likely relate to his expertise with particular weapons such as marksmanship and sharpshooter.

From Pat Ditch, niece to his great granddaughter (Bessie), and Seventh Cavalry records, we know that he had hazel eyes, dark hair and stood 5' 6". In nearly all accounts, he is described as bright and cheerful, an amazing trait in consideration of the many wars he experienced.

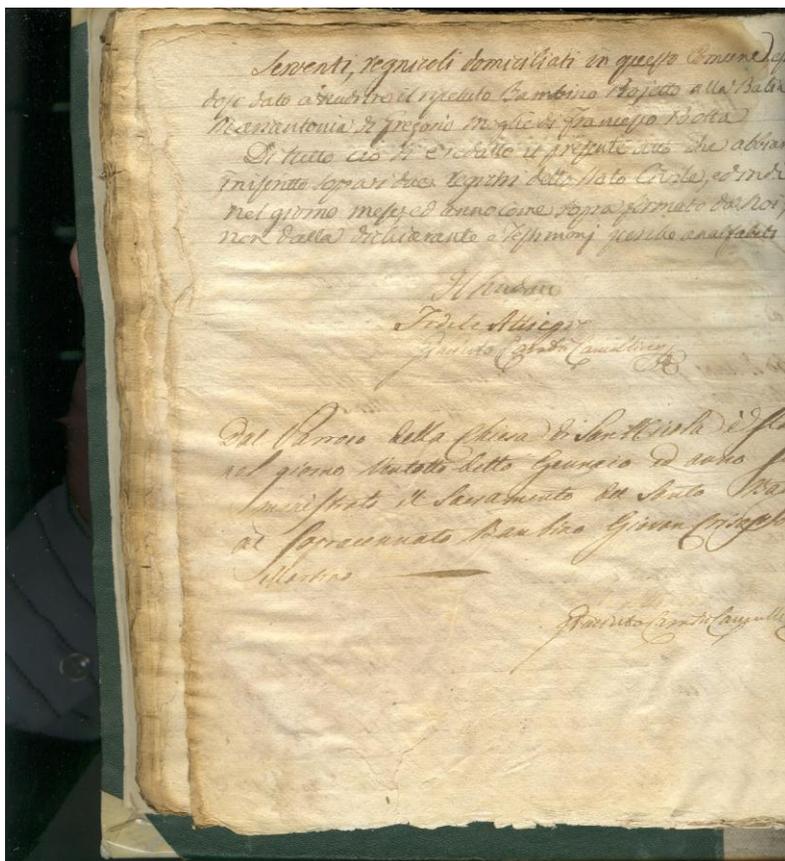
A current photo of **Sala Consilina**, a small town (or *comune*) located in the Campania region of Salerno in southern Italy. Originally, the town was named Sala, but this was amended to its current name of Sala Consilina in the late 19th century. A former New York State police officer and amateur historian, W.F. Walbesser, hypothesized that he could have been born in Sala, Verona, located in a region where Garibaldi had fought, and the misconception may be from the similarities in the towns' names.





Giovan Martino's birth certificate (2 pages) from the Registry in Sala Consilina. It was located by Professor Giuseppe Colitti and Dr. Michele Esposito of Sala in 1997 after an extensive search. The special Register was reserved for children who had been abandoned or neglected. Their analysis determined that Martin's actual baptismal name was Giovan Crisostimo Martino.

Found abandoned near the Church of the Annunciation in Sala the previous day, Martino appeared in good condition and was thought to be about a month old. Sala's Mayor named the boy after Saint Giovan (or Giovanni) Crisostimo whose Feast Day was celebrated the previous day.



The documents seem to confirm that Martino was born in either early January 1852 or possibly late December 1851. Martino told his the family that he was on January 1, 1852, in Sala. One assumption is that, since his exact date of birth was unknown and the unimportance of actual birth dates to rural Italians, it was acceptable to provide varying birthdates in his later years.

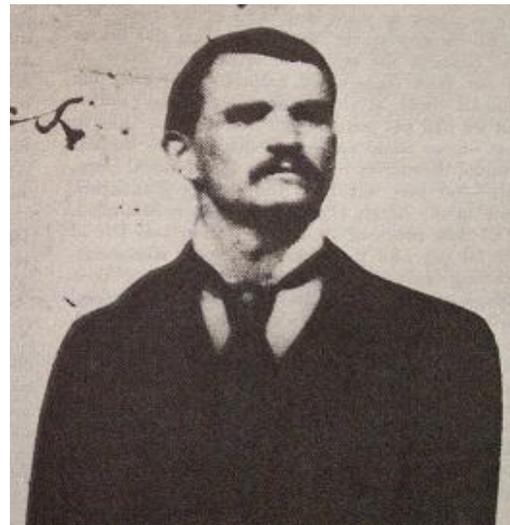
Professor Colitti remains convinced that Martino was born in November 1852 and his surname of Martino - and not that of his adopted parents, diGregorio or Botta - reflects this: Italians traditionally celebrate the Feast or San Martino on November 11.

