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An 1858 Patent Office Report: The Joy of Being Wrong

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An 1858 Patent Office Report: The Joy of Being Wrong

Abstract

I love being wrong. I think every historian should love that feeling. Finding that one small piece of evidence that puts a crack in your perception of the past and makes you restructure your view of the flow of history is a joy.

I had one of those moments a few weeks ago at Adams County Historical Society, digging through the vertical files for random things. I go digging every week or so, simply immersing myself in the raw material of the past and seeing what floats to the surface. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania College, 157th New York, Union Army, Why They Fought, Adams County Historical Society

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Public History | Social History | United States History

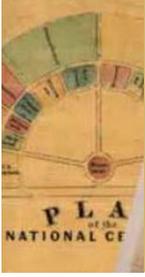
Comments

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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Interpreting the Civil War

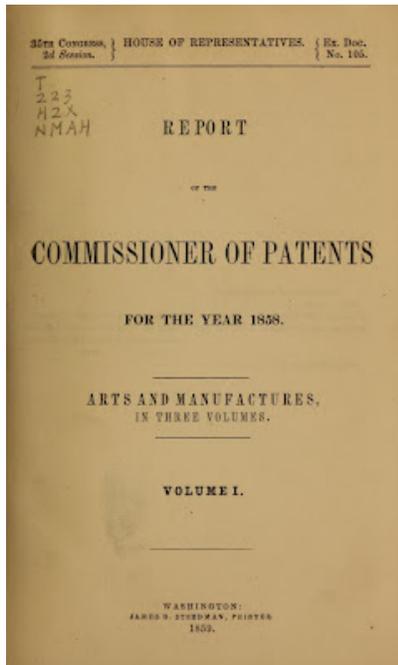
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An 1858 Patent Office Report: The Joy of Being Wrong

THURSDAY, JULY 19, 2012



The patent volume looked something like this.

I love being wrong. I think every historian should love that feeling. Finding that one small piece of evidence that puts a crack in your perception of the past and makes you restructure your view of the flow of history is a joy.

I had one of those moments a few weeks ago at Adams County Historical Society, digging through the vertical files for random things. I go digging every week or so, simply immersing myself in the raw material of the past and seeing what floats to the surface.

This particular Thursday night, I found a transcript of an inscription squirreled away in the files. Somewhere in the shelves, stacks and boxes of the Adams County Historical Society sits the actual volume, but where exactly it might be is unclear.

The book, an [1858 Report of the Commissioner of Patents](#), has a simple inscription on the cover from a wounded soldier:

I was wounded in the battle of Gettysburg on the first day of July, 1863. the ball passed though my thigh. I laid on the field of battle until night. I finally crawled to this house which I found deserted

but soon a lot of Nigers Came and Ransacked the house from top to bottom. it was a good thing for them that I was Wounded I would kill a Niger as quick as I Would a frog

Mr. Ross I hope the Government Will Renumerate you for the loss and suffering War has brought upon you and your famly. if you ever feel Disposed to Write to the author of this Direct your letter to Jerry Murphy, Clockville, Madison Co.

At first glance, there's nothing that shocking about this inscription. What makes it fascinating is Jerry Murphy's heading: "Company G, 157 Regt., New York Vol."

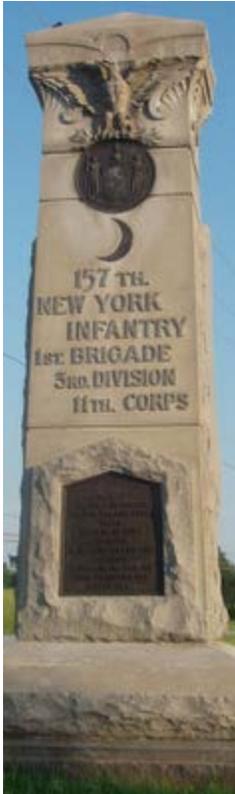
Jerry Murphy was wounded somewhere in the fields north of Pennsylvania College as the 157th New York pushed forward into the Confederate lines on the afternoon of July 1st, part of the XI corp's desperate attempt to hold the right flank of the Federal line as Confederates poured down the Biglerville and Harrisburg roads.

He fought for the United States Army at Gettysburg, an army that by 1863 was explicitly fighting for

the freedom of four million human beings held in bondage. And Jerry Murphy would kill any one of them, "as quick as I Would a frog."

What does this all mean? Many of the Murphys living in Madison County were either Irish-born immigrants or the sons of Irish-born immigrants, more than likely deposited along the way as the Erie Canal tore across New York in the 1810s and 20s, dug by cheap immigrant labor. Jerry himself was about 21 years old when he was mustered into service on the 19th of September, 1862.

Jerry Murphy joined the army for adventure or cash or the altruistic goal of saving a nation. That's why he marched.



The 157th Monument at Gettysburg / CC Jen Goellnitz

So that's the death of a United States Army fighting for freedom, then, right?

Not so fast. I quickly needed to restructure how I thought about the Federal soldier.

Jerry Murphy's sovereignty ends at his hair follicles and the pores of his skin. The uniform on his back, the gun in his hand, the knapsack on his back all were bought by the United States Government, a sovereign body which, by 1863, was fighting quite publicly to destroy slavery in it's haven: the American South.

So Jerry Murphy's feet might not have been marching for freedom, but his boots were. Every forward step those boots would take into the South was the forward step of a liberating army, whether the feet agreed or not.

Suddenly, the Civil War gets that much more complicated, as men fight for causes that they don't personally agree with. Their uniform fights for one cause, their heart for another. But fight, kill and die they do nonetheless.

Jerry Murphy, who was mustered into service back in New York just as Robert E. Lee's army was beating feet across the Potomac into Virginia and just as Abraham Lincoln was dusting off a revolutionary Proclamation he had been drafting since midsummer, marched for freedom whether he liked it or not.