

Family History and the Civil War

Genealogist and Civil War research expert Ron Darrah joined the Roundtable from Indianapolis to help with the one question that always seems to fascinate every Civil War buff, “Do I have any ancestors who were in the war?” Ron is a member of the Society of Civil War Families of Indiana and a volunteer for the Indiana State Archives



Ron Darrah

who has done years of research into not only his own family CW ties, but has also helped others in countless searches. His presentation covered the three main elements of Civil War genealogical research—military forces and their records, pension records in their various forms, and the Grand Army of the Republic with its useful records.

Focusing solely on Union military organization (after all, as Ron pointed out, all *his* ancestors in the war were in Union blue!), he discussed the branches of the army, the differences between regular Federal units and volunteer state units, the Reserve system, and a small bit on the Federal Navy. He looked at enlistment forms, muster rolls, and a few other paper records generated by the companies and regiments. It is important to know these divisions and types of documentation well, because, even if you are not a CW or general military expert, these are the things you must research by, and knowing what they are and how they interweave and work together is essential in honing in on your particular soldier.

It is also helpful, if not essential, to know the three basic types of military units, along with a number of smaller specialized forces that do not readily fit into the main three categories. The main three are the artillery, both heavy and light; the cavalry, who, with the exception of a few famous battles and some legendary names like Jeb Stuart, John Buford and Phil Sheridan, were mostly scouts in the war; and, finally, the main fighting force, the infantry. The common foot soldier will most likely be an ancestor, simply by dint of the massive numbers of infantry when compared to artillery or cavalry. There were a number of specialized forces such as medical, signal corps, engineers, and so on, but their overall numbers are much, much smaller. One cannot forget the Navy, Marines, and the Revenue Cutter Service, but for those doing research in the Midwest these are far less likely sources of discovery.

Ron also explored the various pension laws and the very useful documents generated by applicants and the government. He covered both death and widows' pensions, and explained what useful family history information is contained in each.

Another pension category is the inevitable disability of old age that was applied for many years after the war in most cases. In all of these, the affidavits filed to support a claim can contain valuable information to uncover new histories or to confirm those already known but, perhaps, questionable.

Finally, Ron showed how the establishment and structure of the many Grand Army of the Republic posts after the war, with their voluminous surviving records, can tell much about the veterans and their postwar lives. The GAR was the American Legion of its day and flourished in the latter half of the 19th century, with over 500 posts in Indiana alone. In 1890, there were over 400,000 members of the GAR. This statistic confirms that there is a plethora of information available by delving into this post war phenomenon. The GAR was closely tied to the pension histories, as well, since it was an instrumental lobbyist in bringing the pension acts of the late century into being.

In all of these elements, the significant part is discovering where to find records and how to access and order them. Ron suggested the following steps for those just getting started:

1. Check for anyone in your family tree who would be even remotely of service age during the war years. If you don't know, contact a local library or genealogical society for help in learning this process.
2. If you do not know if any of your ancestors are Civil War veterans, check the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors database online for some of your names. The CWSS is a joint venture of the National Park Service and a number of public/private partners to make the information in the National Archives and other sources readily available to all. Just Google “CWSS.”
3. If you find some candidates, visit the Ancestry.com site and check for muster rolls and pension indexes. Most larger libraries have Ancestry, and you can always get the first two weeks free if you have never been a paid user in the past. Just be prepared when you join and get as much done in 14 days as possible!
4. Visit the Indiana State Library or your local genealogy library to see if your folks are in any of the books and indexes. Let the librarians help you. They are among the best help you will ever find because most are genealogy nuts themselves.
5. You may need to order a pension file from the National Archives. Visit the Archives.gov site to learn procedures.
6. And always remember to do a focused online search. Be sure to narrow down your search terms, i.e. “20th Indiana Volunteer Infantry,” instead of “Civil War.” There are way too many sites to look at them all!

That's it, says Ron. Just dive in and have fun. And never forget about the skeletons you may find in your own closet. It makes the search that much more exciting!

Roundtable Outreach

MCCWR member and immediate past president Steve Rolfe, along with member and former hospitality chair Deborah Cronin, has been spreading “the word” to young people this spring. In early April, Steve took his “show” on the road and spoke to fifth graders at Spencer Elementary School on the connections between the “far away” war and the people of Monroe and Owen County during their annual Civil War Festival Day. Steve focused on the soldiers of the two counties who fought in the war, came home and became valuable members of the community, along with a few who came home as casualties. Deborah also participated in the Spencer event, telling the kids about the life of a Civil War soldier that even included some period CW candy. Later in the month, Steve gave a similar talk at University Elementary School in Bloomington, with more of an emphasis on the Indiana units that fought at Gettysburg and the exploits of John Hunt Morgan and his raid through southern Indiana in mid-July of 1863. If you would ever like to share your expertise and interest in the war with others in this kind of thing, there are other opportunities, such as speaking to retirement communities, service organizations, etc. that are always looking for programs. It’s fun and rewarding. Contact Steve, Deborah or any executive board member to ask about participating.

New Additions to the Overlease Library

Memoirs of Service Afloat by CSA Admiral Raphael Semmes of the famed warship *CSS Alabama*.
Gettysburg: The Final Fury by Bruce Catton (illustrated edition).
Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation by Richard Nelson Current
The Battle of Stones River a DVD of the battle
Ken Burns’ The Civil War – The entire PBS series on videotape
Best Little Ironies, Oddities and Mysteries of the Civil War by C. Brian Kelly (autographed copy)

June Meeting & Then Summer!

