DISMANTALING THE DICHOTOMY OF COWARDICE AND COURAGE DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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Mauren Schindler

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Thesis written by

Mauren A Schindler

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Approved by

Kevin Adams , Advisor

Brian Hayashi , Chair, Department of History

James L. Blank , Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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INTRODUCTION

Americans began to perceive cowardice and courage differently with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Many different viewpoints affected the understanding of these terms, from the broad societal, to the more narrow individual, as well as from military units, and local communities, to name a few of the most influential. Within the first year of the war, the *New York Times* published an article entitled "Courage and Cowardice." Appearing in the *Times* just a few months after the first Battle of Bull Run, an engagement where Union soldiers reportedly "shrunk away from danger," the *Times* article explicitly outlined society's expectations of a soldier going into the war. Not only did the article explain general expectations, but also it delineated what behaviors would not be tolerated and what behaviors would be viewed with a critical eye.[1]

In thinking about courage, the *Times* writers defined it as, "that quality of mind which enables men to encounter danger and difficulties with firmness, without fear, or depression of spirits." In contrast, cowardice was, "the want of courage to face danger." The authors of this article took issue with these base definitions, however, explaining that there was clearly more to each term than their basic definitions covered. Most notably, the authors pointed to a missing element, an element they labeled a "moral" quality; therefore, the authors asserted that mere indifference to danger does not qualify as courage because such indifference lacks the moral conviction necessary to be physically brave. Specifically, they state, "No act is laudable that is

[1] "Courage and Cowardice," (The New York Times, August 14, 1861) 1.

not the consequence of volition; no moral state is virtuous that is not the result of self-control." The 1860s understanding of the terms can be lifted through the assertions within the article that the true tests for moral courage concerned "faithfulness to duty and self-control." These concepts represented common Victorian ideals of manhood, clearly indicating the effect the Victorian era had on pre-war American conceptions of cowardice and courage. In contrast, the article claimed that those men who are "constitutionally so timid or morally weak," never gained a sense of self-discipline or self-respect to follow through with their duty. This group of men inevitably formed and were pittied and despised by women on the Union Homefront who labeled them nothing short of "cowards."[1]

Historians have largely understood these definitions to be too condemning of the soldiers who committed these cowardly acts. Just as the understanding of cowardice changed on the Union Homefront throughout the course of the Civil War, the perception has continued to evolve in the years after the war, effecting the ways in which historians approach the topic of cowardice. While, in general, it is understood that the definitions provided in the *Times* article represent the prevalent beliefs about cowardice and courage during the early 1860s, scholars have approached the topic of cowardice timidly, perhaps because of a sense of compassion felt for the labeled soldiers which the unknown *Times* authors did not have.

The definitions in this 1861 *Times* article allows for the writer to create a baseline from which to conduct her research. The definitions give us a general glimpse into the societal understandings of cowardice and courage at the start of the Civil War. While perceptions of the two terms changed throughout the course of the war, having a place to begin allows for more accurate analysis of the flexibility or rigidity of the terms during this period. In order to further investigate the changing perceptions of cowardice and courage, this research will utilize the

[1] Ibid., 1-2.

Reiter Family Private Collection, containing correspondence between members of the Bassett family, a family residing in the state of New York. Three Bassett sons, George, Erasmus, and Richard fought for the Union Army, two serving with the same regiment. The stories of these three brothers, told through the correspondence they carried out with members of their family, allow further examination into how and why perceptions of cowardice and courage became less rigidly separated throughout the Civil War.

Camp Douglas, Wednesday November 19, 1862

On the eve of winter, brothers Erasmus Eddy and Richard Allen Bassett wrote letters responding to their family. For the last two months, the brothers had endured squalid lives as parolees in a prisoner of war and detention camp located just south of Chicago, Illinois. They wrote in reply to correspondence they received from their mother and younger sister, Sill, asking them to desert their positions in the Union Army, or seek medical discharges to return home. These pleas had been inspired by what was forthcoming for the Bassets' regiment, the 126th New York Volunteer Infantry, which had been captured at Harper's Ferry in mid-September, but had finally received its marching orders. Along with their regiment, the brothers had suffered through a military investigation placing the blame for the Union surrender at Harper's Ferry solely on their regiments' actions during the battle. Initially disgruntled and disillusioned, the brothers were now faced with a chance to return to active duty; their relatives on the other hand, saw this as a moment where the brothers could take their leave of the army and return home, under whatever circumstances necessary.

Regardless of the requests made by their family members, Erasmus and Richard, both affected by the surrender in distinct ways, eagerly sought to avoid the possibility of being labeled cowards again. As Erasmus wrote home:

> …nothing would give me more pleasure than to come home and remain, but under all the circumstances it would be better for me to try a soldier's [sic] a little.[2] Dr. Hoyt is a friend [of the family] I am aware, and I am sure of several other good friends. Even if I should wish a discharge Dr. Hammond stands ahead of Dr. Hoyt, and a large Medical Board ahead of him. I don't write this because I have ever thought of applying for a discharge, but merely for your information. I trust I have friends in this Reg't who will help me in another direction. You know it is natural for man (or most of men) to be ambitious. I think I have the same desire for position and honor as most people and the prospect if but small is a great stimulus.[3]

Ending his letter home with the explicit statement, "Don't pass such letters as this to everyone," underlined for emphasis, Erasmus exhibited a clear understanding of the definition of cowardice during this period. Later that night, Richard also expressed his sentiments about receiving marching orders. He began his own letter to the family, "To all whom it may concern [underlined for emphasis] Be it known that the 126th N.Y. Vol. This day received marching orders; we are to go to Washington… we all feel rejoiced to think we are again exchanged & to take the field." He ended the letter emphatically stating that he felt he had "grown 6 inches since [he] received marching orders."[4]

These two simple letters introduce an important, but understudied component of life in Civil War America, namely how the components of cowardice, courage, and manhood were understood. Each brother hinted at the issue of being considered a coward. Erasmus went so far as to request that his letter was not shown to "everyone," presumably because his statements outlined the difficulty in attempting to receive a medical discharge from the regiment. Both Erasmus and Richard seem to have had a clear understanding of what made a man cowardly or courageous while enlisted as a soldier in the Union Army, but what have we, as historians, uncovered about this same idea? How have we handled the concepts of cowardice and courage,

[2] Erasmus is most likely saying that he wishes "to try as a soldier" in this line of his letter.
[3] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 19 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[4] Richard A. Bassett to Bassett Family, 19 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

in the 1860s and in subsequent wars? And finally, how do we define cowardice and courage as individual terms and how have we understood the interconnected nature of these terms?

Even though many other aspects of the Civil War battle experience and valor have already been explored by historians such as Bell Irvin Wiley, Gerald F. Linderman, Reid Mitchell, and James M. McPherson, the question of cowardice has not intrigued historians to the same extent.[5] Often, in fact, cowardice is left out entirely, making an appearance only when it benefits an argument as a direct foil of courage. Historian Chris Walsh begins to address this gap in the literature with his work *Cowardice: A Brief History*. He investigates the roots of the idea of cowardice in this country, connecting the term back to the Book of Revelations in the Bible, examining its Latin roots, and placing it within the context of the American military Courts-Martial code. For Walsh, acts of cowardice are best explored through the lens of "prudent" behavior, bringing forth another aspect of cowardice for scrutiny. He asserts that the conduct of men could be misjudged when in reality their conduct was practical or even courageous.[6]

More than an abstract discussion of cowardice, however, Walsh focuses our attention on the motivations of men deemed cowards by their peers; here he maintains that "less obvious, but far more pervasive harm has been caused by those who fear being judged cowardly so behave recklessly." Walsh's theory of "recklessness" helps to understand the motivation behind the combat actions of the 126th NYSV during the Battle of Gettysburg. Walsh develops cowardice further as a "misunderstood condition" or "an adverse reaction to trauma." His understanding places cowardice itself as one of the direct victimizers of the coward. The coward is pushed to

[5] Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952); Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*. (New York: Viking, 1988) and *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
[6] Chris Walsh, *Cowardice: A Brief History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)1-6, 9.

act "courageously" by the sheer fear of again receiving the stigmatization of "coward." At the same time, Walsh urges that further work must be done on this topic to examine the intricate complexities which exists between cowardice and courage.[7]

Another recent work emphasizing the overlooked area of cowardice is *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War*, by Lesley Gordon. Gordon examines the 16th Connecticut using a micro-historical approach, following the regiment's entire experience in the Civil War. The unit's early experiences caused its soldiers to bear the label of cowards. As the men were faced with more wartime situations, they dealt with instances of redemption, failure, and trial. Through this regiment's journey, Gordon finds that the men of the 16th Connecticut felt "increasingly convinced that they were suffering more than most, even though their experiences were not necessarily any harder than those of other northern regiments." Gordon's regiment serves as a similar foil to the 126th NYSV, but my analytical focus is less concerned with soldier political dissent and its relation to cowardice and courage, and more interested in understanding the culture that surrounded and developed the terms. Still, Gordon's work sets an important precedent for using microhistory to analyze the understanding of cowardice during the Civil War, but her work contains pertinent differences to my own. While Gordon looks through the lens of an entire regiment, I examine cowardice through the lens of one specific family. In addition, the 16th Connecticut experienced an almost cyclical series of events which placed them in the position of being labeled cowards and heroes; first the regiment broke and panicked during the Battle of Antietam, causing them to be labeled cowards, then they were put in a position where they managed a small victory in a skirmish at Suffolk. After this, many of the regiment were captured during the battle of Plymouth and held as prisoners of war for almost a year in the Andersonville prison. While normally a surrender and capture would be perceived as an act of

[7] Ibid., 9-11.

cowardice, the horrors these men endured during their time as prisoners of war ultimately elevated them to heroes for their sacrifice through starvation and neglect in the camp. Roughly one-third of the regiment that had been captured did not survive their internment in the camp.[8]

Studying these regiments, the 126th NYSV and the 16th Connecticut, relies on the same basic methodology: an analysis of the motivations of the men within the units and how they changed throughout their terms in the war. When examining Civil War soldier motivation, one cannot overlook the work of James M. McPherson. In his book, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, McPherson addresses the question of where Civil War soldiers' willingness to fight and die came from. He examines their motivation, adopting a three-part framework, initially conceptualized by French Revolutionary historian John A. Lynn. This tripartite approach revolves around what Lynn described as initial motivation, sustaining motivation, and combat motivation. Initial motivation looks specifically at why the men first enlisted. Sustaining motivation focuses on the reasons which kept the men in the army and that allowed the army to exist over time. Finally, combat motivation concentrates on what nerved the soldiers to face extreme danger in battle.[9] This study applies Lynn's three-part framework to the experiences of Richard and Erasmus Bassett to assist in the analysis of their changing motivations while remaining in the Federal Army.

Another historian, Joseph Cook's, work acknowledges the oversight of many historians who utilize simple approaches to understanding complex individuals, helping me to build a strong foundation for my research, which also takes on this approach. In a recent piece, Cook. In "The Future of Civil War Soldier Studies: The Failure of Courage," Cook addresses this missing

[8] Lesley Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014) 68, 152-158; and " 'I Never Was a Coward' : Questions of Bravery in a Civil War Regiment" *More Than a Contest Between Armies: Essays on the Civil War Era*, (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2008) 150-163.
[9] James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 12-14.

element in Civil War historical scholarship. He asserts that though historians in this subfield have many source materials to work with, thus far they have been, in essence, overlooking the complexity of Civil War soldiers' lives. "Despite this plethora of source material," he explains, "Civil War soldier studies have not come close to reaching their potential… soldiers are too often seen as being cleanly divided between analogous groups rather than being complex individuals." He works through the recent research trends viewing these soldiers just as statistics on a page in a way that overly simplifies their war time realities. Urging historians to step back from this perspective and reestablish the individuality and humanity of the soldiers, Cook argues that the emotion and "complex interconnections" of the soldiers' thoughts may be adequately acknowledged by such a move. Cook is not the only historian to push for the Civil War research to move in this direction; another historian, Jason Phillips also recognizes the potential in these complex connections between and within soldiers. Cook recaps Phillips' explanation emphasizing, "A valuable new trend… restore[s] the individuality of each soldier and understand[s] them as both actor in and subjects of the world in which they lived."[10] This research examines the Bassett brothers and their family through their agency as actors in their own world and acknowledges the influences of society, and more specifically their upstate New York community, on them as subject of their own time period.

This research examines cowardice and courage and places them, not as opposites, but as ends of a spectrum which blend inward towards one another, in essence creating a space, or grey area, where cowardice and courage can exist simultaneously within an individual. Applying to this the concept of "reckless" courage and "prudent" or "practical" cowardice, the polar ends of the spectrum in turn become blurred themselves; the poles appear to be swappable, making the

[10] Joseph Cook, "The Future of Civil War Soldier Studies: The Failure of Courage." *Saber and Scroll* (2014) 25-27, 31.; Jason Phillips, "Battling Stereotypes: a Taxonomy of Common Soldiers in Civil War History," *History Compass* 6, no. 6 (2008), 1407.

entire spectrum ambiguous. This blend-able continuum can be seen through utilizing examples from three brothers who served for the Union Army: one brother was labeled a hero for his actions, while the other two were labeled cowards for theirs. None of the labels were as straight forward as they appeared to be and the circumstances of each drew into question the "correctness" of the label. For the brother who survived the war, the label he received changed with the engagements he endured, forever shaping him. By examining cowardice and courage through the perspective of these examples and placing them on a continuum, we open the door for further research and discussion of the actions of soldiers, in the Civil War and in subsequent wars. We also call into question the way we currently study battle trauma, known today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. If overly courageous actions can in fact be deemed reckless and are therefore not courageous, are the soldiers committing these acts already in a state of traumatization? If cowardice is in some, or most cases, practicality and courage is recklessness, how does a soldier know how to behave in any given situation? Can the actions of a soldier be judged so readily? There is much to consider if courage and cowardice are understood as fluid entities and not solid terms with impermeable boundaries.