These documents were provided through the courtesy of Giuseppe Colitti and Michele Esposito.

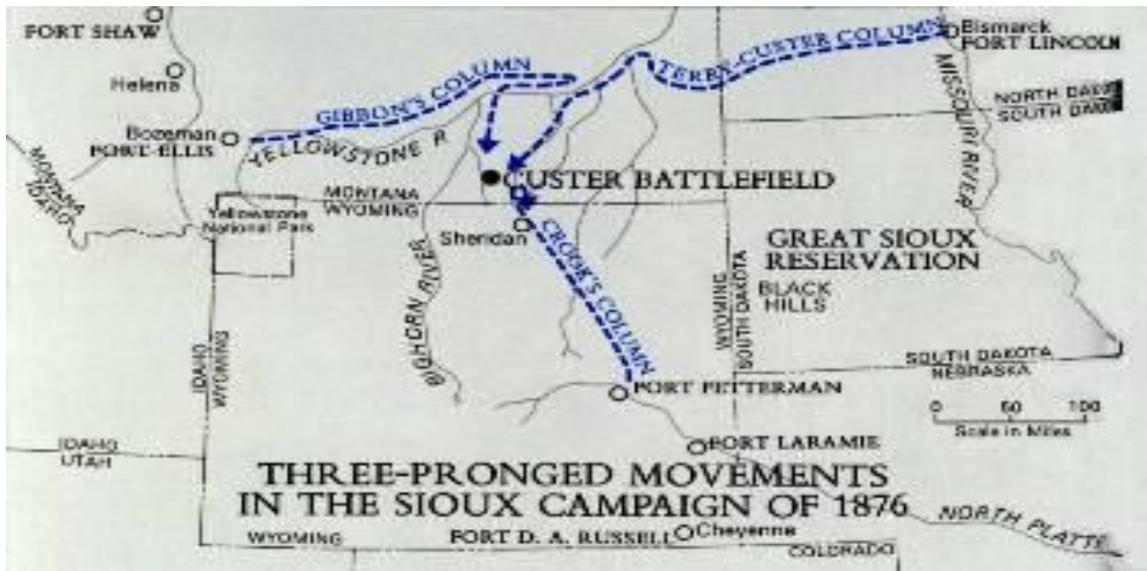


Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807 - 1882), Italian patriot and military hero. His popularity and military abilities are rightfully credited with the creation of a unified Italy during the Risorgimento. After returning to Italy from exile in 1848, he fought on and off for Italian unification for many years. His success was acclaimed internationally and he was offered a command in the U.S. Army by Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War, to which he politely refused. Garibaldi remains the most popular of all Italian heroes of the Risorgimento, and is often acknowledged as the Father of Modern Italy.

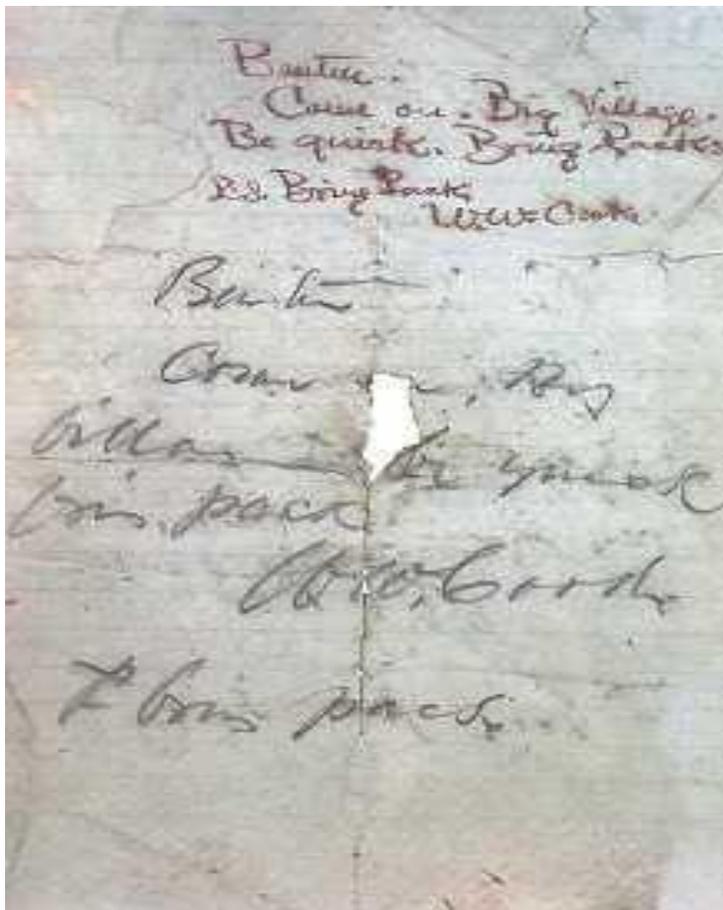
A young **John Martin (Giovanni Martino)** in an undated photo. Although the quality is poor, the photo likely dates back to soon after his arrival in America. A phenomenon of the massive Italian immigration to Italy during one 25-year period (1875 to 1900) resulted in so many emigrations that some sections of Italy were almost depopulated, including Martino's own region, Campania. Part of this was due to the Italian immigrant's tendency to emigrate in large groups. In general, emigrations of such scale resulted in economic upheaval in both Italy and the United States.



