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Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall: A Place for Quiet Reflection

Abstract

Much has been written about place and Civil War memory, but how do we personally remember and commemorate this part of our collective past? How do battlefields and other historic places help us understand our own history? What kinds of places are worth remembering and why? In this collection of essays, some of the most esteemed historians of the Civil War select a single meaningful place related to the war and narrate its significance. Included here are meditations on a wide assortment of places—Devil's Den at Gettysburg, Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, the statue of William T. Sherman in New York's Central Park, Burnside Bridge at Antietam, the McLean House in Appomattox, and more. Paired with a contemporary photograph commissioned specifically for this book, each essay offers an unusual and accessible glimpse into how historians think about their subjects.

Keywords

grand Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

13 **SOLDIERS AND SAILORS MEMORIAL HALL** **A PLACE FOR QUIET REFLECTION**

CAROL REARDON



Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh awes visitors more than it welcomes them. In 1891, a committee of delegates from Allegheny County's twenty-eight Grand Army of the Republic posts determined to build a memorial "of a character so imposing and impressive as to represent the wealth, intelligence, and patriotic sentiment of our great industrial center." Those attending the building's dedication in October 1910 validated the success of the planners' vision, declaring the edifice to be "among the most costly and magnificent military memorials in the world," one that reminded many of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.¹

As a child, I cared nothing about Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall's founding. I did not know about the unpredictable shifts in state and local political support confronting the project's commissioners at every turn, the legal challenges to various state and local funding schemes, and the unprecedented vote in 1905 by Allegheny County residents to impose upon themselves a special tax to raise the \$1.7 million needed for construction to begin in 1908. I knew nothing of the building's weeklong dedication in October 1910 that included a grand parade with over 2,000 Civil War veterans, two regiments of the Pennsylvania National Guard, Spanish-American War veterans, and a group called the "Military Order of the Medal of Honor Legion." Only the name of the president of that last-named organization, one-time Union major general Daniel E. Sickles, might have sparked a bit of recognition.²

No, I knew none of this when, after a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball game at old Forbes Field, my grandmother took me to our bus stop, then situated in

(previous page)

*Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
(Photograph by Will Gallagher)*

front of this imposing and distinctive building. The green space the founders managed to secure in front of Soldiers and Sailors—the local nickname for the edifice—allowed the main entrance to the building to sit atop a slight hill far back from busy Forbes Avenue. The long bricked walkway to the imposing bronze doors contributed significantly to Soldiers and Sailors’ power to both intimidate and impress. The large artillery shells and siege guns that flanked the walkway immediately caught my eye. I desperately wanted to get a closer look at Frederick Hibbard’s larger-than-life bronze portrait statues—*Parade Rest*, featuring a Union infantryman, and *Lookout*, portraying a Civil War sailor—that conspicuously guarded the main entrance. My grandmother, who I could rely upon to support anything of an educational nature that captured my interest, quickly promised to take me into Soldiers and Sailors after a future ballgame.

My first visit inside the grand sandstone and terra cotta hall a few months later made a lasting impression on me. A stone tablet near the entrance announced Soldiers and Sailors’ mission to extend “appreciation of the courage, the loyalty to the government, and the devotion to freedom” of Allegheny County’s Civil War combatants.³ Of course, I did not understand the emancipationist tone of these words until years later. My grandmother and I may have been the only visitors in the quiet, cavernous building that day. Thus, I felt free to peek through the doors of the large auditorium that filled the center of the hall’s first floor. Designed to seat approximately 2,300 guests, it featured a wide stage; originally an immense battle mural was to provide a thematic backdrop for that platform, but when costs became prohibitively high, the planners opted instead for the words inscribed there still today: Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. An inscription

on the auditorium wall also acknowledged the role of Pittsburgh’s Subsistence Committee that organized local civilian support for the war effort between August 1861 and January 1866, its work “sustained by voluntary contributions of the citizens.”⁴ I looked into several smaller rooms, originally designed as meeting rooms for Allegheny County’s GAR posts, still decorated with flags and military-themed artwork. On one wall of the Gettysburg Room hung an impressive oil painting; in the summer of 2017 I finally learned its subject was Brigadier General Alexander Hays, a longtime Pittsburgh resident whose division helped to repulse Pickett’s Charge in July 1863 and who fell dead ten months later in the battle of the Wilderness.