While many scholars have yet to take cowardice and courage as far as a continuum theory such as the one I theorize, others such as Gordon, Walsh, Cook, Linderman, Wiley, and McPherson, have brought much to the table through their work in Civil War research. Walsh and Cook both asked the questions which brought me to the concept of the continuum, pushing me to consider cowardice and its relationship to and with the soldiers of the collection I study. Additionally, Walsh's theory of recklessness and practicality assisted in the expanding of my continuum. Gordon provided an impressive example of micro-historical examination, which serves as a model to base my own research off of, but my work deviates from her in a few key

ways: through the application of Lynn's theory, through my sample size, and my use of primary source materials. In addition, the experiences of the 126th NYSV whom I study and the 16th Connecticut, of Gordon's study, are distinctly separate. While Richard and Erasmus, along with the 126th were oppressed by their cowardly label for the entirety of the time period in which they are examined, the 16th Connecticut were faced with opportunities in which they were able to redeem themselves. In addition, in this research I will also be utilizing another Bassett brother, George, of the 33rd NYSV, as a foil to my analysis of Erasmus, Richard, and the 126th NYSV.

These three main accounts of the Bassett brothers battle experiences – in Harper's Ferry, the Battle of Antietam, and of Gettysburg respectively – illustrate how the seemingly definitive line between acting cowardly and acting courageously can be blurred. This research also suggests the applicability of this continuum to other wars outside of the Civil War. Moving forward, military historians need to acknowledge the complexity in the lives of soldiers and they should integrate these complexities with the contingencies of war.

The model and perspective lens used to examine research is only one piece of the puzzle. It is also important to recognize the context within which the research sits. In this case, when looking at cowardice and courage in 1860s America, it is necessary to understand the influence of Victorian ideals on the period. There were a few key works which assisted in the development of my analysis of these ideals and their influence on the Union Homefront. First, was Louise Stevenson's *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought & Culture, 1860-1880*. Stevenson lays the ground work for her research stating that Americans, "…drew upon the ideas their culture held in its intellectual storehouse." Stevenson outlines well the central ideals of Victorian culture as they presented themselves in 1860s America. She describes them as having a moral purpose for each task most often stemming from Protestant religious values. These beliefs fostered the

importance of education, in particular of reading, life-long learning, and continual self-improvement for Americans influenced by Victorian ideals. She works through objects and places of the era to feed her analysis.[11]

One area she places much attention on is in the home. As Stevenson describes family as an "institution," at the center of the American adaptation of Victorian ideals, the home is the "safe haven" for the members of the family. It provides them a place void of the temptations of the outside world, a place where it is not necessary for them to exercise the same level of self-restraint as in public, and it serves as a literal safe location where they could escape the violence of the outside world. The home was also the center of self-improvement of the family members, often in the form of reading. Families also enjoyed musical performances and entertainments directed by their own religious feelings and beliefs. The home was the center of activity for these Victorian American families.[12] Stevenson examines songs, hair styles, handmade religious objects, and other items of the household in support of her analysis of Victorian ideals in American thought and culture. Her conceptions of the American home and the importance of education and family find a place within this research.

Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire by Amy Greenberg is another piece of scholarship that sheds light on the role the dramatic changes of the antebellum period had on reconfiguring the idea of manhood in the country. Greenberg asserts that there are two main types of manhood which vied to become the main perception of American manhood; *restrained manhood* and *martial manhood*. *Restrained manhood* was driven by an identity grounded in the ideal of family. Men favoring this ideal valued expertise, moral uprightness,

[11] Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) xxiii, xxviii, xxx.
[12] Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) xxxiv, 11.

reliability, and courageousness. Those preferring the concept of *martial manhood* rejected moral standards and prized physical strength, brute force, violence, and aggression over other characteristics. Greenberg's conceptions of *restrained manhood* and *martial manhood* even appear to be grounded in their own interpretations of Victorian ideals; *restrained manhood* carries the same importance of family and moral uprightness as prevailing Victorian ideals, while she describes *martial manhood* as a version of "chivalry" exhibited by men of the past. With both definitions clarified, Greenberg openly acknowledges that though these two types of manhood ranked highest in popularity during this period, most men adopted something in between these two ideals.[13] This is where her work intersects with this thesis: the three Bassett brothers exuded elements of both *restrained manhood* and *martial manhood*, in perfect keeping with Greenberg's assertion that most men of this period adopted a hybrid version of manhood. Using the components of each type of manhood, I will show that the type of hybrid manhood adopted by the Bassetts and their conceptions of cowardice and courage were influenced and perpetuated by the underlying Victorian ideals of the era.

Another foundational work in understanding American Victorianism is "American Victorianism as a Culture," by Daniel Walker Howe. Howe grounds the intensity of the development of middle-class Victorianism in the United States in the missing "aristocratic cultural patterns," comparing its development to that of Victorianism in England. Using this theory of cultural self-definition, Howe asserts that the adaptation of Victorian values allowed Americans to gain "tangible rewards, such as upward mobility," and other rewards perhaps intangible for instance "participation in a larger cultural matrix."[14] Those who called themselves

[13] Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 11-14.
[14] Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975) 511-515.

American Victorians ascribed to reform society through education and religion, using these as tools to achieve social responsibility, morality, and respect for cultural standards. This type of Victorianism was a set of "cultural motifs;" an ideal type to strive towards, but never to live up to in all regards.

Understanding Victorianism as a cultural ideal type allows insight into Howe's biggest contribution to understanding of American Victorianism; viewing it as a communications system. In the nineteenth century, the obvious form of communication was through print and reading; Howe asserts that the many Victorian values were received through schooling. As it was expected for all members of the family to gain some levels of education, it was not only children who were adopting Victorian values from their education materials, women and members of the working class were also experiencing this as well. The values Americans adopted from reading changed the desired family and home structures, goals for self-regulation and control, and fostered continuous self-improvement. Howe stresses the importance of rooting analysis and examination of Victorian culture primarily through reference to its values.[15]

Victorian culture contained a clear moral focus, often driven by Christian, Protestant notions of a greater purpose. While Victorian ideals cannot be confined to one social class, most middle-class Americans of the 1860s, and some members of the upper class, shared in the serious ideals of Victorianism. Self-control and restraint were some of the ideals central to the image of Victorians in general; though society placed emphasis on the male exemplification of these and other behaviors. Other key traits included punctuality, industriousness, neatness, modesty, ambition, maintaining a temperate demeanor, orderliness, independence, dependability,

[15] Ibid.,520-525.

and most importantly, a good work ethic. Victorians believed that in order to obtain success and prosperity one must work hard to attain a more desirable position.[16]

Keeping this society and its cultural implications in mind, let us look at the patriarch of the Bassett family, Allen, who was a farmer by trade. He and his wife raised a family of thirteen children, in a small New York town beginning in 1840s America. They placed a focus on all of their children's education and also on their sons' occupations. They exemplified the belief that men influenced the world directly, and women indirectly, helping their sons gain positions of some stature, but not overwhelming wealth; this ideal economic and societal position was called "competence."[17] They created a tight-knit family where the home acted as a "safe haven" from the temptations and violence of the outside world. In other words, they raised a family beholden to their middle-class ideals of Victorianism.

An examination of the Bassett family and the three brothers, George, Erasmus, and Richard, who enlisted is possible because of the wealth of information available in a letter collection that I gained exclusive access to. Two of the brothers within this collection fought for the Union in the 126th New York State Volunteers (NYSV) and one fought for the 33rd NYSV. This novel collection, the Reiter Family Collection, is located in Charlotte, North Carolina and contains correspondence and artifacts from members of the Bassett Family who resided in New York State during the Civil War. Chronologically, the Reiter family private collection contains letters sent among members of the family beginning around January 1861, until late 1864. The letters are in very good condition considering their age of 156 years. The majority of the letters are from brothers George Wilson Bassett and Erasmus Eddy Bassett – the youngest and middle

[16] Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), xxviii-xxxiv; Richard Altick, *Victorian people and ideas*. (London: Dent, 1974); Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8-14.
[17] Richard White, *The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 136-37.

brothers of the Bassett men who fought in the war. Additional artifacts provide insight into the life of the eldest brother, Richard Allen Bassett. Most of the letters within the collection are easily legible, though some letters written in pencil are now fading and are more difficult to read. Overall, the Bassett relatives maintained beautiful penmanship while writing home.[18]

There are small distinctions particular to George's, Erasmus', and Richard's handwriting that allow differentiation between their penmanship. The most obvious distinction is the slant of the writing, or lack thereof. Richard's handwriting slants very far to the right, easily distinguishing his writing from his brothers. Erasmus' maintained the neatest penmanship and most frequently wrote in ink instead of pencil, making his letters some of the best preserved within the collection. George often preferred pencil and would write in haste, causing his writing legibility to change with level of urgency with which he completed the letters.[19]

The collection is comprised of letters, diaries, personal artifacts, photographs, and newspaper clippings. There are more than 700 separate letters, roughly five newspaper clippings, and four photographs; two of these photographs are of the Bassett brothers, George and Richard. There are also roughly ten year-length diaries. The personal artifacts comprised in the collection include musket balls, a sewing kit, a flask, officer manuals, a book on the history of the Bassett name (publication date unknown), and the contents of the brothers' pockets. I have currently documented roughly 1,700 images of the materials comprising the collection.

In addition to the use of this private collection, many sources were located using the genealogy site and database Ancestry.com. In particular, this database allowed research to continue past the end of the letter collection until the death of the sole surviving brother of the

[18] Bassett, Erasmus E. Papers. Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; Bassett, George W. Papers. Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina; Bassett, Richard A. Papers. Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[19] Ibid.

Civil War. It also allowed the confirmation of enlistments, musters in to and out of service, along with discharges, census records, and other government documents detailing the lives of the Bassetts. Census records allowed me to track members of the Bassett family as they moved across the United States. They also provided information on what Bassett children lived with their parents or with other family members, as they grew older. Ancestry.com provided additional military documents, confirming medical issues, physical descriptions, reports of death and sickness, as well as specific information on discharges. All of this information assisted in the understanding of the Bassett family and in the humanization of George, Erasmus, and Richard.

By stepping forward and looking at sources containing evidence of cowardice and courage concurrently, this thesis utilizes this collection to answer the call both Walsh and Cook put forth. Importantly, the spectrum of cowardice is directly affected by the ever-changing perceptions, be they the perception of military peers, of general American society, of community, and of family. Each perception is affected by different elements and all have the potential to be contradictory to one another. Consequently, cowardice sits in an environment of competing ideals, much like the one Amy Greenberg describes when defining the understanding of manhood in Antebellum-America.[20] These competing ideals paralleled and fed into the two main perceptions of American manhood, described by Greenberg, during this era. This cultural conglomeration of ideals, driven by conceptions of Victorian manhood helped to shape societal understanding of cowardice and courage. While this thesis uncovers cowardice as it related specifically to the American Civil War and the U.S. in the 1860s, this theory of continuums driven by perception can also be utilized and applied when analyzing cowardice and courage in the context of other wars.

[20] Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12-14.

In addition, the materials of the Reiter Family Collection allow the reader to connect with family members on a micro-level, while still engaging with material representative of the larger whole, American war-time society. Having individual faces, photographs, and personal statements adds a human dimension to this research and understanding the Civil War experience in a way other materials simply do not nor hope to do. This humanization allows for a more in-depth analysis of the subjects and the complexities of their lives. Their statements show evidence of the prevalence of Victorian ideals during this era and provide further insight into the family's understanding of the societal definitions of courage and cowardice and how their conception of the terms changed along with the actions of their enlisted sons.

This thesis' first chapter examines who the brothers were, where they came from, and how they fit into the greater scheme of Union wartime society. It utilizes the era's adapted Victorian ideals to examine the family's priorities and the manifestations of them. Topics such as education and the occupations held by the members of the family are analyzed in comparison with these societal ideals.

Chapter Two depicts and analyzes the experiences and perceptions of the brothers during battle. Cast as a "brave and beloved" officer when he is killed at the Battle of Antietam, George's actions during the engagement led to posthumous speculation of cowardly action. George serves as a foil, presenting a reversed experience to Erasmus and Richard who, with their regiment, suffered a blow devastating not only their military careers, but their manhood as well. The regiment's blunder during the Battle of Harper's Ferry earned them the stigma of being known as the "Harpers' Ferry Cowards" while the official military investigation added an additional "sting" when it prevented them from speaking on their own behalf to contest the allegations made against them.

In the third chapter, the attempt of the two "cowardly" brothers to gain redemption for their past wrongs will be illustrated and investigated. Their attempt for redemption comes when they are called into battle on the second day of the engagement at Gettysburg. This chapter explores if this quest at redemption did in fact, change their stigmatized label. It also investigates the actions they took to "redeem" themselves and scrutinizes them through Chris Walsh's lens of recklessness. It finds questions the success of the brothers' attempts at redemption and scrutinizes their actions during the Battle of Gettysburg, acknowledging that they were committed recklessly in order to try and achieve their goal.

This research will help to build our understanding of cowardice and help to further future research on the topic. By gaining a more dynamic understanding of cowardice it will allow scholars to better analyze instances of perceived cowardice. In creating a model which accounts for the previous research on cowardice, but calls for the use of the in-between, that is the co-existence of cowardice and courage, my research allows for the complexity of individual circumstances and reminds historians that while simplifications are great, not everything can be placed neatly in to a category. History is built on complexities; that is what provides us with debate and research questions. We need to remember to acknowledge these complexities to the best of our ability while carrying out our research. Additionally, this research allows comparison between the Civil War conception of cowardice and courage compared to modern day discussions about the nature and meaning of cowardice.

CHAPTER ONE:

CONNECTING THE DOTS

In antebellum America, the northern states experienced a growth in population and an increase in industrialization between the 1820s and the 1860s.[1] This industrialization affected the majority of northern citizens, allowing them easier access to goods and marketing, as well as expanded opportunities for travel. Many American cities developed and built an increased number of canals because they allowed for the growth of the market economy among the cities that expanded their waterways. States like New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois spent over fifty-seven million and seventy-two million respectively. Other state institutions funded the development of the steamboat, to continue to foster the growing transportation craze.[2]

Canals were not the only mode of transport that expanded during this period however; with interest in better transportation remaining high, railways also received funding to improve and increase modes of rail travel. While the railroad system in the US expanded nearly 9,000 miles in 1850, it "paled in comparison with the 21,000 additional miles laid during the next decade."[3] With this rapid expansion in rail came lower prices for both individual travel and the transportation of goods. By the start of the Civil War, these developments allowed many

[1] David R. Meyer, *The Roots of American Industrialization*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 133.
[2] Charles Grier Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 43-45.
[3] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, NY: Tess Press, 2008) 12.

