

Unpublished Sources: What is in the Attic, Anyway?

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Feature Essay: Civil War Obscura

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Unpublished Sources: What Is in the Attic, Anyway?

Civil War Obscura has offered only published fictional and non-fictional resources for readers' consideration. Still, those are usually the results of authors who have been reading unpublished sources for years. Unpublished resources range from personal letters and diaries to service records, regimental papers, and just about everything in the National Archives. If anything is more exciting than getting a book box from amazon, it is sitting at a table in a library or museum, opening a gray document box, and finding exactly what you were hoping for.

Readers may have come across the term “primary source” without knowing what one is. It can be any number of things—an artifact, document, diary, manuscript, autobiography, recording, or other source of information that was created at the time under study. They are fantastic to handle, read, work with, or listen to. However, when using them in research, it is essential to know something about the person, the battle, the politics, etc., as primary sources will always reflect their time period. Transcribing, for instance, is an adventure in itself. Civil War historians are lucky that most letters and diaries are written in legible cursive and maintain traditional English sentence structure. The longer a reader works with one person's writing, the easier the job becomes. Eyes adjust to penmanship, and the number of times something is labeled “illegible” decreases. Readers can also listen to or transcribe recordings. The Federal Writers’ Project recorded interviews with formerly enslaved persons whose memories are fascinating. Sometimes the dialects of the interviewees are challenging, but the more one listens, the easier they are to understand. There is controversy concerning dialect, but that will be covered in another post.

Other primary sources are “sort of” published. They may have been printed and distributed within a government agency or state department. They could be part of a set of documents created for members of a particular regiment or those who were present when a specific thing happened. These include Civil War pension files, regimental papers (archive.org),

headquarters memoranda, or claims documents. The fires of devastation in Richmond destroyed many Confederate records, but those of the United States were safely kept in Washington or state capital archives. Many a mystery has been discovered and solved by following these threads.

Yearbooks from veteran reunions, memory books created by mothers and other loved ones—even those which, like Carrie Spafford's scrapbook for her fiancé Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, also include death notices and funeral descriptions—are a wealth of personal information. It is impossible to hold a scrapbook such as Carrie's in one's hands and not feel significantly closer to the eighteen-year-old girl whose life had just been turned upside down.

Often old soldiers created memoirs based on memories of the war. These are not always terribly reliable, based on fading images of a traumatic event. But few types of reading get one closer to that soldier-author as a person. These memoirs exist as singular documents or privately printed books distributed to families or war companions. They are usually found in local libraries or the historical societies of small towns across the nation.

One might not think a Claims Document had much to offer, but my personal experience argues that this is untrue. My great-granddaddy, David Jackson McAlpine, brought his own horse with him when he served in the 5th Kentucky Cavalry, U.S. Granddaddy Mac made it through the war, but his trusty steed did not. My relative filed a claim (more than once), but he was never paid for his mount. Not only was his claim denied, but he was also insulted about his lack of rank. "The practice of the office has been to reject all claims of enlisted men when there was no record evidence either of loss, muster-in, or services of the horses, for the following reasons:" and then a list of "reasons" follows. Basically, no enlisted soldier had the means, will, or anything else to provide a horse of his own. Enlisted men were probably liars anyway, and horse thieves to boot:

It is also well-known that as the army moved through the enemies' country horses were picked up and used by the soldiers, these were of course the property of the United States, and nothing ought to be paid for the use, risk, or loss of such a horse. There are, it is believed, many thousand cases of this kind.¹

Knowing this about my relative gives me a connection no other source could create, and it was all in the Adjutant General's Claims Department.

¹ E. D. Townsend, Inspector General Brevd .Major General U.S.A., letter, War Department, August 26, 1868, 2, accessed on <https://www.fold3.com>

Civil War Obscura hopes readers attempt to read the old books and the unpublished sources. The goal is, after all, to understand the men and women who fought “our” war. They are fascinatingly complex, as are the sources we depend on. It is always worth the effort, however. Always.

Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books.