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# From Farmers to Soldiers: Raising a Civil War Volunteer Regiment

Savannah A. Labbe  
*Gettysburg College*

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# From Farmers to Soldiers: Raising a Civil War Volunteer Regiment

## **Abstract**

How did one transform a group of raw recruits, of men who had no military knowledge, into soldiers? It was not an easy task, especially since many of the men had never even touched a weapon, let alone knew how to use one. This task often fell to private citizens, who, out of patriotic sentiment or the prospect of becoming commissioned, persuaded their neighbors to join their regiment. While this method was convenient and inexpensive for the government it often meant that the commissioned officers were inexperienced and underqualified, chosen only for their skills of persuasion. Because of this, transforming a group of men who were more skilled as farmers or lawyers into soldiers prepared for battle could prove to be a daunting task. It is also a subject that is paid little attention, outshone by the great battles and leaders of the Civil War. However, these regiments and the efforts of the men that raised them allowed for the possibility of those battles to occur and those leaders to emerge.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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

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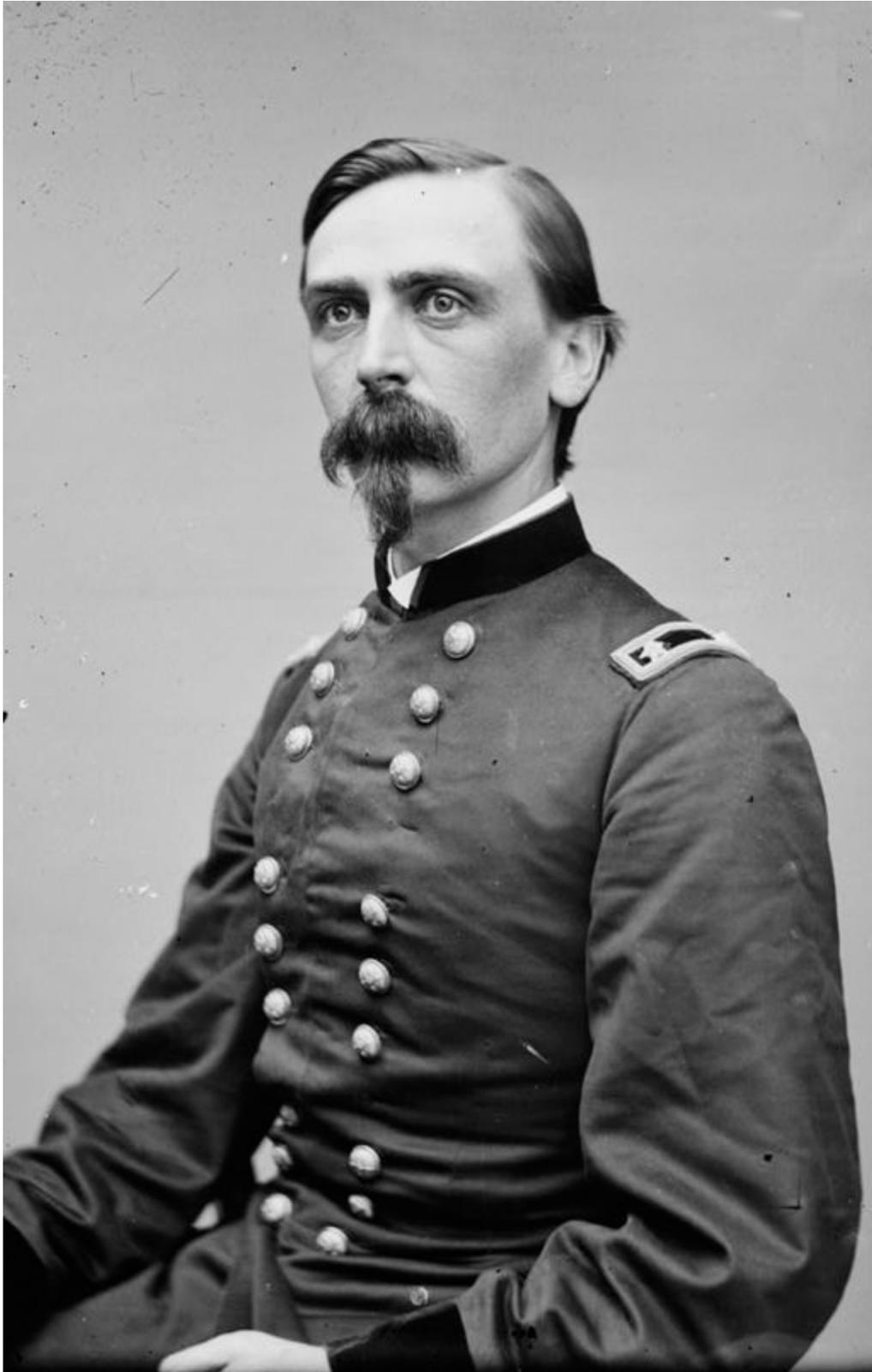
## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### **From Farmers to Soldiers: Raising a Civil War Volunteer Regiment**

