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Researching the Biography of a Civil War Soldier

This year marks the 150th Anniversary of the American Civil War (1861-1865). Second in importance only to the Revolution, the Civil War created profound changes in the way Americans viewed themselves and their country. An estimated 3.2 million men, North and South, served during the conflict, with Ohio alone contributing some 320,000 soldiers. Nearly every family in the state was touched in some way. Whether the soldiers were members of the family or just intriguing historical figures, researchers today may be interested in compiling the biographies of servicemen. There are many sources which can help. Not every soldier will be well-documented, but thanks to good record-keeping in the past, many lives can be outlined in greater detail than ever before. The Center for Archival Collections holds many local government records, manuscripts, letters, diaries, and books, focusing on Northwest Ohio and the Civil War.

Examples of the kind biographies that can be put together are those gleaned by our volunteer Daniel Masters. Thanks to his efforts, the CAC has an online index to the articles about service units and soldiers' letters that appeared in Northwest Ohio newspapers. Linked to these letters are brief summaries of the history of the units of which the men were members, showing muster-in and muster-out dates, location, and battles fought. Where possible, the writers of the letters have been identified and biographies written. An extended biography for Captain Cyrus Sears (seen at right, in later life) of the 11th Ohio Battery, Independent Light Artillery contrasts with shorter biographies like those for most of his comrades, where only service information is available.

Because most regiments were recruited in a specific locality, articles on the unit would appear in local newspapers, and serviceman's letters to the editor were often intended to represent the observations of the majority of the soldiers. Certainly there was great interest in reports of combat and second-guessing of strategy, but there was also a continuing community narrative. Social relationships continued among the men and between the men and their families back home. Politics both within the unit as well as on the national scene were common topics. Reading such letters can provide interesting background for the soldier's experience in the field.

Personal Biography

A good place to start when gathering biographical information about a Civil War soldier is the same as that for any other person of the nineteenth century—the U.S. Federal Census. For
those who survived the war by many years, a good place to begin is the 1890 Special Census of Veterans. While most of the census for 1890 was lost in a fire in 1921, the Veterans Schedule did survive and contains valuable clues for tracing a Civil War soldier. The return lists the geographical location, name of veteran or surviving widow, rank, company, regiment or vessel, dates of enlistment and discharge, and length of service. Additional information may include the veteran’s post office address, description of disability incurred, and other remarks. The population schedules for other census years give a snapshot view of the soldier and his family every ten years. This can make it easier to follow the movements of the veteran, learn his occupation, and find out something about his wife and children, and perhaps his parents and siblings, as well as find the likely place to search for an obituary.

Obituaries appearing in the newspaper during the war were usually simple death notices. Later, however, two or three paragraphs outlining the veteran’s life might appear—especially for officers. As time went on, there were fewer surviving veterans, each death was taken as an opportunity to comment, not only on the individual, but on the passing of an era. Besides an obituary, more personal information may be found for many citizens in the subscription histories produced during the late 1800s—histories of the Civil War (with a section focusing on a county or region), or histories of the counties which included biographical essays of residents, using information provided by the family. While usually only two or four paragraphs in length, these essays are often packed with family information, and provide a glimpse of the veteran in middle age.

Letters, diaries, or other manuscripts may have been passed down through the family or have been donated to an archive. These, too, can tell something about the education and character of the writer and his family. The CAC holds many such collections, including links online to transcripts.

Military Records

At left, Addison Swoyers (1840-1863) was the younger brother of Alfred (below). Before the war Addison, a bachelor, purchased land at present-day Weston, Ohio, in Wood County. He and Alfred enlisted as corporals in Company H of the 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry on September 2, 1861. It was common for brothers, cousins, and neighbors to enlist in the same unit, creating strong community ties to particular regiments.

The soldier’s regiment will lead researchers to information about his military service. The Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1866 lists every company and regiment, including naval enlistments for all the units recruited in Ohio. Information includes the name of the soldier, his age at enlistment, term enlisted for, dates of muster-in and muster-out, rank, and notes on events that may have affected him, including wounds, capture, promotion, and transfer to other units. A separate index is available. Of course, not all soldiers participated in every battle credited to their unit. Companies could be held in reserve, assigned to guard railroad stations or accompany shipments, or an individual might serve as a supply clerk behind the lines.

The National Archives may also be able to provide still more details through the Compiled Service Record, which recorded the soldier’s muster-in and re-enlistment dates, and may include such information as his physical description, nativity, presence in monthly roll-calls, appearance on lists of wounded, sick, missing, or captured, promotions, pay and bonuses owed, and final information. Disabled veterans, widows, orphans, and aged dependent parents were entitled to a monthly pension, and the Pension Record provides much information about the soldier and his family, including the documentation they provided to receive their benefits. These records may be requested through the National Archives through the mail or with an online form.

As the war progressed, recruitment became more difficult. Veterans were encouraged to re-enlist with bonuses. Draftees could hire substitutes to serve in their place. County governments maintained records of these transactions, including discharge records to keep track of the military status of former soldiers. Researchers should check the holdings of the County Auditor and Recorder in the soldier’s county of residence for this information. The CAC has copies of many such records available.

Entitlements and “Safety Nets”

A rush of social services was established after the war, in part to assist veterans or the families of deceased soldiers. County infirmaries and orphanages were founded, and the County Auditor and Recorder maintained records for Soldiers Relief payments. As time went on, Veterans hospitals and nursing homes were established to care for aging and disabled soldiers. The Soldiers and Sailors Home in Sandusky was one such place. The CAC has some records of the Home including applications for admission, and death and burial records (1869-1983).

