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Recording the Ruckus: Field Desks and Battlefield Administration

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Abstract

For most people, the American Civil War calls to mind images of artillery, bayonet charges, waves of blue and gray uniforms, and daring acts of bravery and heroism. What we forget, however, is that behind every shift in an army's position or deployment of troops was a long line of administration. Effective communication, as well as accurate record keeping of supply and personnel movements, recording the order of events of each engagement, and documenting the number of men engaged and lost, was crucial to the safety of soldiers and the success or failure of the war effort. During the Civil War, with communication and transportation methods so limited, disorganization and mismanagement of troops and supplies could (and as many scholars believe, in the Confederate case, *did*) lead to the loss of the war. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Recording the Ruckus: Field Desks and Battlefield Administration

By Elizabeth Hobbs '21

For most people, the American Civil War calls to mind images of artillery, bayonet charges, waves of blue and gray uniforms, and daring acts of bravery and heroism. What we forget, however, is that behind every shift in an army's position or deployment of troops was a long line of administration. Effective communication, as well as accurate record keeping of supply and personnel movements, recording the order of events of each engagement, and documenting the number of men engaged and lost, was crucial to the safety of soldiers and the success or failure of the war effort. During the Civil War, with communication and transportation methods so limited, disorganization and mismanagement of troops and supplies could (and as many scholars believe, in the Confederate case, *did*) lead to the loss of the war. However, given the vast distances armies travelled and the sheer quantity of troops involved in the war, the successful communication and execution of operations during the war is incredibly impressive, and proved crucial to war efforts. Perhaps the simplest, but most effective, tool in this quest for efficiency was the officer's portable field desk. With communication considered an utmost priority for officers on both sides, the two armies took measures to ensure the accessibility of materials to aid officers' communication, like the issuing of field desks as camp necessities.

In a situation where the frequency of movement was uncertain, the survival of Civil War era field desks, despite the need to move quickly and the potential of capture, is incredibly impressive and provides insight into the "behind the scenes," managerial nuances of the war effort. Survival of these desks proves to be even more remarkable when one considers the sheer number of recorded occurrences of the abandonment or capturing of material by both Union and Confederate troops, especially nearing the end of the war. The museum at Gettysburg National Military Park is home to one such desk, formerly the possession of Lieutenant John Wright of the 34th Pennsylvania Volunteers.



***Lieutenant Wright's portable field desk,
currently located at the Gettysburg National Military Park.***

Although Wright served in an administrative position which entailed much writing, and documents are what most historians gravitate towards, it is the physical desk on which he conducted business which has ironically cemented his place in the historical record. Wright, who was from Lancaster County, started the war as a commissioned officer with the 34th Pennsylvania Volunteers. In the Spring of 1863, while the regiment was stationed as defense in Washington D.C. and Alexandria, Wright was promoted to Adjutant. This new role would have come with a significant increase in administrative duties, making his field desk all the more important to him. Wright would have handled thousands of records and pieces of correspondence, managing supplies and troops, with the written fates of men crossing his desk every day. At the end of June, Wright's regiment joined the Army of the Potomac in the field, just in time to take part in the Battle of Gettysburg in July. During the course of their service, the 34th Pennsylvania lost 141 men to death, to wounds sustained in combat, and to capture. It's possible that Wright himself reported many of those losses while sitting at his field desk.



**Lieutenant John L. Wright,
34th Pennsylvania Volunteers**

Though they varied in shape, size, and level of intricacy, field desks were essential to the internal operations of field headquarters on both sides of the war. While the function of an officer's field desk seems self-explanatory on the surface, within the context of managing armies, it takes on a more significant role. The varied administrative duties of officers during wartime influenced every aspect of the war effort. The armies kept records of every weapon issued to soldiers, of soldiers themselves, and of each movement made by the many regiments. In attempting to keep all these records, officers were essentially creating a handwritten database from which they could pull information when developing new plans and strategies. Having this information could mean the difference between an officer implementing an informed tactical strategy that won the day, and a blunder that caused the loss of thousands of soldiers' lives.

Officers also wrote personal correspondence to loved ones at their field desks . Anecdotes from their families served, for many, as a consistent reminder of why they put their lives on the line during each engagement. Private Silas S. Auchmoedy of the 120th New York Volunteers wrote to his mother on March 23rd, 1863 on this very topic. In his letter he said, "I had not received a letter from home in over two weeks & began to be discouraged, but Mother when I came into my tent & found a letter from home one from Kate & one from Eliza, you may bet I felt all right." He goes on later in the letter to say, "I tell you Mother which will discourage a soldier more than to have folks at home

say or think Well now I must write him today... they say well I will write tomorrow & so on. That is no way. Write often." Writing to loved ones, and receiving letters in return, created a haven of sorts amongst the chaos and destruction which accompanies war. Without that connection to home, soldiers like Private Auchmeody suffered from low morale, which impacted their ability to perform in the field. Lieutenant Wright was no doubt equally as eager to hear from his own family and would have greatly enjoyed his stolen moments corresponding with them at his field desk.

Although administrative actions were largely successful on both sides of the war, there were many instances where administration failed. Some scholars have claimed that "the Confederate leadership... neither planned nor efficiently managed the war effort," and that this administrative failure ultimately led to the defeat of the Confederacy. Despite efforts by the Federal government and the Missing Soldiers Office (founded by Clara Barton), as well as statewide efforts in the former Confederate states, thousands of men still went unaccounted for in the years following the end of the war. The unknown fates of these men haunted their families who didn't know what had become of their loved ones and were unable to even take solace in knowing the final resting places of their sons and husbands. Prioritizing administrative needs was not always an option, though, as the war continued years longer than anticipated and casualty counts rose, forcing compromises and shifts in priorities, such as postponing record-keeping in favor of attempting to improve conditions in the moment.

Keeping up with administrative duties not only affected the war itself, but also our memory of the war. The importance of communication during the Civil War continued into the following decades as people began piecing together histories of the war, trying to portray events in as accurate a light as possible. Records that passed over the surfaces of field desks were, and still are, studied meticulously in hopes of preserving the narrative of the war within public memory. Following the war, there was mass communication from state governments to their veteran constituents, requesting that they provide their own accounts and recollections of the war in order to flesh out regimental histories and fill holes left by incomplete government records of the war. Inconsistent records of events were often corrected by the general consensus of men who were present and able to recall specific details from battles and campaigns. Due to the hectic nature of war, though, there are still countless gaps in information within records caused either by a loss of certain records, mismanagement of administrative duties, or general chaos which prevented accurate record keeping.

Pieces of material culture, such as field desks, currently serve as tangible reminders of aspects of the Civil War which are often forgotten in favor of remembering great generals and vicious battles. However, at its base level, the war was one fought not only on the battlefield, but in the countless pieces of correspondence that changed hands at every level. Whether it be field officers sending requests to their higher-ups in search of more supplies and aid, or men like Private Auchmeody writing to their families in search of levity and motivation to get them through their next battle, efficient communication was a necessity to the war effort.

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