Meaningless Lists of Soldiers: Hidden in Plain Sight

John M. Rudy ’07
Gettysburg College

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Abstract
This week I had the chance to visit National Archives 1 to do some research for work into the history of the Federal Armory at Harpers Ferry, and particularly the building I work in. Mather Training Center was the Superintendent’s House before the War came and upended the entire town. It was nice to get back into the stacks downtown and dig through musty boxes of (in this case) Office of the Chief of Ordinance records.

It brought to mind the last time that I got the chance to root around in the trove that is the Nation's repository down in DC. In the fall of 2011, working on a hunch, I ran a lead to ground. Working from a few random Confederate Compiled Service Records I found over in the College's Special Collections, I dug into Confederate prisoner of war records from the Gettysburg Campaign. [excerpt]

Comments
Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you.”

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This week I had the chance to visit National Archives 1 to do some research for work into the history of the Federal Armory at Harpers Ferry, and particularly the building I work in. Mather Training Center was the Superintendent’s House before the War came and upended the entire town. It was nice to get back into the stacks downtown and dig through musty boxes of (in this case) Office of the Chief of Ordnance records.

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In and of themselves, those types of documents aren’t all that interesting. The data is plain and simple, a litany of names and units without much more detail. But this lead was different. I was working from the hunch that a manifest of the College Hospital existed thanks to a notation on a CSR index card.

I do that sometimes. I work hunches and tiny leads. In the past, it’s lead to finding a Confederate deserter who was a student at Pennsylvania College and another student who pulled a 'John Burns' and fought on July 1st. History is like a sock with a few bare threads sticking out of the seams: pull hard enough and the whole story falls apart, baring all.

This lead took me to Record Group 109, a War Department cache of documents pertaining to Confederates and Entry 211, "Records Relating to Confederates in Union Hospitals." When the cart was wheeled out, my heart leaped. I threw open the "Gettysburg, Pennsylvania" box.

The campaign was so large, with so many wounded prisoners, it warranted its own box. And there, inside box 15, sat a simple set of two sheets of paper with light pencil scrawled on front and back. The document’s bureaucratic title still sends chills up my spine: College Hospital transferred July 19, 1863 to Baltimore, Md.
The list is a roll of about 80 prisoners who sought shelter in the halls of the College Edifice through mid-July, when their fortunes suddenly changed and the United States decided to move them out of the Pennsylvania border town.

This all sounds like an amazing moment. But the truth is, it's all really meaningless. The document is just a list of names. Lists and accountings of things have no real meaning but for their weight. Here are 80 men who survived the horror of a Civil War hospital and were moving on toward better times. Beyond that, the list is just a list. It's a dry number: 80.

What does it take? It takes looking at each individual name, one by one, and finding the story. A list is a list. Any monkey can do the type of research I do. All it takes is some dogged determination and the stupidity to follow a lead all the way to its conclusion, no matter the effort. But to take that information and sous out the story? To make this mean something takes more.

It takes finding out more than just Private John Abner Persinger of the 28th Virginia's name and rank, and the sterile fact that he was wounded in the right side. That's all the document tells you. He is pencil scratches on paper. You need to keep digging and discover that he was born on March 2nd, 1842 and lived in Roanoke, Virginia as war descended on the Old Dominion state.

In 1863, as John sat in a college dorm room or library hall with a wound in his side spilling forth a trickle of cleansing blood, at home on a sprawling family farm valued at over $45,000 sat his 53-year-old father James. His mother Emaline waited too. Charles and Marshall, two of John's younger brothers, were 15 and 13. There was much work to be done on a large, prosperous farm. But how many times did their thoughts flit to John in the army. Was he safe? When had his last letter arrived? Was he among the wounded or, worse, the dead?

John Persinger survived his wound from Gettysburg, was transferred on to Baltimore and eventually exchanged. He rejoined the 28th Virginia and fought on, captured again by United States soldiers at Five Forks in the waning days of the war. Four long years of war, and four long years of waiting for father and mother and brothers at home. The 5' 5" tall soldier, with blue eyes and brown hair would return home to his family intact. But the anguish of war, for soldier and for family, would never disappear.

How many untold hours of anguish aren't captured on this simple piece of paper. These aren't pencil scratches, they're the remnants of lives. We don't commemorate pencil scratches. We don't kneel at the graves of worn stubs of graphite and yellowing paper.

It's the people. It has to be. The men and women of the past must be brought back to life in the glowing technicolor of the mind in order for any of this to matter at all. Tactics don't matter. Lines and boxes on maps don't matter. Raw casualty statistics and rote lists of prisoners don't matter.

But men and women? That's the heart of interpretive history. And here are 79 more men waiting to be awoken, remembered and set walking the world once more.