More information about CAC holdings of local government records regarding military service can be found in past issues of the Archival Chronicle (see website list below).

Young men returning from war were eager to begin new lives and many veterans took advantage of the Homestead Act (1862) to file claim to farmland west of the Mississippi. Veterans could deduct enlistment time served from the five-year residency requirement to acquire land. The Bureau of Land Management has an online index that can be searched by the name of the first homestead settler, showing the location and date of the claim, and often a copy of the document itself.

Social Networks

The comradeship which was born under fire continued among the men once they returned home. The Grand Army of the Republic was the Union veterans’ fraternal organization which held monthly meetings for all veterans in a locality, regardless of their service unit. Auxiliary organizations for women and children of the veterans grew with them (the Woman’s Relief Corps and Sons of Veterans). The records of these organizations may include detailed information about the veteran.

The men also maintained ties through contact with other members of their units. Reunions held in the summer or early fall were sometimes elaborate affairs with picnics or formal dinners, and a time for remembering the fallen. Newspaper coverage of these meetings could be extensive. Men who had once served as privates often rose to positions of leadership in these organizations and in their communities. Active organizations encouraged and sometimes sponsored the writing of unit and regimental histories, and were responsible for the creation of battlefield parks and monuments.
Alfred Searles (1834-1864), at right, was Addison's older brother. Married, with two daughters, he also served as a corporal in Company H of the 21st OVI. Before the war, he had worked to establish a family farm, settling near his parents in Fulton County.

Still more information is available in books and other publications dealing with the history of battles, service units, or prisons. A search of library holdings will locate many general histories which put the soldier's service in the larger context of the war. Google Books may include out-of-print material not otherwise accessible to the researcher working from a distance.

Not all soldiers participated in every action their unit fought, nor did every company in its regiment. Many were assigned guard duty at railroad stations or worked as clerks or supply agents behind the lines.

- Civil War Manuscript Collections (CAC). Links to manuscript descriptions and transcripts of Civil War era materials held here at the Center for Archival Collections.
- Civil War Newspaper Correspondence Index (CAC). Indexes northwest Ohio newspapers which published letters and articles by and about local servicemen.
- Northwest Ohio in the Civil War (CAC). Brief biographies of northwest Ohio servicemen who contributed letters to their hometown newspapers. Brief list of unit action.
- Guide to Internet Links in Civil War History (CAC). Links online to broad-based Internet sites with information about the Civil War.
- National Archives: Military Records—Civil War Records. Provides a basic introduction to Civil War resources, giving examples of soldiers' histories, and tells where to write for further information.
- Ohio in the Civil War. Provides selected bibliography of sources in paper and on the web for each Ohio regiment, as well as information from Dyer's Compendium, which lists battles in which the unit fought.
- Ohio In the Civil War: Interesting Facts. Ohio Historical Society provides questions and answers to a variety of questions about Ohio's participation in the war.
- Traveling Exhibit: Ohio and the Civil War—150 Years Later. A brief description of a traveling exhibit designed by the Ohio Historical Society dealing with the war.
- Bibliography of Ohio in the Civil War. Lists print resources available on Ohio's participation in the war.
- Civil War Soldier Search. A guide for researchers compiling information about Civil War soldiers, north and south.

Archival Chronicle

Our newsletter has published a number of articles over the years about research sources documenting the Civil War. Among these are:

- December 1992 Includes article on local government records
- December 1989 Includes articles on soldiers and the home front.
- March 2011 Includes information about photographs and albums of the Civil War era.

Alfred and Addison Searles—Company H, 21st OVI

Sources of Information:

1. MS 597-Stanton/Searles Family Papers. Manuscript collection at CAC
   - Biographical sketches in manuscript finding aid
2. Transcripts of Correspondence
3. Census. 1850. Lyme Township, Huron County, Ohio. Both sons listed with parents and family
4. Census. 1860. Lyme Township, Huron County, Ohio. Alfred next door to his family
5. Civil War Pension Index. Shows Alfred's wife Mary applied for a widow's pension
6. Roster of Ohio Soldiers in the War of the Rebellion. Shows Alfred and Addison in Company H; gives rank and cause and place of death
7. Find-a-Grave. Photograph of gravestone of Alfred Searles; Addison buried in Chattanooga National Cemetery

John H. Bolton, Company F, Company I, 21st OVI

Sources of Information:

1. MS 562 - 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry Papers. Manuscript Collection at CAC. See transcripts of letters
2. Civil War Biographies/Newspaper Index. Lists articles and letters by and about Bolton; note biographical essay
3. Census. 1860. Marion Township, Hancock County, Ohio. Listed as oldest son in family.
5. Census. 1890. Veteran's Schedule
6. Civil War Pension Index. Shows date of John's application for invalid Pension and wife Harriet's application for widow's pension
7. Obituary. Findlay Republican-Jeffersonian, October 14, 1904, p. 3
8. Find-a-Grave. Photograph of gravestone of John H. Bolton, including links to additional family information

--Lee N. Mc Laird

John H. Bolton (at left, during the Civil War; at right, as a veteran) enlisted as a 22 year old Sergeant in Company F, 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry on September 6, 1861, mustering into service on September 19, 1861. He took part in all of the engagements of the 21st Ohio, including Stones' River, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Chattahoochee Bridge, Jonesboro, the March to the Sea and the March through the Carolinas. Reenlisting as a veteran in 1864, he was commissioned First Lieutenant of Company I on date May 15, 1865. He mustered out with the regiment July 26, 1865 at Louisville, Kentucky--information taken from the Roster of Ohio Soldiers.