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Archival Chronicle

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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
A rush of social services was established after the war, in part to assist veterans or the families of deceased soldiers. County Veterans organizations maintain records that may include detailed information about the veteran.

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 auditors 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. Researchers should check the holdings of the County Auditor and Recorder in the soldier’s county of residence for this information. The CAC holds many such collections, including links online to transcripts.

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. Active organizations encouraged and sometimes sponsored the writing of unit and regimental histories, and were responsible for the creation of battlefield parks and monuments.

Military Records

At left, Addison Searles (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 CAC has some records of the Home including applications for admission, 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 and 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 civilians 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.

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, or 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 an online form.

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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 Ohio. 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.
- **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.<br>   - 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. Addison with parents; Alfred next door with 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 L, 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.
4. **Census.** 1880, Findlay, Hancock County, Ohio. Married to Harriet, one daughter.
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.

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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, Chattoochoe 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 L on date May 15, 1865. He mustered out with the regiment July 28, 1865 at Louisville, Kentucky—information taken from the Roster of Ohio Soldiers.