Sitting Bull (Tatanka Iyotake), a Hunkpapa Sioux holy man. His premonition of victory provided untold inspiration in the days preceding the battle. At the Little Big Horn, while Crazy Horse led the warriors into battle, Sitting Bull's voice was clearly heard urging the Indians on. Following the battle, he and other Indian warriors were hunted by the U.S. Army and escaped to Canada for safety. After his return to the United States, he toured briefly with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In 1890, he was shot and killed - though unarmed - by Sioux police trying to arrest him at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.



A map of the 1876 campaign illustrates the three different columns and their points of departure. Custer's column rode out of Fort Lincoln in modern day North Dakota on May 17, 1876, as the Regimental Band played "The Girl I Left Behind Me."



Custer's last official order, handwritten by Lt. W.W. Cooke, and carried by John Martin to Captain Frederick Benteen just before the attack began. The original note is written in the center of the page; it was rewritten at the top by Benteen for legibility.

The note reads:

Benteen
Come on. Big Village.
Be quick. Bring packs.
W. W. Cooke
P.S. Bring Pacs (sic)

The dispatch was finally located by Colonel W.A. Graham sometime after 1923. It was given by Benteen to a friend and was eventually donated to the Army through the efforts of Col. Charles Bates. It now resides in the library at West Point. Martin's life was almost certainly saved by his order to deliver the note.

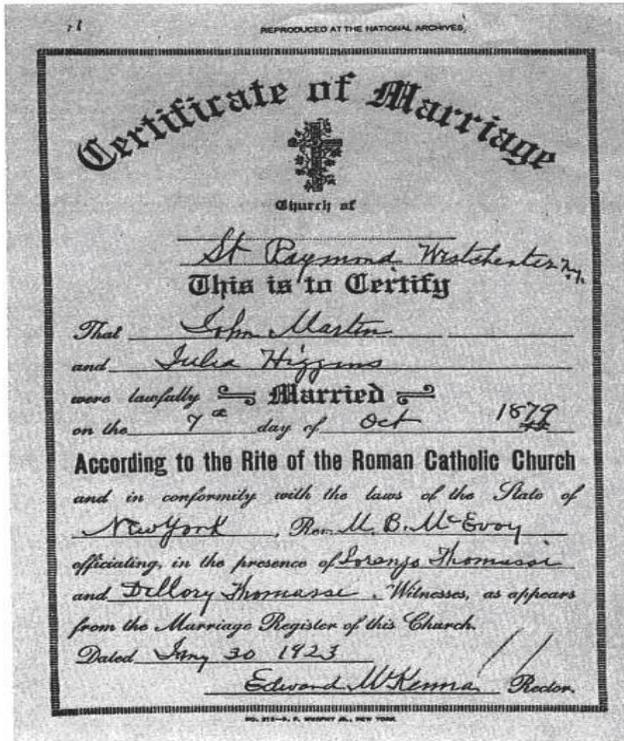


Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer was born in Rumley, Ohio on December 5, 1839. He attended The U.S. Military Academy at West Point and graduated - barely - ranked last in his class. Appointed as (brevet) Brigadier General of Volunteer Forces during the American Civil War, he served with distinction. Although he was nearly universally referred to as General, his permanent rank at death was Lt. Colonel. He, along with two brothers and a cousin, was killed during the fight at the Little Big Horn. His body was reinterred at West Point in October 1877.

Captain Frederick W. Benteen (photo by D.F. Barry). Born in 1834, he served with distinction during the American Civil War and remained a career Army officer for 27 years. Ordered by Custer to scout to the west, Benteen and his men were saved from sharing Custer's fate. After receiving Custer's note from Martin, Benteen and his command united with Major Reno's remaining troopers and fought off escalating Indian attacks for two days before being rescued by General Terry's column. Benteen disliked Custer since their first meeting in 1867, finding the General "vain, arrogant and egotistical." He passed away in 1892 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



A view of the Big Horn river and valley from **Reno Hill**. After delivering his message, Martin remained here as Reno and Benteen established a defensive position. They successfully fought off attacks and enfilading fire for two days until relieved by General Terry's column. Twenty-four men would receive Medals of Honor for their heroic actions on this hill.



Certificato di matrimonio di Martin

John and Julia's Certificate of Marriage. They wed on October 7, 1879 at St. Raymond's Church in Westchester, New York. This document - dated 1923 - was likely created in order to help substantiate Julia's claims for John's pension after his death in 1922.



John Martin's grave stone at **Cypress Hills National Cemetery** in Brooklyn, New York (left, and in detail, center photo). The original stone (right) was replaced in the 1991 by Don Horn of the Little Big Horn Associates with the larger stone; the original stone now lays in front of the new tombstone.