Join us on Tuesday, June 9, at 7:00 p.m. at the Monroe County History Center for MCCWR member John Crosby’s talk on General Robert E. Lee’s decision to resign his U.S. Army career and join his home state in rebellion against the United States. Was he a hero or a traitor? To find out, be sure to be there for *Traitor or Patriot: Why Did Lee Side with the South?* This will be the last program before the Roundtable’s annual hiatus in July and August, so don’t miss it before you head out on the Civil War trail this summer.

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On the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/>

Web master, Rick Watson.

Member Jerry Spore Issues a Challenge

Jerry Spore has given a book to the Overlease Library on “long-term” loan about the Confederados, the colony of Confederate expatriates who fled to Brazil during and after the Civil War and established a community that is still active today. Jerry believes the story to be one most buffs do not know and one which would fascinate the Roundtable. Jerry challenges someone to read this book, *The Confederados: Old South Immigrants in Brazil*, to research the Confederados and report back to the group. Anyone interested?

Repeat Reminder: Don’t Forget The Encampment

The third annual encampment on the History Center lawn will take place in August. A new group, the 35th Indiana, 1st Irish Infantry, will hold drills, live musket firings, cooking and camp life demonstrations and more on the lawn of the History Center. The date is August 22, so be sure to keep that day open and join us. Mark your calendars now! For a preview of the 35th, see them at one of the biggest re-enactments of the year at Billie Creek Village near Rockville, Indiana on June 13-14.

Can’t Get Too Much Gettysburg?

The Roundtable has been informed of the ultimate Gettysburg buff’s website. Randy Drais, a descendant of a Union soldier wounded at Gettysburg and fortunate enough to live only 30 miles away from the battlefield in York, Pennsylvania, during his entire life, has focused his website on the lesser known or visited areas and topics for anyone interested in learning or doing more than the average visitor to the Gettysburg battlefield. Randy does extensive updates twice a year and has had over 10,000 hits on his site since launching it in March 2008. Check it out at <http://www.battleofgettysburguff.com>. With summer coming, who knows, maybe you will be inspired to visit the Civil War’s most popular battlefield park.

E-Announcements

THOMAS CARTWRIGHT has joined the Lotz House Museum Staff in Franklin, Tennessee, and will lead custom tours of the famous battle of November 30, 1864, in which General Patrick Cleburne died, a battle much more fierce than even Pickett's charge in many ways. Cartwright has been the curator of the Carter House in Franklin for years and is a familiar "talking head" on the History Channel, Discovery, PBS, and anywhere a true expert on the battle is needed. For details and further information, see www.lotzhouse.com.

JOIN SOME OF THE NATION'S TOP HISTORIANS IN JULY for an in-depth look at Stonewall Jackson, the Confederate commander known for his bravery and battlefield strategy. The event will be at the Plaza Hotel in Hagerstown, Md. The July 22-26 seminar will include bus tours of Jackson's 1862 Valley Campaign and the Romney Campaign, and include discussions of the military genius of Jackson, the making of the movie "Gods and Generals," the Civil War on the silver screen, civilian life in the Shenandoah Valley, Confederate and Union leadership, and the spiritual life of Jackson. For details, go to <http://www.chambersburgcivilwarseminars.org>

AFTER NEARLY A YEAR OF HEATED DEBATE, the controversy over building a Wal-Mart superstore on the Wilderness Battlefield is coming to a conclusion. Public hearings are under way, and it is crucial that friends of the battlefield again weigh in about this threat. Opponents, including the Civil War Preservation Trust, firmly believe that the best solution for everyone is to move Wal-Mart to a less historically sensitive location away from the national park. To follow the issue and to find out what you can do as an individual in southern Indiana to oppose this outrage, go to: <http://nowildernesswalmart.wordpress.com/>.

THE NEXT FEW MONTHS IN GETTYSBURG will be very exciting and event-filled. James Earl Jones will be in town to perform as part of **The Gettysburg Festival** in June. Ken Burns will be at the battlefield's new museum and visitor center in July as part of the annual **Sacred Trust** event. And the restoration of Ziegler's Grove will begin, in earnest. For all the details of these exciting events, go to: <http://www.gettysburgfoundation.org>.

NEED ANOTHER GOOD CIVIL WAR BOOK? There is a lesser known source right here in Bloomington. Take the time to visit Joe Grant's small but excellent store, Academic and Scholarly Books L.L.C., at 105 Pete Ellis Dr. A&SB specializes in excellent quality used books at prices well below the original. Many other scholarly books on a wide variety of topics are available, too. For a look at Joe's website, visit: <http://www.academicsscholarlybooks.com/>.

AS ALWAYS, FOR THE LATEST CW NEWS, upcoming reenactments, etc. don't forget Civil War Traveler at www.CivilWarTraveler.com. This month's issue features articles on the Lincoln assassination exhibit at the Newseum in Washington, DC (see below) and the opening of the Pry House Museum on the Antietam Battlefield.

AN EXHIBIT DEVOTED TO THE ASSASSINATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN and the pursuit of his killer is open at the Newseum in Washington DC. "Manhunt: Chasing Lincoln's Killer" continues through the year. For more information and an online exhibit, visit www.newseum.org.



This photograph from the Library of Congress shows a portion of the 48th New York drilling on the parade ground of Fort Pulaski some time after its capture in 1862. This is also the first extant picture of a game of baseball being played. "The Siege and Capture of Fort Pulaski" will be the topic of David Wiley's talk at the September meeting.