

FATHER BAKER

A FRIEND TO ALL



Written by Thomas Lucia | Illustrated by Michael Gelen

Dedicated to Father Nelson Baker, who fostered a legacy of caring that lives on to this day. And to Our Lady of Victory for, as Father Baker said, “she did it all!”

Published by OLV Charities



Copyright © 2025 by OLV Charities.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Visit us online at OLVCharities.org.

First printing sponsored by the Catholic Parenting Initiative (CPI) of Western New York. For information on how CPI fosters faith in families, go to CPIWNY.org.



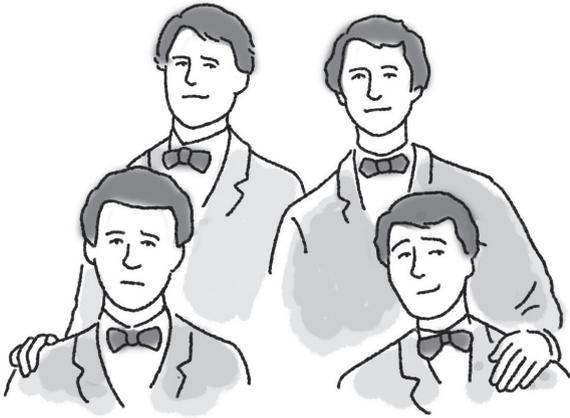
CATHOLIC
PARENTING
INITIATIVE
— A ministry of OLV —

Table of Contents

Booming Buffalo	6
Duty Calls	11
Uncertainty	16
A Turning Point	21
A Difficult Start	27
“Father Baker’s Folly”.....	33
A “City of Charity”.....	40
“A Light in the Darkness”.....	52
The End	64
His Legacy Continues.....	69

CHAPTER ONE

Booming Buffalo



Nelson Henry Baker was born in Buffalo, New York, on February 16, 1842. He was the second of Lewis and Caroline Baker's four sons. Nelson had an older brother named Lewis (named after his father) and two younger brothers, Andrew and Ransom.

At that time, the City of Buffalo was growing. Its location on the Erie Canal made it the perfect

place for goods and materials to flow to and from bigger cities on the Great Lakes and the Northeast United States. Between 1840, around the time Nelson was born, and 1850, the city grew from a population of 18,000 people to 42,000. Just 10 years after that, Buffalo was the 10th largest city in the entire country!

Nelson's father, Lewis, had come to the United States from Germany, while his mother, Caroline, had arrived from England. A smart businessman, Lewis began to take note of the city's rapid growth and established a grocery store in downtown Buffalo.

As was common in those days, the family lived in a small apartment located above the store. As the Baker boys grew older, each was expected to work at the store, keeping the shelves full and working with customers.

While not too much is known about Nelson's younger years, those who knew him from that time remember him as being thin and a bit short for his age. He was usually gentle, but could be

direct with people when he was sticking up for those things he believed in. Nelson was usually smiling and had a good sense of humor.

He had a wide variety of interests and was gifted both athletically and musically. He loved playing baseball as well as singing and playing the guitar and piano. One childhood friend said about young Nelson: “He was an immensely popular young man at parties because he could sing, dance, and play the piano, guitar, and snare drum. He even composed some songs all by himself.”

From his father came Nelson’s intelligence – he was especially good at math – and his business sense. By his teens, he was already helping with the finances of the grocery store, counting and tracking money.

From his mother came Nelson’s interest in religion, specifically, the Catholic faith. Friends and family recalled the young boy eagerly following his mom to Mass each week. One story from that time tells of an interesting decision Nelson made



when he was 12 years old. Overjoyed with his good grades, his parents gave him one dollar to spend any way he wanted. He excitedly ran out the door.

When he returned, the family had expected him to show off a new baseball glove or a harmonica. Instead, he proudly took a statue of the Blessed Mother, Mary, out of its box and showed it to them. The item quickly became one of his most prized possessions.

Nelson attended Elementary School #12,

located at the corner of Batavia and Spring streets in Buffalo. After that, he attended the city's first secondary school, Central High, from which he graduated at the age of 17.