Americans the luxury of traveling further distances more quickly and gaining access to goods previously too high to for them to purchase regularly.[1]

Additionally, an increase in transportation modes and speed meant the letters and news also moved more quickly and reached more locations than ever before. Along with railroad expansion, telegraph lines followed quickly behind. This provided for improvements in paper making as well as printing. Newspapers became a more important medium of communication because of these technological innovations and the increased speed with which information was spread.[2] These improvements in technology, speed, and price, were all helpful to the North when they entered in to a Civil War in the following years by allowing them quicker access to both information and resources. It also allowed the North to communicate more swiftly and efficiently between military units and the federal capital.

In 1860, during this growing economic and technological environment, the Bassett family resided within the Finger Lakes region of New York State, (Figure 1) in the small town of

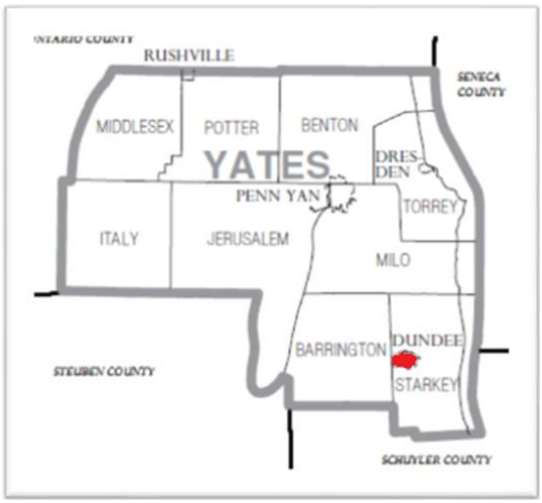

Figure 1. Finger Lakes region of New York State where the Bassett family resided.

[1] Ibid., 12-14.
[2] Sarah H. Gordon, *Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 3, 9, 19.; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (2008) 12-13.

Dundee. The Bassetts were a typical Northern family. Patriarch Allen Bassett, was a humble farmer who had been married to Jemima Mann, his second wife, for roughly 10 years.[3] They had thirteen children compiled from both of Allen's marriages. Though many of the siblings were in fact step siblings, the Bassett children do not appear to have made any distinctions between themselves, their biological siblings, and their half siblings.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, it took only a year for three of the eligible Bassett sons to enlist in the Union Army: George Wilson, Erasmus Eddy, and Richard Allen. All three brothers were born in the local town of Barrington.[4] Richard was the eldest, born to Allen's first wife, Drusilla only a few months prior to her death in 1829.[5] George and Erasmus, born of Allen and Jemima's union, were half-brothers to Richard. Other Bassett men, such as middle son Ansem "Ace" and older son Palmer were eligible to enlist, but for reasons not yet uncovered, did not. George, Erasmus, and Richard were part of the minority of Northers who fought for the Union Army; just over one in four men who were eligible volunteered or were drafted into the Federal army over the course of 1861 to 1865.[6]

Like many soldiers, the brothers wrote letters to help cope with feelings of homesickness, loss, and boredom. They poured their hearts out, penning countless letters to their immediate family, and also to their extended relatives. While more letters were written by American

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[3] "New York, State Census, 1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2014, 10-11, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.

[4] Robert Trenchard, "Application for Headstone of CW veteran currently unmarked." Ancestry., "US Federal Census, 1860," *Ancestry.com*, 2012, 748, accessed April 23, 2017., "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.

[5] "U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current," *Ancestry.com*, 2012, accessed April 8, 2017, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/107648923.

[6] Utilizing Federal Census data from the year 1860 in conjunction with data from the National Park Service, I calculated that there were roughly 15,800,000 total men in the United States then extrapolated the percentage of men of the total population (roughly 52%) to the total population of the Union -18.5 million. Ultimately, this calculation found that there were roughly 9,500,000 men in the Union, of whom roughly 28%, or one in four men served for the Federal Army; "Facts," National Parks Service,, accessed April 07, 2018, http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/facts.htm.; United States., Census Office., *Census of Population, 1860*(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1862) iii-xviii.

soldiers in wars following the Civil War, including World War I and II, the letters written by Civil War soldiers are particularly revealing because the censorship of correspondence maintained during the modern wars did not exist in the 1860s.[7] Letters within the Reiter Family Private Collection follow this pattern, with the enlisted Bassett men enclosing details such as the locations in which they were stationed, the names and details of battles in which they fought, as well as members of their units who were ill, wounded, and killed. In later wars, transmission of private or sensitive details such as these, would not have been allowed.

During the nineteenth century, letter writing took off with the decrease in postal rates and as stationary was lowered to more affordable rates; both outcomes spurred from the 1845 Post Office Act. With the increasing popularity of letter writing, a general set of rules developed which became the general set of respectable standards to follow when writing correspondence. These rules included an emphasis on neat handwriting and correct spelling. Along with the development of this set of societal rules of respectability, letter writing manuals became more pervasive. They were available at all prices points, including as low as around ten cents.[8]

Additionally, letters were seen as a source from which one's authentic personality could be drawn from. In other words, letters were believed to be a form of true self-expression; a place where one could share secrets. Overall, viewed as a "means of liberation," letter writing allowed many Americans to freely share their "self" with others.[9] The publication of letters in print media was believed to provide an unparalleled glimpse into the psychological interior of an individual. This may be part of the reasoning behind the Bassett family's keeping of the collection. Perhaps

[7] Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 15.
[8] Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman, and Matthew Pethers, *The Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-century American Letters and Letter-writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1-3.; David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[9] Bernier, Newman and Pethers utilize published correspondence of famous poet Emily Dickinson to illustrate and emphasize this point. Ibid., 4, 11.

by keeping these keepsakes in a box, the family was attempting to preserve what little they had left of George's and Erasmus' "authentic" persons, left behind in their letters.

While letters can present a wealth of information to historians, they also pose an issue of bias which needs to be kept in mind as well. Each letter is written to an individual or group of people; in other words, it is written for an audience and therefore has the potential to have been censored or tailored based on the nature of the relationship between the writer and the recipient. One potential predisposition, often overlooked was the way a soldier expressed his identity, identifying both as a soldier, but also as a part of his society, a point Aaron Sheehan-Dean assesses and concurs with in the introduction of *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*.[10]

The letters of the Bassett brothers are similar to their Union counterparts in that they share information about where they were stationed, activities they partook in during camp life, information about their commanding officers, their regiment and other unit movements, and the like.[11] While each Civil War soldier had their own unique story, not all of them were preserved; luckily for the Bassett brothers, George, Erasmus, and Richard, most of their stories were. For over one-hundred and fifty years descendants of the Bassett family have protected the letters, diaries, photographs, and other memorabilia keeping the story of these three Bassett brothers alive.

[10] Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 12-13.
[11] Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 13, 82-86.; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 12-14.; Arabella M. Willson, *Disaster, struggle, triumph: the adventures of 1000 "Boys in Blue," from August, 1862, to June, 1865*. (Albany, NY: The Argus Company, Printers, 1870), 177-178.

George Wilson Bassett

The first of the three Bassett sons to enlist in the Union was young George Bassett, age twenty-three born November 11, 1838.[12] Prior to the war, he worked towards completing a law degree in the office of Judge Henry Welles, a fact recorded in a history of the town. Additionally, in the description of his work for Judge Welles, it was recorded that many of the town felt that George "was a young man of much promise in the field."[13]

After Confederate forces bombarded Fort Sumter, George (Figure 2) wasted little time answering the call to duty. Only two weeks later, on April 25, 1861, he enlisted in the 33rd New York State Volunteers (NYSV) starting out as a private of Company I. His regiment mustered in for duty on July 1. The courage and leadership he displayed in battle quickly elevated George to the rank of Sergeant Major.[14] A physical description of George is left out of the New York Civil War Muster Roll Records, (Figure 3) but we do know that he had dark hair, and at the time of his promotion to Sergeant Major, looked especially dashing with a full beard. He, and the other men of Company I, fought in several battles, during a six-month period in the first year of their enlistments.[15]

[12] "New York, Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017.
[13] Cleveland, *History and Directory of Yates County, New York*, 158.
[14] "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[15] "33rd Regiment, New York Infantry," 33rd Regiment, New York Infantry Genealogy - FamilySearch Wiki. Last modified, February 23, 2017, https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/33rd_Regiment,_New_York_Infantry.

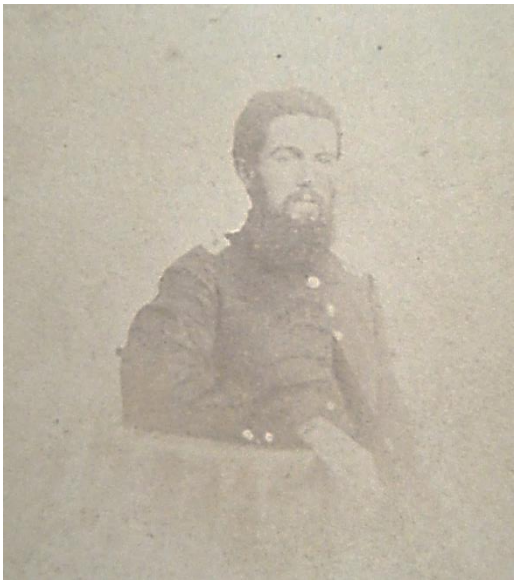

Figure 2. George Wilson Bassett

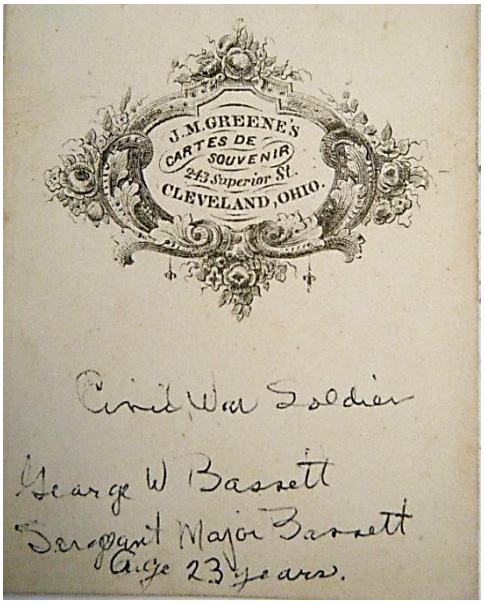

Figure 3. New York Civil War Muster Role Records.

Erasmus Eddy Bassett

Erasmus Eddy, born February 11, 1836, was the next brother to enlist in the Union infantry.[16] He answered the call for more troops in August of 1862, mustering into Company B of the 126th NYSV less than a week after his enlistment. Erasmus had dark hair, similar to his brother George, hazel eyes and stood at a height of five feet, ten and a half inches tall.[17] His family and friends affectionately called him "Ras" or "Rapsy."

Before the war, Erasmus was a twenty-five-year-old school teacher who taught at the Valley School house. It is unclear from the collection the exact location of the school, but it is evident that Erasmus taught several levels of mathematics, including algebra there.[18] The family collection has also maintained some of Erasmus' school roll books from this period. Many of his letters present his passion for education and knowledge. He often wrote encouraging his younger siblings to further their own education and provided feedback on their continued progress.

Richard Allen Bassett

The final brother to enlist in the Federal Army was Richard Allen, born on February 20, 1829.[19] He enlisted alongside his brother Erasmus in August of 1862, at the age of thirty-three.[20] Richard (Figure 4) was the only one of the enlisted brothers who was married; his wife was Mary A. Hendrickson Bassett, about whom the family collection says little. We do know that she was born sometime in either 1832 or 1833 in the state of New York. Richard and Mary had three

[16] "US Federal Census, 1860," *Ancestry.com*, 2012, 748, accessed April 23, 2017.
[17] "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[18] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 21 January 1861, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[19] "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[20] Ibid.

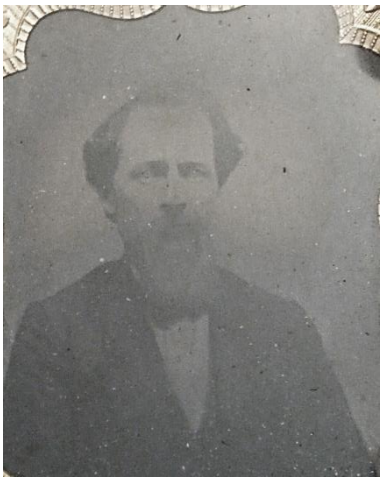

Figure 4. Richard Allen Bassett

children, Edward P., George W., and Allen, born in 1855, 1863, and 1872 respectively.[21] Presumably they named their children in honor of Richard's brothers and father.Their middle son was named for George Wilson, after he died in the Civil War, while their oldest, Edward, was named after Erasmus Eddy (Edward) before he fought in the war.

Since he served in the same regiment as his brother, much of Richard's Civil War story is intertwined with Erasmus'. This interweaving includes letters in which Erasmus updated the family on Richard's health and wellbeing; Richard did the same for his brother in his own personal correspondence. When Richard enlisted in the 126th NYSV on the coattails of his brother, he entered as First Lieutenant of Company B, after being elected by the other men in his unit.[22] Another promotion, elevating him to Captain, came a year later in March 1864.[23]

Richard was the only Bassett son to survive his enlistment. He forever struggled through helplessness he felt at being unable to carry out any action after his brother George's death, as

[21] "New York, State Census, 1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2014, 10-11, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1880," *Ancestry.com*, 2010, 160D, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[22] "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[23] Ibid.

he, Erasmus, and the entire 126th New York were being held as prisoners of war near Sharpsburg, Maryland, when George was killed in battle. In the year after George's death, Richard also experienced the agony of witnessing a great portion of his regiment, including Erasmus perish during the Battle of Gettysburg. Richard, while writing home to his family, expressed his inability to express his feelings post-battle: "my heart is too full and sad to say anything…".[24] Losing half his regiment, both of his enlisted brothers, and many close hometown friends weighed heavily on Richard for the rest of his military enlistment and arguably, his life.