My grandmother soon found a comfortable bench and let me roam at my own pace through the main corridors that trace the outline of the building. By tradition, they are called the West, North, East, and Main Halls, because uncompromising Union veterans who first staffed the building after its dedication simply refused to apply “South” to any part of a hall dedicated to the valor of Northern soldiers. Far more than the auditorium or the meeting rooms, the contents of the glass cases that lined these corridors endlessly fascinated me. Relics as nondescript as pieces of wood from Civil War battlefields—a piece of oak from Gettysburg, or cross-sections of tree trunks that revealed embedded bullets—provided little in the way of informative narrative or historical context, but I did not mind. Other cases displayed rifles, bayonets, bugles, swords, cap boxes, artillery shells, Bibles, canteens, and much more that offered small glimpses into life and death in wartime. The personal connections between relic and individual soldier drew my greatest interest. Most Pennsylvania regiments had served in Virginia, but the 77th and 78th Pennsylvania Infantry

that included large contingents of Allegheny County volunteers served entirely in the Western Theater; the family of Samuel H. Croyle of the latter unit donated his pocket watch, its unique chain made from mussel shells gathered from the Tennessee River. I found a colorful Confederate drum captured at Spotsylvania and then carried throughout the rest of the war by musician Robert Y. Thompson of Pittsburgh's 61st Pennsylvania Infantry quite appealing. I could not pry my eyes from the kepi worn by First Lieutenant James T. Harbison of Pittsburgh's 139th Pennsylvania Infantry, especially the hole made in it by the bullet that killed him at Salem Church in May 1863. Tattered battle flags once carried into battle or on parade by Pittsburgh's 102nd Pennsylvania Infantry—stored along with items belonging to its commander, Colonel John W. Patterson, slain at the Wilderness not far from General Hays—filled another case. Most memorable of all, a segment of tree trunk from Chickamauga with two cannonballs embedded in it sat on the floor of the corridor unprotected by glass, so I could touch it!⁵

But in the end, I left that first visit to Soldiers and Sailors thoroughly obsessed not with these evocative relics but with a burning, very personal question. Sixty-one large metal plaques lined the walls of the hall's corridors, each representing a Pennsylvania regiment with Allegheny County soldiers in its ranks, including all their names. My family had lived in the Pittsburgh area for generations, I believed. Did I have an ancestor named on one of those plaques?

My unrelenting search for an answer soon became a family annoyance. Neither of my parents knew if they had Civil War ancestors; their memories of family military service went back only to World War I. My grandmother, now somewhat regretting that she had taken me to Soldiers and Sailors at all, remembered

only vaguely that her grandfather had a sword and “a funny hat” she later recognized as a kepi. Finally, however, she contacted her aunt Blanche—at ninety-nine, our oldest living relative—and asked for her help. I can still remember the big smile on my grandmother's face as she told me that my great-great-grandfather fought in the Civil War! His name was Joseph Garver, and he served as a corporal in the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry.

Surprisingly, I received the news with mixed feelings. On one hand, I was entirely elated to know that I had a direct family connection to the Civil War. I remembered seeing a plaque to the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry at Soldiers and Sailors, so I just knew I would see one familiar name there. On the other hand, I could find no evidence that Corporal Garver fought at Gettysburg, Antietam, or Spotsylvania, or in any of the Civil War's major battles. With no research skills at my command, the only reference to the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry I recalled seeing on my visit to Soldiers and Sailors was a conspicuous oil painting featuring Colonel James M. Schoonmaker leading the regiment in a charge at Third Winchester in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign, an action for which he received the Medal of Honor. I had trouble concealing my dismay in learning that my ancestor served in what I then deemed a relative backwater of the war.

Nonetheless, I still wanted to return to Soldiers and Sailors to find Corporal Garver's name on the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry's plaque. When the opportunity came, however, my lingering dismay turned to utter devastation. I rushed through the front door, found the regimental plaque, and read the names, and when I reached Company L, I found bronze letters spelling out a name I did not expect to see: Private John Garver. No other soldier surnamed Garver appeared on the plaque.

I stood there, utterly stunned. They got his rank wrong! Worse, they got his first name wrong! How could anyone make such an egregious error for any soldier who fought for his country, let alone for MY soldier? Try as I might, the bitterness of that disappointment quashed all enthusiasm to ask more questions. I did not care to dig deeper. Indeed, I did not go back to Soldiers and Sailors again for years.