After high school, he joined the rest of the family working at the grocery store. At that point in his life, his path seemed straight forward: Nelson's charm and ability with numbers made him destined to either take over the family business when his father retired or use these gifts to start a company of his own. It seemed so clear.



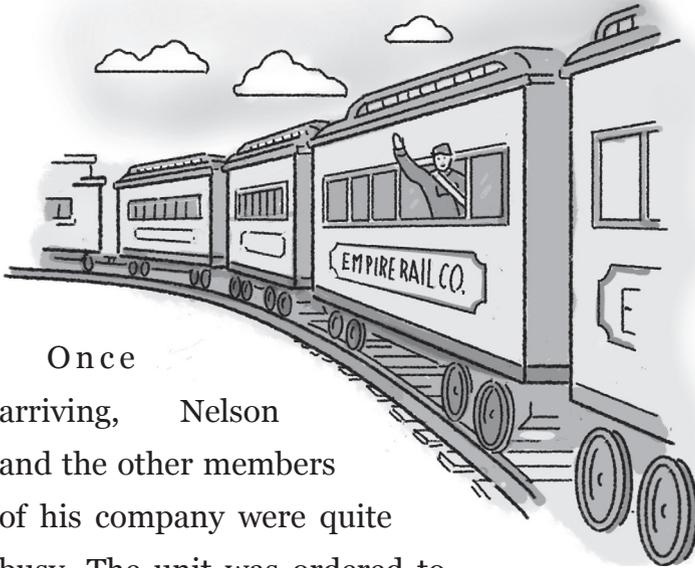
CHAPTER TWO

Duty Calls



Nelson was 21 years old in June of 1863 when news arrived that General Robert E. Lee and his Confederate army had moved into Pennsylvania. Fearful they would soon reach New York, the U.S. Secretary of War called for 20,000 new recruits from the state to serve their country. One of those who heard that call was Nelson.

He enlisted with the 74th New York State militia on June 18, 1863. He and his fellow recruits were sworn in and boarded a train for Harrisburg, Pa., the very next day.



Once arriving, Nelson and the other members of his company were quite busy. The unit was ordered to guard key roads and bridges in towns such as Mill Creek and Mount Union. From there, the 74th was sent to Gettysburg, the site of one of the most violent battles of the Civil War.

While it does not appear that the members of his regiment were ever directly involved in the battle's heaviest fighting, they were certainly aware of the terrible events happening there.

At the end of the Battle of Gettysburg, General Lee's forces retreated, so Nelson and the members

of the 74th followed. They were sent into Maryland on July 5, 1863, and, by July 9, they had marched as far as a few miles north of the West Virginia border.

As mid-July approached, Nelson was reminded that he had only signed up to serve for 30 days and that that time was close to an end! With his thoughts turning away from battlefields and back to peaceful strolls through Buffalo, he wished he were home. History, however, had other plans.

Just days after the Union army's win at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln reinstated the military draft, a move that required young Americans to fight in the ongoing war. While it may have been necessary, the decision was unpopular. In New York City, the anger boiled over into violence. With only a small police force to deal with the dangerous situation, the mayor begged for help.

On July 13, Nelson, and the other members of the 74th, were sent there to do what could be done to restore peace.

By the time they arrived three days later, most of the rioting had stopped. But lives had been lost and many homes and businesses had been destroyed. In the brief time they were there, soldiers like Nelson, who supported the city's return to calm, did their best to protect the innocent from the violence.

Days later, Nelson and his fellow troops were ordered to return home to Buffalo. What was supposed to be a 30-day adventure ended up lasting a total of 46 days. And in that time, the members of the tired group had traveled more than 1,000 miles – from Buffalo to Maryland, New York City and back!

Like many people who served in the military, Nelson did not talk too much about his Civil War journey. Stories of what happened are rare and there are few mentions of his time as a soldier in his diaries. One historian who studied this time in his life, though, said, “As if a sign of things to come, Nelson Baker’s days in the military was marked more by a peace-keeping cause than by

the interests of death and destruction.”

Now a 21-year-old war veteran, Nelson did not take much time to jump toward the “next big thing” in his life.