The toll Richard's wartime loss and experiences had on him was not unique to him, but rather was common to many Civil War soldiers of the period. As historian Eric T. Dean, Jr. has explored in his work *Shook Over Hell: Post Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*, Civil War soldiers experienced many of the same symptoms and neuroses typically associated with modern day Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), what many nineteenth century historians refer to simply as "trauma." While the issues of PTSD, also called "nostalgia" or "irritable heart" in the nineteenth century, are hard to quantify from lack of diagnosis and labeling, it did exist in severe cases and was not isolated in its instances. Having experienced "trauma" was a key feature of this serious condition. While it is commonly believed that not many veterans were considered "psychological casualties" of war until the increase of high powered deadly weaponry in World War I, Dean Jr. draws back this starting point further, highlighting the experiences of many Civil War soldiers who faced the advent of increasingly destructive military technology. Additionally, Civil War soldiers were more likely than later military units to serve in combat units – ninety percent of those enlisted in the Civil War served in active combat roles. In later wars, the percentage of those enlisted fighting in active combat roles fell dramatically – thirty

[24] Michael A. Dreese, *Torn Families: Death and Kinship at the Battle of Gettysburg*. (Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2012) 119.

percent in World War II and fifteen percent in the Vietnam War. Plainly put, this meant that though there may have been more psychological casualties in the wars following the Civil War, the percent chance of experiencing an event which negatively impacted a soldier psychologically during their service in the war was exponentially higher for those enlisted in the Civil War, as the men serving were most likely to serve in roles of active combat. Soldiers in the Civil War also faced other types of mental stress including extensive, sometimes seemingly endless marches endured with inadequate supplies, over rough terrain, and at the cost of mental and physical deterioration.[25]

Between exhausting marches, a lack of supplies, and the near certainty of combat, Civil War soldiers also grappled with the new technology and the fear and terror it brought along with it. The new type of artillery allowed for firing and sometimes constant bombardment of enemy troops with shells, shot, shrapnel, and other propellants, from a further distance away than in previous wars. This prevented the soldiers from being able to retaliate at those shooting at them, creating an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and dread. At any moment a soldier could be blown to bits, as could the man next to him, with little to no warning and little hope of reaction.[26]

It is no surprise that Richard, having experienced constant fatiguing marches, artillery barrages, the threat of disease, and other horrors of combat, in conjunction with the deaths of two of his brothers, would come out of the Civil War a different man. "Being so broken up about the loss of George at Antietam, and Erasmus at Gettysburg," a modern day descendant noted, Richard "was never the same." Richard received a medical discharge within a year after his brothers deaths, and "after returning to New York and the rest of his family, he was so

[25] Eric T. Dean, *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 27, 46-48, 62-65, 211-212.
[26] Ibid., 46-48, 65-69.

distraught, he…moved his family to Minnesota."[27] Government census data confirms the move of the Richard Bassett family to Minnesota between the 1865 and 1870 census with the family registering in Dundee, New York in 1865 and the St. Peter, Nicolet county, Minnesota in 1870.[28] Reasons for this move can only be speculated from family lore.

The Bassett Family, Antebellum Culture, and Victorian Ideals

Artifacts of the Bassett Family held within the Reiter Family Collection suggest that the Bassetts held cultural beliefs prevalent during the 1860s; many of these ideals aligned with antebellum culture as it comingled with Victorian ideals. Most clearly, the brothers and their parents treated education, occupation, and ambition (in modest proportion), ideals that fit the Victorian ethic of self-improvement, as some of their keystone family principles. Victorian self-improvement was driven by the pursuit of lifelong education. The pursuit of education bettered one not only intellectually, but morally as well because it provided lessons in right and wrong as well as a form of moral entertainment. This included reading purposefully and seeking out educational opportunities over wage-earning ones, even if it would help ones family. According to historian Louise Stevenson, "to be middle-class was to be literate."[29]

In keeping with this ideal, the Bassetts maintained the importance of gaining an education for all of their children. They believed that the more educated a person became, the more they were able to understand the world around them and interact with it, intelligently. In the same way, having an occupation with which you could assert dependability and self-reliance was key. Antebellum understandings of manhood asserted the importance of making one's self

[27] It must be noted that this information is not from a formal oral history but is cited from the word of mouth of the collection holder and is corroborated by members of the Bassett Family Association, and is transcribed in an email; John Reiter, "Bassett Brothers," e-mail message to author, December 4, 2017.
[28] "New York, State Census, 1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2014, 10-11, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1870," *Ancestry.com*, 2009, 296, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.
[29] Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) xxxiii, 23.

dependable instead of dependent.[30] Ambition, meanwhile, composed an important part of social perceptions re-sanding "true" men; to be ambitious was to improve yourself through any means available. For the Bassett brothers, rank within the military proved to be a sought-after ambition. The keystone of all three of these values rests in the Victorian quest for intellectual and moral self-improvement.[31]

Of the brothers, Erasmus exuded the importance of education most wholeheartedly. Erasmus' letters home and distinct penmanship make it evident that he took pride in his work and thoroughly enjoyed learning as well as teaching. In many of his letters, Erasmus enthusiastically encouraged his siblings to pursue various aspects of education and intellectual stimulation and praised them for their work. To his sister, Het, he wrote "You did well last term. I am glad you concluded to attend school this summer…I think it would pay to have Frankie [another of his sisters] go with you." He pinpointed this love and prioritization of learning as something he and his siblings learned from his parents. He expressed, "There is nothing like getting an early start in everything especially this [education] -the most important of all. The more I consider it the more grateful I feel to our parents for every effort they have made for us in that direction." Even while away at war, the more he learned of his siblings' intellectual endeavors, the more he expressed a determination to utilize his "influence and expertise for the education of [his] younger brothers and sisters."[32] This attention to education may be a reason the Reiter Family Collection contains so many legible and lengthy letters.

Given the household their parents created for them, Richard and George would not have escaped the influence the role of education played within their family. While the family collection does not have a record of them expressing their thoughts on the importance of

[30] Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975) 527-528.
[31] Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) xxxiii, 23.
[32] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 17 April 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

education in the same explicit way as it does Erasmus, it contains evidence that George also appreciated education and self-improvement. During his enlistment, in letters home, George requested items he desired to read from family members. In early February 1862, for example, he requested a copy of the *Masonic Messenger* from his brothers. In other letters home, he spoke of reading the news, including their local *Record Herald*, which Erasmus brought him while visiting.[33]

The handwriting of the brothers also delineates the value they placed in their education and appearance of respectability. As previously noted, having neat penmanship and utilizing correct spelling and grammar were important aspects of nineteenth century American letter writing culture; the brothers' handwriting denotes an attempt to meet these standards. While Erasmus carried the most distinct penmanship -most likely due to his occupation as a teacher- both George and Richard also come across as well read and well learned in their letters.

In addition to traditional forms of education, the Bassett family acknowledged the role that music played in furthering the mind and improving oneself. For Victorian values, music allowed one to grow morally, spiritually, and educationally. Education in the art of music provided an endeavor for both men and women of the household where they could learn to play, sing, write, and enjoy it together.[34] With the outbreak of the Civil War, bands of musicians were enlisted alongside the infantry, bringing music from the Homefront and battlefront along with them.

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[33] George W. Bassett to Bassett Family, 3 February 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; George W. and Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 1 December 1861, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

[34] Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), xxviii-xxxiv; Richard Altick, *Victorian people and ideas*. (London: Dent, 1974).; Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling, eds., *The Arts and the American Home, 1890-1930* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 98-99, 104-105.

While it cannot be proven that the Bassett brothers played instruments themselves, the brothers frequently included in their letters home descriptions of and references to music performances they attended. For example, in late-March 1863, Erasmus wrote that, "last evening I went up near H'd Qt's…to hear the "band" play." The placement of the quotations around the word band may indicate that the group playing music was actually a group of soldiers playing for the sake of their own enjoyment. It could also suggest that the group was a military band, but not of the unit with which Erasmus was travelling. It is possible also that the use of the quotations is an indication of the way Erasmus felt about the quality of the band; perhaps it was of poor caliber. On a different occasion, Erasmus eloquently described the music, sights, and sounds of the 126th NY's encampment at Centerville, Virginia as they mingled around him:

> All well this beautiful spring morning…The grass is quite open making a bite for horses which are daily turned out…Several varieties of flowers peculiar to this climate are in bloom.
>
> I wish you could all hear the music that I now do. Brig. guard is now mounting, band is playing and officers inspecting arms. The soft note of the bugle mingled with the ringing sounds of the rammer in the rifle produces more of a charm in my ear than anything, [sic] I ever heard before.[35]

It can be guessed from this passage that the music of the regimental band was a regular addition to the camp life of the 126th New York.

The brothers also shared in the musical knowledge of their younger siblings and nephews before as well as during the war. Younger sister Helen Bassett utilized music and lyric composition regularly and in a particular work alluded to her feelings about the war, her understanding of cultural ideals, and the enlistment of her brothers and other community members in the service. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Helen was roughly eighteen years old;

[35] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 31 March 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 17 April 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

old enough to understand the issues her brothers faced while they served for the Federal Army and educated enough to articulate her feelings regarding the circumstances of the war at play in Northern society.

In the early 1860s, she wrote:

> I love to sing and I love to dance
> I love to keep in motion
> And every time I think of this
> It always suits my notion.
>
> Se [sic] the children round and round
> A crying after their mother
> So kind of way they all have got
> One right after the other.
>
> See the little pious man
> So faithful in his duty
> Traveling on in wisdoms ways
> The robes of shining beauty.
>
> See the old gray headed man
> Traveling on to glory
> With his bible in his hand
> Oh tell a pleasing story.
>
> The boys they love to kiss the girls
> And thinks it hard to leave them
> But if they join the Shakers dance
> I am sure it would relieve them.[36]

While her lyrics are abstract at best, the timing of her writing provides a helpful indication of the thoughts behind her piece. Helen emphasized notions of piety, faithfulness, ambition (also viewed as seeking out glory), and duty. Religious devotion is a central element within the text; Helen not only described a preacher, but also spoke to the religiosity of the everyday man. In her lyric, she referenced a "gray haired man" she indicated as traveling off to glory with the bible in his hand. At the same time, she also poked fun at the religiosity of her

[36] Helen C. Bassett to Bassett Family, unmarked date, 1860s, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

young male counterparts, indicating that they do not wish to leave the girls, but that if they joined in the "Shakers dance" it would relieve their confliction. Along with her final stanza, as she observed the feelings of the young men around her, Helen may also have been speaking to the will of these men to take leave and do their soldierly "duty." When she asserted that they partook in the "Shakers dance," she referred most likely to the religious services of a sect of Quakers, nicknamed "Shakers" or "Shaking Quakers," who for a period of time in the 1800s were viewed as overzealous for their ecstatic reactions within their religious meetings. It is very possible that Helen came into contact with this particular sect of Quakers, as Yates County New York was a part of what was referred to as the "Burned-Over District."[37] While it is entirely possible that Helen used her lyric to poke fun at these Quaker congregations, she may also have been speaking about a belief in the religious or moral necessity of serving one's country. In essence expressing that if the young men experienced religion in a way which relieved them of their desires to remain with and "kiss the girls," then they would be able and willing to serve for the Federal Army.

Not only did the Bassett siblings maintain a love for music, but their extended relatives did as well. Charles Edward Bassett, the nephew of Erasmus, George, and Richard, affectionately known as Charlie, was the son of their brother Palmer H. Bassett and his wife Susan J. Smith Bassett. He was born on May 10, 1849.[38] Charlie's father, Palmer, was thirty-eight at the outbreak of the war and did not enlist. Charlie was a talented musician, able to play both the violin and the bass drum. Charlie Edward (not to be confused with Charlie M., younger

[37] This area consisted of several counties in central and western New York where religious revivals and reform movements formed during the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century.; Michael B. Aune and Valerie DeMarinis, *Religious and social ritual: interdisciplinary explorations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 105.; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950).
[38] Trenchard, "Application for Headstone of CW veteran currently unmarked." Ancestry.

brother of the main Bassett brood), was only twelve years old when enlistments began in 1861. Charlie was eager to join up, (Figure 5) but due to his young age, was legally unable to enlist.[39]

Figure 5. Charlie Edward Bassett

Because of this few year gap, Charlie would not enlist in the Dundee Brass Band until after the deaths of both his uncles, George and Erasmus, and would only overlap his uncle Richard's enlistment for about a year prior to Richard's discharge from military service in late January 1865. While enlisted with the Brass Band of Dundee, Charlie shared his love and appreciation for music with his family. The Reiter Family Collection contains several letters between Charlie and his aunts and uncles during the period of his enlistment. In this correspondence, he described many different experiences he had with the band. Charlie was fortunate enough to perform with

[39] At this time, Charlie was only a few years shy of the minimum requirement for membership in a military band.

the band in Norfolk, Virginia, play for charity benefits, serve as a member of a "pit band" or pit orchestra, all as part of his military service to his country.[40]

Almost running hand-in-hand with the importance placed on education, the Bassetts sought out occupations for their sons which fit within the "middle-class" idea of Victorian principles, modest employments, that conveyed rank and some power, but not overwhelming wealth. The concept of Victorianism developed by nineteenth century Americans emphasized the importance of "republican" independence in the free labor economic system, which promoted the individual's work ethic and their ability to compete and provide for themselves successfully in the market economy. American Victorianism placed the home at the center of all things as it symbolized and served as a "cultural fortress" from the social conflicts of the outside world. The home also embodied the gendered assumptions of "manhood" and "womanhood" grounded in the American concepts of republicanism and the free market economy. The concept of "competency," or equilibrium between wealth and belongings, and the home were heavily linked. Nineteenth century American competency was structured around the understanding of the importance of the independent working man who had his fate "in his own hands" even if their reality strained this ideal. At the same time however, one needed to be conscious of how their actions and successes affected those around them so as not to jeopardize the competency of another's home for your own personal gain or profit. As historian Richard White best explained,

> The idea of the home both stimulated and limited individual striving. A successful economy would yield independent men who would protect the homes and families that would reproduce republican citizens. But too much striving became restlessness or greed, which threatened not only a family's home but also other families' homes and associated

[40] "New York, Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, Ca 1861-1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; *U.S., Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934 for Richard A Bassett*. PDF. National Archives and Records Administration.; Charles E. Bassett to Druzilla Bassett, 14 May 1864, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

> cultural values of manhood, independence, and citizenship. Wealth needed to be distributed to ensure the maximum number of homes.[41]

With the home at the center of American life, the families, guided by the patriarchal head of household adhered to societal norms of striving for competency, and generally avoided the threat of industrialization which placed the ideal of the home in jeopardy.