Still, the emotional distress of that day at Soldiers and Sailors may well have been essential to my ultimate decision to become a historian. I did not follow a direct path, to be sure. After I graduated from Brentwood High School, I went on to Allegheny College to major in biology. I continued to read about the Civil War, mostly about my favorite Eastern Theater leaders and battles, still upset that my family apparently played no role in them. The Civil War had become my hobby. One day, however, on a small balcony in Reis Library at Allegheny, I found some marvelous treasures I never had seen before. Along with a full set of the war's official records, I found Samuel P. Bates's *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*. Those five thick volumes, first published in 1870, reignited the nearly extinguished flame of my historical curiosity and helped to heal the scars of my last visit to Soldiers and Sailors.

Perusing Bates's volumes revealed important information that put me back on the right track. For starters, the index included a soldier named Joseph Garver. He had enlisted initially in April 1861 as a private in Company B, 9th Pennsylvania Infantry, a three-month regiment raised shortly after Fort Sumter. He mustered out in July 1861, but he waited until November 1862 to reenlist in the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry. Perhaps because of his previous service, he mustered in as a corporal.⁶ This perfectly fit the information Aunt Blanche gave my grandmother more

than a decade before! I pushed on, now suspecting that I had greatly erred when I accepted Private John Garver of Company L, 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry, as my Civil War ancestor. Bates confirmed that Corporal Joseph Garver was an entirely different individual, one who served in Company M of that same regiment. Now excited, and with history professors to guide me, I began to dig deeper. Dr. Jay Luvaas, soon to become my historical mentor, pointed me toward *Allegheny County, Pennsylvania in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion*, which confirmed that the plaques in Soldiers and Sailors included only the names of soldiers who enlisted in Allegheny County. I quickly realized that Bates's volumes credited Company B of the 9th Pennsylvania Infantry, Joseph Garver's first unit, to Armstrong County, just northeast of Allegheny County. Bates also confirmed that the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry included a large contingent of Armstrong County recruits. At a family reunion that summer, I learned that Joseph Garver, in fact, had enlisted in Kittanning in Armstrong County. The pieces came together! Short bursts of enlightenment—at Soldiers and Sailors, on a library balcony, at a family picnic—finally gave me my answers. The plaque at the memorial hall contained no error. The fault for the mistaken identity rested on me alone. I felt I had to atone for that!

Even as I completed my biology degree, I continued to hone the fine art of Civil War soldier research. History had hooked me, whether I knew it or not. I obtained a copy of Corporal Joseph Garver's compiled service record from the National Archives. Bates had listed him as "Not accounted for" at muster out, and I feared that perhaps my ancestor had deserted. After all, his regimental history noted that, after Appomattox, when soldiers in the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry who still owed service received orders to duty in Kansas, "a large

number of the boys—brave boys who had never failed to face the death dealing cannon in battle—left their commands and stole away to their homes at this time.”⁷ So I felt great relief to learn that Corporal Garver received an honorable discharge in June 1865 and returned home to his family. The change in my career path that took me from biology to history started soon after this discovery.

Since my initial explorations in the early 1960s, Soldiers and Sailors has expanded its mission to salute Allegheny County veterans of all wars. In 1963, about the time of my first visit, its commissioners opened the “Hall of Valor” to honor local residents who received the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to the present, as well as those who received the Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross, and Silver Star in twentieth- and twenty-first-century conflicts. The hall now includes displays on Allegheny County’s pre-Civil War military history and local civilian contributions in wartime. It also remains a quiet place for reflection tucked in among the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and a sprawling Veterans Administration

medical complex. Most of all, it also continues to be my personal touchstone as the place I first began my journey to becoming a historian.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Memorial Hall Board of Managers, *Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Allegheny County Graphics Department, 1988), 3; *National Tribune*, September 20, 1910.
2. *National Tribune*, September 20, 1910.
3. Samuel M. Evans, comp., *Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Board of Managers, Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, 1924), 8.
4. Evans, *Allegheny County*, 9.
5. Memorial Hall Board of Managers, *Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall*, 16, 18.
6. Samuel P. Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5; Prepared in Compliance with Acts of the Legislature* (1869-70; 10-vol. repr. with new 4-vol. index, Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot, 1993-94), 1:90, 8:892.
7. Rev. William Davis Slease, *The Fourteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry in the Civil War*, reprint ed. (Butler, Pa.: Mechling Associates, 1999), 286.