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## Richard D. Dunphy: A Veteran's Struggle Echoing into the Present

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# Richard D. Dunphy: A Veteran's Struggle Echoing into the Present

## **Abstract**

When I first received the bundle of Richard Dunphy's pension documents, I was prepared to begin research on an obscure figure lost to time. To my great surprise, the very first search I performed resulted in a handful of genealogy websites, several citations of his merit, and even a Wikipedia page. As I began research, it became clear that this coal heaver was not one of the faceless many who fought in the American Civil War, but rather a man of the age whose life told a timeless story of hardship and resolve. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Richard Dunphy, pensions, Union veterans, Medal of Honor, USS Hartford, Battle of Mobile Bay, Admiral David Farragut

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Richard D. Dunphy: A Veteran's Struggle Echoing into the Present

OCTOBER 14, 2013

Kevin Lavery, '16

When I first received the bundle of Richard Dunphy's pension documents, I was prepared to begin research on an obscure figure lost to time. To my great surprise, the very first search I performed resulted in a handful of genealogy websites, several citations of his merit, and even a Wikipedia page. As I began research, it became clear that this coal heaver was not one of the faceless many who fought in the American Civil War, but rather a man of the age whose life told a timeless story of hardship and resolve.

Born in Ireland in 1841, Dunphy came to the United States before the start of the Civil War. He served as a coal heaver aboard five ships in the US Navy, most notably the USS *Hartford*, flagship of Admiral David Farragut. His "skill and courage" under shellfire during the Battle of Mobile Bay resulted in a Medal of Honor, as well as the amputation of both of his arms. Returning home, he married a young woman he had known before the war and they moved to Vallejo, California to start a family.

The most striking element of Dunphy's life is the way in which it is both classic and timeless. In one sense, Richard D. Dunphy was a man of the times: an Irish immigrant who served in the Civil War and later served as patriarch of his large family. But his life is not simply an anecdote about society and military service in the nineteenth century. Dunphy faced endeavors that are universal and present even today. Like many modern veterans returning from war, Dunphy struggled to adapt back to civilian life, especially after the grievous wounds he suffered aboard the *Hartford*. His spare time, which he had in abundance due to his limited ability to work, was spent largely in saloons. A government official, writing about Richard after his death, believed that "Dunphy ought to have someone to protect him from the leeches that were hanging around him," who "would actually put the whiskey glass to his mouth and take the money out of his pocket [to] pay for the drink."

Additionally, Dunphy experienced firsthand the problems of an increasingly complex bureaucracy, a problem that even modern technology has not resolved. Due to a

bureaucratic error, his pension certificate misspelled his name as “Dumphy”. In 1899, likely at the behest of his wife, he requested that a new copy of the certificate be issued with the proper name listed, “that in case of his death, his wife will not be put to the trouble of explaining the discrepancy between the name as properly spelt in the Marriage Certificate and the misspelled name in said Certificate.” Even more insulting to the veteran was how his Medal of Honor had been misplaced during conveyance, causing a delay in its delivery. Dunphy contacted Gideon Welles directly in order to locate the missing accolade, rightly reminding the Naval Secretary that “I place a great value on it and I believe I am justly entitled to it.”

Dealing with bureaucratic complications, facing a difficult marriage and an uncontrollable drinking problem, all while trying to care for a family of ten children proved a challenge for the double-amputee. Nonetheless, Dunphy overcame archaic endeavors and timeless struggles throughout his life and remained in control of his own destiny.

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