*By Savannah Labbe '19*

How did one transform a group of raw recruits, of men who had no military knowledge, into soldiers? It was not an easy task, especially since many of the men had never even touched a weapon, let alone knew how to use one. This task often fell to private citizens, who, out of patriotic sentiment or the prospect of becoming commissioned, persuaded their neighbors to join their regiment. While this method was convenient and inexpensive for the government it often meant that the commissioned officers were inexperienced and underqualified, chosen only for their skills of persuasion. Because of this, transforming a group of men who were more skilled as farmers or lawyers into soldiers prepared for battle could prove to be a daunting task. It is also a subject that is paid little attention, outshone by the great battles and leaders of the Civil War. However, these regiments and the efforts of the men that raised them allowed for the possibility of those battles to occur and those leaders to emerge.



Major General Adelbert Ames, who earlier in the war had served as the first colonel of the Twentieth Maine. Photo from the Library of Congress, via Wikimedia Commons.

In an effort to recognize the importance of the act of raising a regiment, Ellis Spear of the **Twentieth Maine** wrote the story of the establishment of his regiment, entitled *The Story of the Raising and Organization of a Regiment of Volunteers in 1862*. While it is the story of the Twentieth Maine, it is one that is reflective of the process of raising most Civil War volunteer regiments. For the Twentieth Maine, their story began in the summer of 1862 when Lincoln called for 30,000 more troops. Maine needed to provide four regiments, resulting in the raising of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Maine regiments. The response of Maine men to this call was so overwhelming that they had enough men for a fifth regiment, the Twentieth Maine. Because of this, the Twentieth Maine was a kind of surplus regiment, made up of men from all over the state as opposed to just one region.

The men who were responsible for raising the Twentieth Maine were well educated for the most part, but not in military matters. According to Spear only one man had previous military experience, in the Mexican War, but as it turned out, he had forgotten most of what he had learned and was unable “in the matter of legs” to keep up with the rest of the regiment. In addition, one other man had been in a regiment raised in 1861 but had resigned after his first combat experience. These men worked hard in recruiting, facing obstacles such as the mothers of the recruits, one even driving the recruiter off with a pitchfork. Men were convinced to join by the promise of bounties and commissions. The man who could “raise a company in the least time was looked upon with the greatest favor and, other things being equal, got the earliest letter in the alphabet of the regiment.” The recruiters were not looking for the best men or the most qualified but were instead just trying to get enough men to raise a company the fastest in order to get a coveted position in the hierarchy of the regiment. The men had to undergo an examination by a surgeon but the surgeon was often no more experienced than the recruiting officer and “inclined to take the patriotism of the volunteer as conclusive evidence of bodily soundness.” This led to men being passed by the surgeon who were too old or otherwise unfit for service, adding to the difficulty of preparing the regiment for battle.

After the regiment was raised, it was then sent to camp to receive what little training they could. They had yet to receive their uniforms or weapons. The atmosphere was relaxed at first, “more civil than military,” until the arrival of the colonel. Colonel Adelbert Ames was a graduate of West Point and this was his first time training volunteers. He was harsh with the men and they viewed him with a mixture of respect and dislike. Regardless of the feelings of the men, Ames was instrumental in preparing the men for battle with what little time he was afforded. He got the men into uniform and distributed weapons. He began to drill and started to teach them how to march. The camp now looked more like a military one rather than a civilian one. The men did not have much time to drill or learn how to march before they were sent to the frontlines and so most were still inadequately trained. The Twentieth Maine was only in camp for about a week before it was sent to the front and saw its first battle only three weeks after it was mustered, “before it had ever had what could properly be called a battalion drill.” The men of the Twentieth Maine

learned as they went, from their experiences in battle and time spent drilling. As Spear describes, “they learned the duties of a soldier by performing them.” It was this way with many volunteer regiments of the war. With little time to spare and a need for men they were thrown into battle with minimal training, learning by doing. While being “raw and undrilled at first” they soon became “soldiers as good as any that ever carried muskets.” So, in this way, men who had no experience or knowledge in military matters were transformed into skilled soldiers.

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