The Bassett family thoroughly understood these norms, part of the Victorian culture that developed in American during the antebellum period. With these principles in mind, Allen assisted his sons in seeking out occupations that would keep them comfortable and secure while helping them achieve the ultimate goal: competency. Richard and Erasmus, both fully employed in their chosen professions before the war, illustrate some of the options the Bassett sons had available to them. Richard chose to continue the occupation of his father Allen, becoming a farmer by trade. In America during the 1860s, farmers were a keystone of American life. They helped to feed the country and made a living through a decent level of prosperity while in the North avoiding overt wealth and power. The ideal competency for a man of this period was gauged by the amount of wealth a man needed to keep a farm going, support a family, be secure in times of hardship, and still remain independent of outside assistance.[42] Richard's occupation clearly fit within the ideals of nineteenth century republican ideals and the same be said for all of the Bassett sons.

Erasmus' work as a teacher at first brings pause to his choice of occupation. Leading up to the Civil War and after, teaching became a profession also available to many women of the period. This brings forward the question, did Erasmus' occupation go against the current period

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[41] White, *The Republic for Which it Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 5, 136-137.
[42] Ibid., 136-137.; "New York, State Census, 1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2014, 10-11, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), xxxi, xxxiii.; White, *The Republic for Which it Stands: the United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*(New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017) 137.

expectations? The answer, is no. While he held employment in an occupation which became heavily occupied by women during this era, certain topics within the school curricula were reserved for male instruction. Often topics such as arithmetic, and more gentlemanly subjects were taught by male authorities.[43] While the collection does not contain a full breakdown of the courses Erasmus taught at the Valley School House, the subjects the collection does hold include those of various mathematics courses; general arithmetic and algebra appear to be some of his most regularly taught courses.[44]

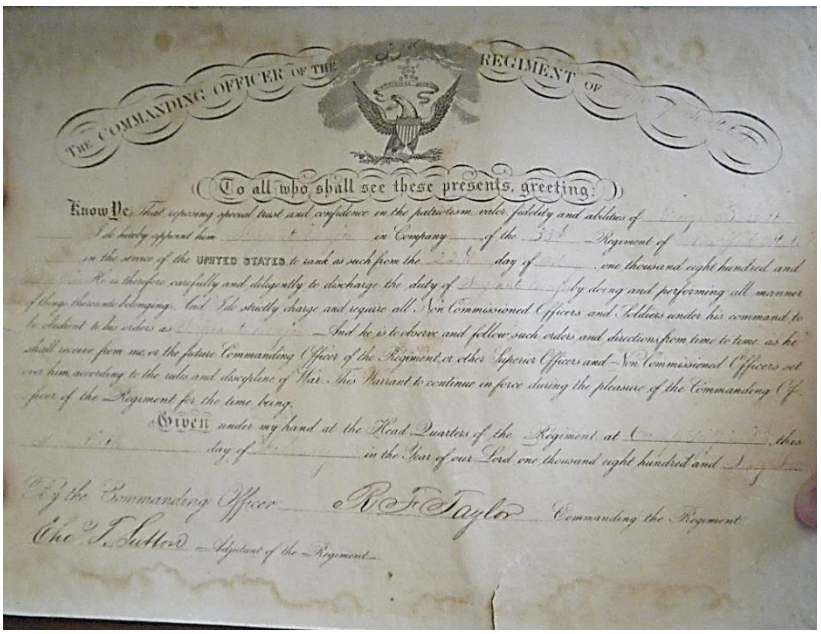
George Bassett, the youngest of the three, did not yet have a full occupation before the outbreak of the Civil War, but he did work in Judge Henry Welles', law office. Town records indicate that he studied law, suggesting that he planned to gain employment as a lawyer. Lawyers during this period were held in a much different regard than many are in today's society; in fact, lawyers were a substantial part of the middle class, often thought of as gentlemen. They also did not receive formal training like the lawyers of present day. George was unusual in that he held a position in Judge Welles office, for he was not the son of a lawyer or a judge; after 1810 over half of the men entering the workforce as lawyers were. During this period, becoming a lawyer was often the initial foothold for someone interested in seeking political office. While every lawyer utilized their occupation differently, it can be suggested that George sought this position, through support of his family, to make a sustainable, but not overly-wealthy living for himself and perhaps consider a later career in politics.[45]

During this period, lawyers also focused on assisting others in a way that ensured that the expanding capitalist market was not endangered by the claims of their clients. This focus

[43] Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975) 528-530.
[44] Bassett, Erasmus E. Papers. Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[45] Cleveland, *History and Directory of Yates County, New York*, 158.; Charles Grier. Sellers, *The Market Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 21, 47-48.; Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), xxxi, xxxiii.

unfortunately did not ensure the best for their clients but sought out the greater end for the United States domestic market. Lawyers were the "shock troops of capitalism," according to historian Charles Sellers.[46] Their focus on fostering the expanse of the "free labor" society and circulating capitalist ideology attempted to strengthen the role of the independent man and his involvement with the economy.

In addition to education and occupation, another strongly held principle was that of ambition. This concept could also go along with the understanding of self-improvement, central to Victorian ideals and adapted within antebellum culture. The brothers exemplified this through their enlistments in the Union Army. George, as the first enlist, was also the first promoted (Figure 6). Military records attribute his rank change from Private to Sergeant Major to his


THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE REGIMENT OF

To all who shall see these presents, greeting:

Know Ye, that reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, order, fidelity and abilities of

I do hereby appoint him ... in Company ... of the ... Regiment of

in the service of the UNITED STATES, to rank as such from the ... day of ... one thousand eight hundred and

He is therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the duty of ... by doing and performing all manner of things thereunto belonging. And I do strictly charge and require all Non Commissioned Officers and Soldiers under his command to be obedient to his orders as ... And he is to observe and follow such orders and directions from time to time as he shall receive from me, or the future Commanding Officer of the Regiment, or other Superior Officers and Non Commissioned Officers set over him according to the rules and discipline of War. This Warrant to continue in force during the pleasure of the Commanding Officer of the Regiment for the time being.

Given under my hand at the Head Quarters of the Regiment at ... this ... day of ... in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ...

By the Commanding Officer R F Taylor Commanding the Regiment

Chs T Sellers Adjutant of the Regiment

Figure 6. Rank change of George from Private to Sergeant Major

[46] Sellers, *The Market Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 47-48.

natural knack for leadership and his charisma with his military unit.[47] Had George not been killed during the Battle of Antietam, perhaps he would have continued to seek out higher positions of military rank.

While Richard and Erasmus also received promotions, their circumstances were perhaps more influential to their ambition for rank. After their failed engagement at Harper's Ferry, the military commission investigation and report, their time as parolees at Camp Douglas, and the open taunting of their regiment as the "Harper's Ferry Cowards," the brothers had an even greater motivation to prove themselves. This may have had a direct effect on their willingness and eagerness to receive promotions. By striving for and accepting promotions, the brothers attempted to regain their "manhood" and assert their dependability and loyalty as soldiers in the Union Army.

Erasmus received his promotion to Color Sergeant just before the regiment was put into active duty at the Battle of Gettysburg. This promotion to Erasmus, represented a chance to prove his courage in battle and reclaim his manhood. The position of Color Sergeant was an extremely dangerous one; accepting it meant entering battle carrying the regimental 'colors' also known as the regimental flag. This position put the bearer in an exceedingly vulnerable position on the field and as the rate of death for the color bearers was particularly high, accepting the position almost certainly meant death. Erasmus' acceptance of this promotion signals an understanding of its undertaking and its dangerous nature in addition to his utter commitment to the cause.

Interestingly enough, Erasmus also sought out another promotion prior to his acceptance of the position of Color Sergeant. Erasmus wished to rise to the rank of Second Lieutenant in early January 1863 and gathered support from other members of his unit. Many officers and

[47] Dreese, *Torn Families* (Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2012) 119.

privates alike filed a petition "earnestly" calling for Erasmus' rise in position. The petition was submitted to Lieutenant Colonel James M. Bull, commanding officer of the 126th NYSV, but was not successful. A copy of the petition the unit filed on Erasmus' behalf remains in the Reiter Family Collection. It contains forty-four signatures of men from Company B.[48] Today its existence tells us of Erasmus' ambition and drive for rank and title while serving in the Federal Army.

Richard, initially mustered in as a First Lieutenant, received his promotion to Captain on March 1, 1864. This was almost two years after his enlistment. The military form indicating his promotion does not state a specific reason for this promotion, but it does seem surprising that such a large period of time separates his initial entry from his promotion. Perhaps he was less ambitious than his two brothers, however, it seems more likely that he became less concerned with ambition and the idea of a promotion after he suffered the traumas of losing each of his brothers in battle and many of his friends and regimental comrades. There is also the possibility that Richard would come into a position of higher rank when superior officers died or were removed from combat, but this option would most likely have come to pass after the regiments' loss of combat officers during the battle of Gettysburg, explored in more detail in chapter three. We find there that Richard does not seek out or receive a promotion in the aftermath of the battle when his unit is left with only captains to lead them; an environment within which it would seem likely that someone of his rank would be promoted to a higher standing.[49]

All three of the Bassett brothers enlisted in the Federal Army and accepted promotions in rank throughout their enlistments. While Richard received the highest rank before he mustered

[48] Company B of the 126th NYSV to Lieutenant Colonel James M. Bull, 10 January 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[49] It is also likely that there were other factors outside of Richard's control at play in his road to promotion.; Eric Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': The Degradation, Humiliation, and Redemption of Col. George L. Willard's Brigade, Part II." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 108-109.

out of the army, George received the most promotions of the bunch, from Private through Sergeant Major. Erasmus, it can be argued, accepted the most dangerous of any of their promotions. It seems fitting that each brother received and accepted a promotion during their enlistment in the federal army; in a letter home Erasmus spoke that it was "natural for man… to be ambitious" and that the "position and honor" of a soldier's life as a prospect "if but small is a great stimulus."[50] While I have not yet uncovered letters within the collection that detail each brother's feelings regarding their promotions, their acceptance of their promotions signifies their willingness to take on the roles, responsibility, and title as well as their desire to prove their loyalty, dependability, and their courageousness as soldiers of the Union Army. The ideals which instilled in the brothers the drive for promotions were only some of the Victorian ideals prominent during the era. The Bassett brothers were also affected by culturally held ideals of manhood. These ideals influenced each of their enlistments in the Union Army as they grappled with concepts of courage and cowardice as well as questions of what it meant to be a good and dutiful soldier.

Amy Greenberg outlines two prominent ideals of manhood which existed in the 1800s in her concepts of *restrained manhood* and *martial manhood*. *Restrained manhood* was an identity grounded in the importance of family, the practice of Protestant faith, and success in business. Men who exemplified *restrained manhood* valued expertise above all other qualities and sought manhood "derived from being morally upright, reliable, and brave." Comparatively, *martial manhood* rejected moral standards, fixated on physical strength and the ability to dominate other and believed that the qualities of aggression and violence, in addition to strength, defined a 'true' man. Additionally, *martial* men embraced past ideas of manhood including concepts like

[50] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 19 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

chivalry. Greenberg asserts in her work that the true model which was adapted by men of the period was a "mixed model."[51] The Bassett brothers are perfect examples of Greenberg's mixed model assertion, that everyone adapted themselves somewhere in between these two competing ideals.

The Bassetts adopted the *restrained manhood* ideals of a strong grounding in family, being reliable, and understanding the importance of being brave. Concurrently, the Bassetts also turned to the use of *martial manhood* violence through the assertion of strength and aggression in battle, when their manhood was challenge. In the case of Erasmus and Richard, carrying out violence in battle while also exuding bravery exemplified the true mix the brothers held between these two ideal conceptions of manhood. Like many other the men and soldiers during the period, the Bassett brothers ebbed and flowed between the ideals of masculinity as they needed to.

Family

The Bassetts had a strongly rooted family structure; the siblings were close and they wrote each other often, regardless of age difference and biological relation. From what we can tell from the correspondence they left behind from this period, the family members placed importance on the family and on the family home. Victorian ideals prevalent during this period equated the home with the nuclear family. The nuclear family included all of the Bassett siblings as well as those who had spouses and children. One of the main competing forms of manhood, *restrained manhood*, was an identity grounded in the importance of family. The family was understood in conjunction with the home. The concept of the home during this period provided a way for Americans to understand their lives, society at large, and the economy; historian Richard

[51] Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 11-13.

White even termed it the "cultural fortress" of the era, providing a safe haven from the social conflicts of the outside world.[52] This understanding of the family and the home assisted in building the bond among the Bassett family which withstood hundreds of miles and war torn battlefields.

Community

Much like the competing ideals that structured American society's understanding of manhood and masculinity during this time, a mix of principles also dictated the understanding of 'community.' Although it is not possible to ascertain every aspect of the Bassett brothers' individual communities, utilizing their correspondence assists in building the foundation for research on the subject. George, Erasmus, and Richard felt connected to not only the member of their extended family, but their local community, the members of their respective regiments, and their fraternal organization, the Freemasons.

The Freemasons were an organization centered around the ideal of brotherhood which was open only to professionals and businessmen. The ideals central to the Masons aligned with Victorian ideals; the organization acknowledged "human weakness and morality and celebrated restraint." They were a religious denomination which utilized ritual at the mode of communication between worshipers and their God. The Freemasons encouraged education, for they proclaimed that "true knowledge…originated in study" and was not found in a personal relationship with God. The fraternal meetings allowed for community between men and a subsequent "softening" of the demands of manhood.[53] Though the organization is secret in nature, the brothers' involvement in the fraternity is mentioned in some letters, and the sign of

[52] Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 11-12.; White, *The Republic for Which it Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 136-137, 157.
[53] White, *The Republic for Which it Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 169-171.

the Masons is engraved at the top of both George's and Erasmus' headstones, signifying the importance of the organization to them.

In addition to their continued involvement with the Masons, the brothers kept in contact with other branches of their community, including their family members during their enlistments; nuclear members as well as extended family such as cousins, aunts, and uncles, as well as nephews and nieces. This provides us with the knowledge that the brothers' conception of 'family' was extended. Their concept of community was also apparent in their writings. They considered two communities as part of their lives. One was their geographic notion of community, their hometown of Dundee, New York, and the inhabitants of the town. Their second was their "relational" community which was concerned with the "quality of human relationship[s]" within it; this "relational" community was comprised of their military peers and the relationships they formed among them. Letters of the brothers almost always include at least one mention of another member of their regiment. Often, the Bassetts provided updates on local friends and inquired about those from their hometown's enlisted in other regiments. Loyalty between members of a military unit were important; academic Dora Costa found that soldiers had increased ties of loyalty between comrades who were more "alike" to them in status, age, and background. This was only second to loyalty ties between comrades who were also kin.[54] Erasmus and Richard were fortunate to have maintained both of these loyalty ties; George, on the other hand, could only rely on one of them.

Victorian culture shaped the lives and beliefs of the Bassetts in many ways. Among the most important aspects of Victorian culture for the Bassetts were the importance of education, the placement of the home and family as the focal point of ones life, and the necessity of

[54] Qtd. In David W. Mcmillan and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986), 8.; Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, *Heroes and Cowards: The Social Face of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 5-6.

achieving competency. The brothers also maintained new forms of community through their engagement with their military units during their enlistments in the Civil War and their involvement with the fraternal organization the Freemasons. All aspects of the culture in which the Bassett family lived helped the brothers to develop their understandings of manhood, and therefore what was viewed as cowardly and courageous in their society.

CHAPTER TWO:

BATTLE EXPERIENCES

The outbreak of the Civil War lead to a more explicit outlining of Victorian beliefs surrounding definitions of courage, cowardice, and manliness. Many historians have researched courage, to varying degrees during this period, including Gerald F. Linderman, Reid Mitchell, and James M. McPherson. As noted earlier, fewer historians have attempted to tackle a thorough examination of cowardice. Scholars Lesley Gordon and Chris Walsh currently carry the leading scholarly works. Gordon utilizes a microcosmic perspective similar to the one employed here, while Walsh employs a more broad approach encompassing multiple wars and time periods in his work.[1] Both have helped to lay the groundwork for scholarly exploration of this important topic.

The experience of the youngest Bassett, George Wilson, is the story of a soldier thought of as courageous, while he broke orders in a manner which would typically be deemed cowardly, George managed to escape this label. A thorough examination will suggest how that may have been possible and why he may have been willing to risk committing an act which was tinged with cowardly notions.

Having enlisted first among the Bassett brothers, George eagerly participated in the drills of the 33rd NYSV. Initially enlisted as a Private, he showed leadership while fighting with the

[1] Linderman, *Embattled Courage* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*. (New York: Viking, 1988); McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).; Lesley Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014) 1-10.; Walsh, *Cowardice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)1-6.

regiment in early engagements with the enemy and for this he received his promotion to Sergeant Major. His promotion was rather quick, occurring on May 22, 1861, only eight days after his promotion to Sergeant.[1] The photograph of George, held within the Reiter Family Collection, was taken soon after his second promotion. George and the 33rd NYSV fought hard in each battle they faced. In a letter home to his parents in early April 1861, George proudly reported that his unit engaged in an attacked earlier in the week and took the position "without loosing [sic] but one man."[2] For George, the ambition he carried for power, rank, and honor pushed him to commit acts on the battlefield perhaps he would not have otherwise.

In September 1862, the 33rd NYSV was reassigned and attached to the Army of the Potomac as an active element. Initially the 33rd, along with other units of their brigade, were sent to quickly make their way to the garrison at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in order to relieve the troops there.[3] The continual explosion of artillery shells could be heard from the direction of the garrison, and the brigade was made aware that the Union forces there were surrounded. The men of the 33rd and their brigade continued to push back Confederate defenses blocking there path until they were within six miles of the garrison. The men received orders to cease fighting for the evening and awoke to a startling sight the next morning; the Union garrison had surrendered.[4]

With their mission complete, the troops went into battle again, now near Sharpsburg, Maryland. During this battle, Sergeant Major Bassett went into combat and did not return. George's courage and compassion in battle aided him well; when a fellow officer, Lieutenant Lucis Mix fell with an injury preventing him from being able to walk, George rushed to his aid.

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[1] "New York, Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, , accessed April 23, 2017.
[2] George W. Bassett to Bassett Family, 10 April 1861, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[3] Now modern day West Virginia; George Contant, *Path of Blood: The True Story of the 33rd New York Volunteers* (Savannah, NY: Seeco Printing Services, 1997), 226-228.
[4] It is unclear from the Reiter Family Collection whether George knew his brothers Erasmus and Richard were stationed here, having just been sent there themselves.; Ibid., 228.

He picked Mix up in his arms and carried him to the back of the Federal line near the Dunker Church, knowingly going against direct orders to continue forward, attacking the Confederate line. He carried Lieutenant Mix all the way to the Mumma's Field, where the 33rd's Assistant Surgeon Richard Curran had set up an aid station, before setting him down. In helping his fallen comrade, George made a choice to directly refute the orders given to his own regiment and the regiments on either side. The 20th New York, serving directly on the left of the 33rd during this battle were facing their first fight since previous acts of cowardice and had commanding officers waiting behind their ranks, watching for men making movements to retreat or moving in the opposite direction of the fighting. By carrying out a counter movement during the battle, George faced the possibility of being thought a deserter.[5]

The survivors from Company I reported that as George returned to the battlefield, a bullet fatally hit him. Some reported that a bullet struck him in the head, while others believed that it was shrapnel that tore through him. Either way, the men of Company I agreed that they had lost a "brave and beloved officer" that day, September 17th, 1862 at the Battle of Antietam. This battle proved to be the most costly of the Civil War. One member of his unit recalled after his death that George "had won the esteem of his officers and commanders, and fell universally regretted." Roughly 132,000 soldiers were engaged in the battle that fateful September day; 87,000 Union troops pitted up against 45,000 of their Confederate counterparts. George was one of over 22,000 Americans who died during this engagement, what would become known as the bloodiest day in American history, and in the end, neither side could claim a victory.[6]

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[5] Contant, *Path of Blood* (Savannah, NY: Seeco Printing Services, 1997), 236-239.
[6] It is important to note here that when George's Company is referring to him as an "officer," they are considering his rank as a non-commissioned officer. Dreese, *Torn Families* (Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2012) 119; Cleveland, *History and Directory of Yates County, New York*, 157.; "Antietam." Civil War Trust. 2017. https://www.civilwar.org/learn/civil-war/battles/antietam.

There are several reasons why George may have acted contrary to orders. He may have felt that, as he held a position of power in the regiment, he could make his own distinction of what orders should be followed down to the letter. Or, he may have been driven by empathy to help his fellow officer so that he would have a chance at survival. Further still, ambition or a drive to act courageously may have been his motive; if he saved another from the thick of battle, he could be viewed as a hero. Most likely, his motive was comprised of several different and potentially conflicting thoughts and emotions. Unfortunately, history cannot fill in these blanks for us. George's final motivations and thoughts rest with him alone.

Whether George was driven by desire for higher rank, prestige, or moral obligation, he appears to be rooted in the antebellum culture of Victorian ideals. If he carried an obligation to his fellow soldier, it was through the community and comradery that he built with his regiment. As most of the 33rd NYSV was drawn from around the Barrington, New York, area, many knew each other well, or at least knew of each other prior to their enlistment. As they worked together through training, then fought together through battle after battle, a strong kinship formed. The unit was nicknamed the "Keuka Rifles" and prided itself on the fact that its ranks derived from men focused on volunteering and doing their duty for their country. While examining the role of social networks between soldiers during the Civil War, scholars Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn found that loyalty to comrades made a soldiers increasingly more likely to stay and fight, or to sacrifice themselves for another when in the circumstances it would have been much easier to desert.[7] The 33rd New York was no exception to this strong bond of community as is evident from the words George's fellow soldiers used to describe him after he was killed at Antietam as well as from the care his comrades took to personally notify his family and return the contents of

[7] Contant, *Path of Blood* (Savannah, NY: Seeco Printing Services, 1997), 13, 28.; Costa and Kahn, *Heroes and Cowards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) xix, 5-6.

his pockets, artifacts still held in the Reiter Family Collection [pictured below in Figures 1 and 2].

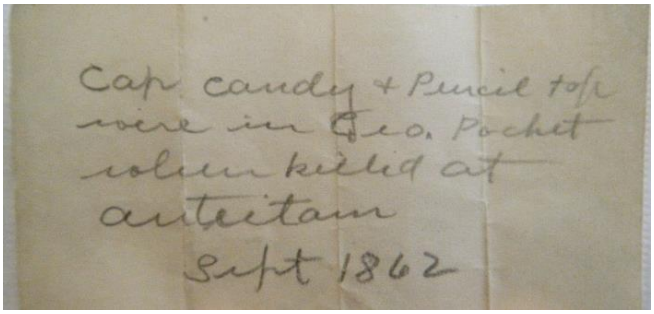

Figure 7: Note describing contents of George's pockets upon death.

Figure 8. Contents of George's pockets upon his death.

Looking through another perspective, George also clearly carried ambition for rank and the prestige associated with command. As previously discussed, his choice of occupation - lawyer- exemplifies the importance he placed on social "rank." It makes sense that his ambition would carry over from his personal life into his life as a Union soldier and his role as an officer. George's relatively quick promotion to Sergeant Major highlights this desire and perhaps, had he lived longer, he would have continued to move up the military ranks.

In a twist of fate, George's brothers Erasmus and Richard were being held as prisoners of war a mere thirty miles away, camped near Frederick, Maryland, during his fateful encounter

with death. Shortly after learning of his death, in a letter home, Erasmus expressed the horror of hearing the battle raging so close by, knowing that George's brigade was in the area, and later learning that George had fallen during the battle. About the same time, Richard took the loss especially hard, writing that his feelings of helplessness at being a prisoner of war intensified upon learning the news of his brother's death. He exclaimed, "When I think of [George] & the painful reflection that we are prisoners of war: as if I were chained hand & foot & cannot avenge his death it makes it doubly painful, but I feel confident that there is a day of retribution not far distant."[8] Richard's statement was more prescient than he could have realized. Richard's and the 126th's day for retribution was coming, but little did they know the devastating pain and sorrow this day would also bring, and the torment they would endure while waiting for it.

The Bassett family on the Union home front suffered George's loss along with Erasmus and Richard. George's eldest biological brother Asem "Ace" Bassett, residing in Cleveland, wrote to his parents after learning of George's death:

> Thought I would penn a few lines to to [sic] the place that filles [sic] a large space in memory Home the Home of my youth that has hardly seen sorrow since I was old enough to realize until the rude hand of War has laid one low in the Grave and such a War it is to horrid to think of… what will become of the country if this War is not ended soon I sometimes think that American Independance will be among the things that wer unless there is a more vigorous policy pursued. enough of this.

Ace grappled with understanding the death of his brother, George, and the larger picture of the war as a whole. He further inquired, "I want you to save me some little thing that belonged to George that I may have something he useto call his own no matter what." Asem is only one example. The boys' mother, Jemima Mann, was described by her children as "down-hearted." Erasmus spoke to this writing, "I am sorry to hear that mother is so…although I think she has

[8] Dreese, *Torn Families*, 118-19.; Erasmus Bassett to the Bassett Family, unknown, Erasmus Bassett Papers, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

sufficient cause."[9] The pain the family endured from losing a son and brother was universally shared and can only be understood as unimaginable.

Members of Company I returned George's body and personal effects to his home in Dundee to the members of the Bassett family. The family buried him in Hillside Cemetery, a local Methodist cemetery. His body has remained enshrined there, honored by ancestors and extended relatives of the Bassett family. Many years after George's death, in April 1956, a relative, Robert Trenchard, applied for the flat granite headstone, a marker which, still resides on George's gravesite. Tenchard applied for this marker through a United States Government's program which provided markers for previous war veterans; the program ran from roughly the 1950s to 1970s.[10] George's grave is marked by this headstone and another presumably put there by members of his family, as his brother Erasmus' plot maintains an identical marker.

Figure 9. George Bassett flat granite government headstone.

[9] Asem L. Bassett to Bassett Family, 9 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 19 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

[10] There are 106 total Civil War Veterans buried in Hillside Cemetery; See Appendix D; Dianne Thomas, "Hillside Cemetery Index." Hillside Cemetery Index. 2015. http://www.newyorkroots.org/yates/ceme/hillsideindex.htm.; Trenchard, "Application for Headstone of CW veteran currently unmarked." Ancestry.

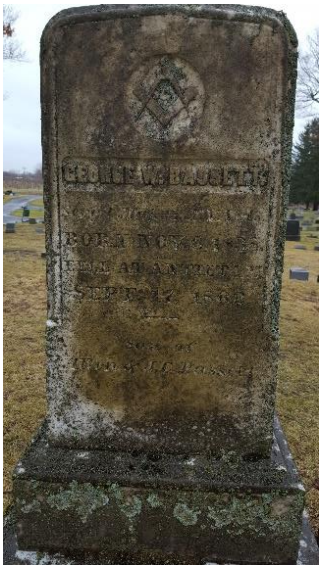

Figure 10. George Bassett family headstone.

Unlike the experience of their brother George, Erasmus and Richard faced an uphill battle after their first engagement. Branded cowards for their conduct at Harper's Ferry, Erasmus, Richard and the 126th New York spent the rest of their enlistments fighting back against the label of the "Harper's Ferry Cowards."[11] Their story outlines soldiers' struggle to escape an initial label of cowardice for a more favorable one, or at the very least, a label of less desperation.

Leading up to Harper's Ferry, the 126th New York regiment mustered in during the late summer of 1862, answering President Abraham Lincoln's call for "300,000 additional volunteers." These regiments were new troops, more commonly referred to as green troops. They received orders to march down to Harper's Ferry, Virginia, to help defend the Union position located at the garrison there.[12] These new regiments headed to battle, just three short weeks after their mustering in, and had not yet received proper training. Their lack of battle training and

[11] R. L. Murray, *The Redemption of the "Harper's Ferry Cowards": The story of the 111th and 126th New York Volunteers at Gettysburg*. (Wolcott: Benedum Books, 1994).
[12] Harper's Ferry is located in modern day West Virginia.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine* (1992) 51.

experience would affect them greatly during and after their regiment's encounter with the Confederate Army at Harper's Ferry.

Union forces at the town of Harper's Ferry experienced distress prior to the green troops' arrival. Because of a string of recent victories, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was willing to take a gamble and launch an attack into the North, through the Union state of Maryland. The federal garrison at Harper's Ferry stood in his way and he was determined to take the town and confiscate the Union weaponry, effectively disabling the stronghold.

With Union forces stretched thin around the garrison, the 111th and 125th NY were called to hold positions in the lower area of the town. The 126th however, received orders to help secure an area called Maryland Heights. The Heights resided on the northern bank of the Potomac River, across from the town and Union garrison. The regiment was informed that maintaining the position at the Heights was imperative to Union success. The Heights consisted of the highest ground above the city and was the only remaining area preventing the attacking Confederate forces from surrounding the town and forcing a Union surrender. This critical situation was the backdrop for Erasmus', Richard's, and the 126th NYSV's battle engagement.

Arriving atop the hill, the 126th were placed on the left most flank of the Union line. Very few regiments were positioned above the garrison in an effort to hold the heights and even when the brigade of New Yorkers was brought in, only the 126th was sent up to Maryland Heights to help hold this crucial position. Barely settled into formation, the 126th clashed in a brief engagement with Confederate Major General Lafayette McLaws' division, holding off all attempts at Confederate advancement. Shortly after the fighting began, the darkness of night enveloped the Heights causing the fighting to cease. The regiment had a brief moment to catch their breath after repelling the Confederate advancement but would quickly realize that any sense

of victory they may have felt was far from yet earned. The 126th had yet to see what true battle was like and the troops of McLaw's unit would not let this go without using it to their advantage.[13]

Though the battle had ceased, the Union and Confederate lines were within speaking distance of one another, neither giving ground for fear of losing position to the other. Confederate Brigadier Generals Barksdale and Kershaw encouraged their men to play to the weakness of the "raw" New York troops. For the entire evening of September 12, the inexperienced New York troops were forced to listen to the Southern soldiers talking about what all they were going to do to them the next morning. This unnerving taunting and discomfort over their lack of true battle experience created an overwhelming feeling of discouragement amongst the men.[14]

When the next morning came, the 126th faced its first fight in a full-fledged engagement. Early in this battle for the Heights, the regiment experienced a devastating loss: their commander, Colonel Eliakim Sherrill, was seriously injured. Not only a well-loved and respected commanding officer, Sherril was also a widely esteemed member of the local community in New York. He served as a rallying force, working to build the confidence of the men around him. As the 126th battled on the heights, several of his men recall him continually cheering them on during the battle. When it grew difficult for them to see through the smoke of the artillery and musket fire, Sherrill even climbed atop a log breastwork in an attempt to better examine the situation and direct his men. Now rising above the smoke a more visible target to the enemy, Sherrill was shot. A bullet tore through both of his cheeks, knocking out some of his teeth and mangling his tongue. This injury left Sherrill unable to speak, and therefore to

[13] Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 51-54.
[14] Ibid., 53-55.

command, and he was removed from the battlefield quickly for medical attention. Colonel Sherrill's loss was a great blow to the morale and confidence of the New Yorkers. With Sherril taken to the rear for medical attention, no longer able to guide them, many men recalled that panic began to spread throughout the ranks creating the "utmost confusion."[15]

Amidst the ensuing sense of confusion between the men of the 126th the New Yorkers continued to hold fast to their lines. McLaws' forces quickly turned the tide however, by continuing to execute a flanking maneuver making the New York regiment susceptible to attack from the front and the left. As Confederate bullets poured into the 126th from both sides, the combination of a missing commander, the stress from the unit's first engagement, and the increasing rate of fire from multiple directions deepened the confusion amongst their ranks. Before long, the New Yorkers' lines began to waver; many were unsure of how to counter the attack and who should be giving the order to do so. Confusion deepened as the men questioned whether they had received an order to retreat. This confusion further broke down the ranks, almost entirely dissolving them. With the collapse of the 126th, the largest regiment defending the location on the heights, Union defenses began to fracture and were ultimately forced to retreat.[16]

Soon after the Federal retreat from the Heights, Confederate forces effectively surrounded the town and all the Union units in it. When the garrison surrendered the next morning, the Confederates captured roughly 12,000 federal soldiers, seventy-three artillery pieces, and various other resources. The 126th New York suffered fifty-five casualties during the

[15] Ibid., 54-55.
[16] Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 54.

battle, and in-part because of their 'green status,' they became an easy scapegoat for the Harper's Ferry failure.[17]

It was during their time as POWs that Erasmus and Richard learned of George's death during the Battle of Antietam; both experienced feelings of internal anguish over the loss, coupled with their confinement as prisoners of war. Erasmus and Richard were fortunate to have been taken captive as prisoners of war early in the Civil War, as the parole-exchange system which allowed captured soldiers to be released, with a surrender of arms, back to their respective military and be held in a parole camp until they were effectively "exchanged" with corresponding enemy forces, remained in effect during their captivity.[18]

Upon surrendering their arms, the Union forces were paroled and released to Union custody swearing not to take up arms again until a trade for them came through.[19] The regiment then travelled to Camp Douglas, a prisoner of war, parole, and training camp, located in Chicago. The New Yorkers arrived there around September 27, 1862, roughly one month after their mustering in. Unfortunately, the hardships for the 126th had only just begun.

After the devastating defeat at the Battle of Harper's Ferry, the United States military launched an investigation into the circumstances of the surrender. These circumstances and the sheer size of the surrender greatly embarrassed the Federal Government, for the Union Army's failure during the battle appeared to show the government's inability to maintain control of territory it already held. These struggles coupled with public outcry over the life-loss at the

[17] 'Green' is used here in reference to the fact that the regiment was new to combat. Ibid., 55.
[18] Erasmus and Richard were lucky in their timing of their capture. Later in the war, General Ulysses S. Grant discontinues the parole-exchange system to cut off its benefit to the Confederacy (man-power). Many Union soldiers taken prisoner after the removal of this system suffered horrible fates in Confederate Prisoner of War camps.; Dreese, *Torn Families: Death and Kinship at the Battle of Gettysburg*, 119.
[19] "Paroled" refers to the release from Confederate custody; during this time however, soldiers transferred to custody of Union troops and served out their sentence as parolees within a federal parole or Prisoner of War camp. Release came with a 'trade' of equal Confederate to Union troops, who were released from custody and reinstated into active duty.

battles of Shiloh and then Antietam created an even larger problem for President Abraham Lincoln. The timing of the fall of the federal garrison at Harper's Ferry came during this period when it only deepened the humiliation for Lincoln and the government as they continued to wage the fight against the Confederate States, and because of this, the investigation they launched into the surrender sought harsh repercussions for those to blame for the blunder.[20] As the Federal government continued their fight against the Confederacy, the 1860s American climate carried thriving undercurrents of other Victorian ideals which fed a growing discussion of what determined cowardice and courage as well as what "made" a man.

The 126th NY regiment not only suffered from the humiliation of this surrender at the Battle of Harper's Ferry, but from the labeling and open taunting of them as the "Harper's Ferry Cowards" in the over nine-month period between their capture and their next active battle engagement. Similar statements questioned the manhood of the regiment because of their actions during the battle. This ridicule only furthered their humiliation. The military investigation of the surrender opens the door into an example of the country openly labeling Union soldiers as "cowards" and placing the burden of blame for the loss of the garrison on them. During the commission's investigation, the board examined the actions of individual commanders and whole regiments alike. Rumors swirled around cities on the Union Homefront as the commission gathered their information and began to publish their findings. A quote from the commission's statement, reprinted in *The New York Times*, outlines the accusations of cowardice directed towards the 126th New York State Regiment.

[20] "Lincoln's Generals," National Museum of American History, September 25, 2013, , accessed June 04, 2018, http://americanhistory.si.edu/lincoln/lincolns-generals.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 55-56.

November 12, 1862

> All but two companies…broke and fled in utter confusion. Men and most of the officers fled together, no effort being made to rally the regiment. The evidence… confirms… that Harper's Ferry, as well as Maryland Heights, was prematurely surrendered. The garrison shoul!d have been satisfied that relief, however long delayed, would come at last, and that a thousand men killed in Harper's Ferry would have made a small loss had the post been saved, and probably saved two thousand at Antietam.[21]

The commission's report was originally published in *The Tribune* and was then reprinted in *The New York Times*.

Newspapers across the country printed accusations, assumptions, and stories about the regiment and what "really" happened at Harper's Ferry, publicly shaming the 126th NYSV. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* maintained a leading headline exclaiming the "Poltroonery of 126th New York."[22] Other publications from cities as far east as Bangor, Maine, Boston, Massachusetts, and Middletown, Connecticut, and as far west as San Francisco, California, and Portland, Oregon, reported on the proceedings of the surrender and the failure of the federal units there. *The Daily Cleveland Herald* kept up even more readily with the ongoing proceedings, reporting regularly of the failure of commanding officers and the New York Regiment, but also of the bravery of the 32nd and 87th Ohio units. In a particularly damning article, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* unleashed its wrath on several Union commanders at the surrender of Harper's Ferry, but in particular Colonel Dixon Stansbury Miles. The reporter of the *Inquirer* recalled a principle they noted of "vast importance" which had been sorely overlooked thus far in the war;

> It is this: - There are times and contingencies when a post, a garrison, a commander must sacrifice himself for the success of a campaign ; when the "business" of a soldier is literally… "to die;" and the true soldier discerning the necessity, pays the noblest tribute

[21] Murray, *The Redemption of the "Harper's Ferry Cowards"* (Wolcott: Benedum Books, 1994).; "The Surrender of Harper's Ferry: Report of the Military Commission." *The New York Times* (New York), November 12, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[22] "The Harper's Ferry Surrender." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Pennsylvania), November 11, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

> to patriotism and to his profession, by gathering up his energies and devoting himself to death… Such a time, such a contingency had come to Harper's Ferry, and it was not met.

While this article was directed at a particular commanding officer, who did, in fact, die of his wounds following the battle, a fact seemingly overlooked by the *Inquirer*, the article's general sentiment applied to all those blamed for the surrender of the Union garrison. While Colonel Miles' reputation was in an even more precarious situation because of previous battle behavior, the reputations of other officers and soldiers involved, including the 126th NYSV can be understood as being given or retracted of value based on their actions during the Battle of Harper's Ferry.[23]

The pervasiveness of this military investigation of the surrender at Harper's Ferry and general interest and discussion regarding the topic can be noted from the reprinting of the commission's report, but also can be inferred from the fact that the 126th New York Regiment published a personal defense in *The Chicago Times* the day before the military commission's report became public. The defense itself is intriguing. Written by the line officers of the regiment in response to the preliminary findings of the military commission, twenty men of the 126th including eldest Bassett brother, Richard, were willing to directly confront the accusations they faced in the papers and amongst their peers.

Their statement in part read:

> In several communications respecting the surrender of Harper's Ferry, the One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Regiment of New York Volunteers has been stigmatized as having acted in a shameful manner…

[23] "Military Blunders." *The Daily Cleveland Herald* (Ohio), November 12, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.; "Harper's Ferry Surrender." *The Daily Cleveland Herald* (Ohio), November 22, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.; "Harper's Ferry Surrender." *The Daily Cleveland Herald* (Ohio), November 23, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.; "So Much of General Order No. 115." *The Daily Cleveland Herald* (Ohio), November 25, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.; "The Surrender of Harper's Ferry – Was it Necessary?" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 22, 1862.; Colonel Miles was Court Martialed for intoxication while in battle after the First Battle at Bull Run (also referred to as Manassas), July 21, 1861.; "The Battle of First Manassas (First Bull Run)," National Parks Service, April 10, 2015, accessed April 07, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/mana/learn/historyculture/first-manassas.htm.

> A regard for our own reputation and the reputation of the men we command demands that we shall be no longer silent under imputations equally injurious and unfounded. Therefore we, all the line officers of the One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Regiment, now living, who were present at the engagement on Maryland Heights, do declare, upon our honor, as gentlemen and soldiers, that the following statements are true:
>
> …That after the wounding of Col. Sherrill, no field officer or staff officer of our regiment was present, to our knowledge, that orders of the most contradictory character constantly followed one another; and that, after the fall of our Colonel, no field officers of any regiment were seen by any one of us until we had fallen back from the breastworks at least three-quarters of a mile.
>
> That… Individuals may have fled previously, but neither the regiment, nor any company of it, left the breastworks until the Thirty-second Ohio and the Garibaldi Guard had, in obedience to commands, retired from those defences [sic].
>
> That in the engagement on Maryland Heights the One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Regiment lost more men in killed and wounded than all other regiments put together.
>
> To the truth of the above statement we are willing to bear witness anywhere and everywhere, however much the conduct of the regiment may have been misrepresented by officers who ran early from the battle and succeeded in first reaching the reporters, or by officers interested in covering their want of courage or capacity by laying our charge the blame of a defense badly planned and badly maintained. All we ask of our countrymen is justice; that having done as much, and suffered more than any other regiment at Harper's Ferry, we should not bear the odium of a result for which we are not responsible.

Their response echoes the values of Victorian manhood prevalent in the period; calling out those who are lacking courage and using the misfortune of the 126th New York to their advantage, in order to prove their own courageousness, or at the very least, their lack of cowardliness. While the defense was reprinted in other newspapers across the nation such as *The New York Times*, it does not appear as prevalently as the commission report, suggesting that it may have been overshadowed by the release of the commission's report the following day.[24]

[24] This is derived from the author's extensive utilization of American historical newspaper databases in which a search for the defense of the 126th was not found to be republished in many locations throughout the country; this is contrary to the prominence with which the military commission's report was reprinted in like newspaper outlets.; "The Surrender of Harper's Ferry: The One Hundred and Twenty-Sixth New-York Defending Itself." *The New York Times*, November 23, 1862.

After their capture and parole, the 126th New York made their way to Chicago. Though Erasmus and Richard were fortunate to be parolees under the care of their own government, soldiers of their unit described their living conditions during their stay at Camp Douglas as "filthy," at best. One man exclaimed that it was a "scene of unexpected horrors." Others agreed that the conditions were nothing short of demoralizing. The area, recently vacated by exchanged Confederate soldiers, was void "of everything but filth, rats and vermin."[25] The 126th NYSV called this deplorable location home for two straight months.

During their stay at Camp Douglas, the military investigation sought not only to find a cause, but to place blame on the parties responsible for the surrender. Now, the 126th New York would experience even further demoralization through the scrutinizing of their every action on a public stage. The performance of the troops in battle and whether or not they showed bravery and courage, was the focus of the investigation. The circumstances surrounding the battle at Harper's Ferry did not receive adequate examination, however. The critical nature of the position in which they were placed, the lack of training of the new troops, and the loss of one of their strongest commanders were effectively glossed over in the report and perhaps not of much consideration to the commission.

Every man in the brigade engaged at Harper's Ferry gave testimony to the military commission. While providing their statements, Union veterans such as the 39th NYSV and other green troops alike picked apart every action of the 126th Infantry, presumably taking out their anger and mutual humiliation on them and so as to avoid a cowardly label themselves; or to gain a lesser one. The statements of these other regiments effectively scapegoated the 126th New York, most likely in order to protect themselves and deflect as much blame and shame as possible. It disheartened the 126th to hear the testimony of the other regiments, especially their

[25] Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 55.

fellow New Yorkers. Several of their comrades in the 111th NY and 125th NY accused the 126th of being "worthless," calling them names like "dirty scoundrels." Many recalled exaggerated tales of the 126th's cowardice in battle, claiming that the men hid behind trees and in bushes to avoid engaging in the battle. To make matters worse, numerous newspapers across the country printed the testimony and verbatim coverage of the military investigation preventing the men from escaping the libel.[26]

The regiment also suffered the humiliation from being labeled and taunted as the "Harper's Ferry Cowards." Similar statements made by other military units questioned the manhood of the regiment because of their actions during the battle. This ridicule only furthered their humiliation. The green troops were offered little, if any, shielding from the continual slander and could not escape the stigmatization. The final report of the military investigation commission in part read, "[T]he commission calls attention to the disgraceful behavior…of the One Hundred and twenty-sixth New York Infantry." Historian Eric Campbell puts it well expressing that the "events of their first month of military duty were a sobering and disheartening experience."[27]

During this experience, Erasmus and Richard encountered additional pressures from home to leave the regiment. It is unclear if the pressures arose solely from the intense scrutiny the 126th Infantry was under or if the death of brother George and its effect on the family played an even more significant role. Most likely, both were factors. As noted in the introduction, Erasmus responded to these pleas to request a discharge and return home with an eloquent

[26] Willson, *Disaster, struggle, triumph*, 70-71.
[27] Murray, *The Redemption of the "Harper's Ferry Cowards"* (Wolcott: Benedum Books, 1994).; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 55, 57.

refusal; even after the loss of his brother George, Erasmus still sought the honor of war, retribution for the loss of George, and atonement for his regiment.[28]

Their experiences as prisoners of war tore at the morale of the 126th New York. Erasmus, Richard, and the other men of the regiment came in to the war exhibiting a strong sense of duty to their country and the federal government. Proclamations of "duty" appear fairly frequently in the early letters of the Bassett brothers. They typically signed their letters home, "Your Dutiful Son" or dutiful brother.[29] Assumedly, the poor treatment of the regiment by the military commission and the government tarnished the initial sense of duty the brothers had to the government. The 126th understood that one of the only ways to redeem themselves in the eyes of their country involved engagement in battle.

The brothers also spoke of the duties of a soldier, particularly in camp life. Fulfilling the duties of a good soldier in battle, however, became a central focus for the regiment as they awaited their release from Camp Douglas. The duties of being a good soldier included exemplifying bravery and courage, discipline, and loyalty in the face of battle, devotion to one's country, and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the cause. On November 19, 1862, news of the swap and release of the 126th came through to the regiment at Camp Douglas. They soon received and followed order to make their way to Washington D.C. and by the beginning of December carried a renewed sense of duty. Their release offered them a second chance. Though they started again from the "bottom," a new wave of enthusiasm swept through them. As regimental historian and writer Arabella Willson puts it, "They were going to the front; to fight

[28] Erasmus' refusal is utilized in the introduction to this work.; Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 19 November 1862, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.
[29] Bassett, Erasmus E. Papers. Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

the enemies of their country' to redeem their names from disgrace."[30] The sustaining motivation of the 126th, Erasmus, and Richard, revolved around this increased sense of duty. This overwhelming sense of obligation came from the intensely seeded desire to prove themselves because of intense scrutiny and the repeated public humiliation the regiment suffered.

The experiences of Bassett brothers George, Erasmus and Richard, parallel one another. While George's battle experiences with the 33rd New York earned him a courageous label from the leadership his unit felt he displayed, he made the conscious decision to go against orders to help a fellow officer when he is shot and wounded. Though the motivation behind George's desire to help his friend can only be speculated, his choice to violate his regiment's orders to carry out a frontal assault on Confederate forces put him in the position where he is killed. However, even with this disregard for his unit's orders, George's reputation as a brave soldier was not questioned or revoked upon his death. The label his brothers, Erasmus and Richard received proved harder to remove. Given little voice in the military investigation of the surrender at Harper's Ferry, the Bassett brothers and the 126th New York were pinpointed as the culprits which caused the fall. During their time in Camp Douglas, the regiment had ample time to drill and to anxiously await their next shot at combat; a chance they hoped would come quickly, and one in which they aspired to redeem their tarnished reputations.

[30] Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*; Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2008); Linderman, *Embattled Courage* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Willson, *Disaster, struggle, triumph*, 121, 124, 130.

CHAPTER THREE:

A FIGHT FOR REDEMPTION

After facing the intense scrutiny of the military investigation and the seemingly endless newspaper publication's continued humiliation, the brothers were motivated to get back into the thick of battle for more than one reason. They sought a new chance to utilize and show off the training and skills they had learned during their internment at Camp Douglas. They also desired redemption; redemption through the violence of battle was something rather cathartic for soldiers during the Civil War. Erasmus spoke to this desire to carry out violence in a letter home exclaiming, "[We] all have full confidence that [we] can whip the rebs easy enough if we get them." The use of violence in this way is a concept explored in detail by Amy Greenberg in her discussion of the concept of martial manhood that existed in antebellum America. It may have been a way for the soldiers to take their fates "into their own hands," so to speak. The Victorian ideals of the era had built up a belief that acts carried out to regain manhood must be valiant and even somewhat reckless. Historian Chris Walsh developed a theory on this understanding of recklessness which is applicable here in what can be termed reactionary recklessness.[1] The 126th NYSV is a tremendous example of a unit thriving off of their understanding of manhood through the assertion of violence, their exemplification of loyalty, and through the carrying out acts of manhood recklessly rather than face the potential of failing to reclaim this manhood.

[1] Erasmus E. Bassett to Bassett Family, 16 June 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 11-12.; Walsh, *Cowardice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 4-6.

Coming off two stationary months of nothing but running drills and awaiting release, brothers Erasmus and Richard Bassett, along with their regiment, the 126th New York, were "chomping at the bit" for a chance to restore their reputations in battle. For Erasmus and Richard this quest for redemption was fueled with an additional desire to gain vengeance for the death of their younger brother George. What awaited the brothers and their New York unit was not at all what they had expected. They were doomed to spend a long, bitter winter encamped around the Federal capital.

The regiment camped near Union Mills and Centreville, Virginia, while on guard duty in Washington D.C.. Brigadier General Alexander Hays received command of the Harper's Ferry Brigade during their winter encampment there. He frequently carried out drills and disciplined the men, which would prove crucial for future engagements. With new training and command, the battle the 126th had long dreamed of awaited them in the first days of July 1863 in Gettysburg. Union forces, excluding Hay's brigade which included the 126th, received directives to head to Gettysburg at the end of June. As brigade after brigade of Union troops marched past the 126th NY en-route to Pennsylvania, the regiment's eagerness heightened. Day after day, Erasmus recorded in his daily pocket diary phrases such as "See the whole army," "think of moving," "have orders to hold ourselves ready," and finally he recorded "Get marching orders," "prepare for marching," and on June 25, "commence march at 3 P.M."[1]

Amongst this eagerness, the men also experienced continued beratement as the passing units called them "band-box and white-gloved" soldiers. For eight months, the men of the 126th NY were forced to do nothing but wait, only hearing news of battle from the press. At last on the 24th of June, the Harper's Ferry Brigade received their marching orders. The brigade spent the five days following marching on the tails of the Second Corps, newly under the command of

[1] Erasmus E. Bassett, June 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.

Major General Winfield Scott Hancock; Crossing the Potomac, at Edwards' Ferry, continuing on through heavy rain and mud. Soon after, they shifted north, passing near Frederick, Maryland, and culminated their journey in Uniontown late on the eve on July 1.[2]

The following morning brought hope of battle to the 126th, but while the Second Corps was given marching orders, the Third Brigade, including the New York regiment, was singled out and ordered back to "guard quarter-master's stores." Presumably disheartened at the turnaround, the soldiers had marched some leagues away before there was a commotion among the federal aides, and they were summoned back to the ranks of the Second Corps, to head for the front lines. Marching at quick step, the regiment was confronted with the increasing sights and sounds of the impending battle. As they grew closer and closer to the town, they could hear "heavy cannonading," and rumors swirled through the ranks of the fighting awaiting the men ahead. The corps began to pass stragglers from the field, making their way to the rear of the Union troops. The unit also passed the ambulance which contained the body of slain Union commanding officer Major General John Reynolds, killed early on the first day of battle at Gettysburg. With the sight of blood covering the stretchers in the ambulance, one member of the 3rd Brigade wrote that the unit was "…awakened [with] a sense of the bloody work ahead."[3]

The following morning proved to be the true test of the will of the Harper's Ferry Brigade. As they were the last unit of the Second Corps to arrive on the battlefield after their countermarch of the day prior, the 3rd Brigade was placed in reserve. While the battle raged, they nervously waited, perched in their designated reserve position for five, then seven, and what soon became almost eleven straight hours. Finally, the regiment was given instruction to reposition, moving in to fill a gap at a location called Plum Run on the center left of the Union

[2] Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine,* 58-63.
[3] Erasmus E. Bassett, June 1863, Reiter Family Private Collection. Charlotte, North Carolina.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine,* 59-60.

line. Here they waited even longer, for orders to engage, watching the battle continue to rage on around them. Smoke from artillery fire and musket shot darkened the air. The smoke sunk down into the low grounds around the small stream. The regiment could hear enemy troops approaching, but the visibility in front of them was reduced immensely by the smoke. As it cleared, Richard described the area as a small ravine "covered with a thick growth of trees and bushes, and [a] hill on the other side."[4]

As fate would have it, the approaching Confederate troops were none other than Barksdale's Brigade of Mississippians, still under the command of Major General Lafayette McLaws, the same brigade the 126th had fought at the Battle of Harper's Ferry ten months prior. This allowed the New York regiment a way to directly atone for their past conduct. Their orders were to directly engage with Barksdale's unit; to attack their line, pressuring it backwards until they reached a Federal artillery stronghold initially held by remnants of the Third Corps and Artillery Reserve Batteries, which had been overrun by the rebel forces.[5]

As the men of the brigade advanced, they struggled to see the attacking Confederates clearly; members of the Third Corps continued to retreat through the New York brigade lines as they worked their way forward. As they rapidly advanced, the 126th came face to face with Barksdale's men. Many of the New Yorkers recalled a courage fueled fury swept over them and they bellowed above the roar of musketry, "Remember Harper's Ferry!" One veteran recalled, "The venom of that old taunt, 'Harper's Ferry cowards!' which had so long burned in the veins of this noble Regiment, now excited them to fury." Another expressed that during this battle, "everyone was determined that…their records should be clear." Richard recalled that, "We drew up in a line of battle and charged across the ravine…under a terrific fire of grape, canister, and

[4] Dreese, *Torn Families*, 120.
[5] Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 54-56, 65.

shell, driving the rebels off [the hill] on the point of the bayonet…our comrades falling thick and fast around us," not failing to note the great loss of life the unit endured during the battle.[6]

It was here near Plum Run, as the smoke began to clear and the brigade followed orders to charge forward, that bullets struck Erasmus twice, once through the leg, and then fatally through the heart. Richard recollected, "When we started on the charge, I occasionally glanced my eyes toward the colors, but while we were crossing the ravine, I noticed they faltered and finally fell… I then knew that my dear brother had fallen." Having been given a directive to continue a forward assault, Richard struggled as he passed up wounded comrades seeking aid. With the rest of the unit, he pressed on, rather than face the possibility of again being labeled a coward.

The New York brigade accomplished their objective, retaking and claiming the location of federal artillery. However, even with this task completed, the unit continued pursuing Barksdale's Rebel forces, going beyond their orders. Continual cries of "Harper's Ferry" and "Remember Harper's Ferry" echoed among the men as they charged on. The Federal brigade had pursed Barksdale's unit one hundred yards behind the Confederate line before they stopped to regroup and obtain their next order.[7] While the actions of the unit may seem courageous, they align well with historian Chris Walsh's theory of recklessness.

Walsh's theory understands the actions of some soldiers as being reckless in order to avoid, at all costs, to be again labeled a coward. Walsh theorized that "the very idea of cowardice is one of [their] victimizers," pushing the men at an even more unbelievable pace to prove they were not, or were no longer, cowards. While the regiment followed the orders given to them by their commanding officer Brigadier General Hays, they surpassed their required duty and

[6] Ibid., 67-68.; Dreese, *Torn Families*, 120.
[7] Ibid., 120.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine,* 72-73.

continued to pursue the Rebel forces far beyond their required point of objective. These men went far above and beyond their required duties in a way which succeeds in the grand scheme of the battle, helping to relieve a struggling Union line, but backfires and perhaps produces more casualties for their individual regiment than was necessary in the battle. The 126th lost most of its commanding officers and was being run solely by unit captains by the end of the second day of battle. The New York brigade suffered the second highest casualty rate of the Second Corps, all within their first "true" test of battle.[8]

With quiet enveloping the battlefield as the fighting ceased, the realities of the battle horrors began to sink in. Some of the men were overwhelmed with grief and were at a loss for words, much like the eldest Bassett brother described himself upon finding the body of his brother and other friends on the battlefield. Other men found the ghastly scenes before them so sickening, they wrote about them to relieve the discomfort. One fellow comrade wrote:

> No words can depict the ghastly picture. The track of the great charge was marked by bodies of men in all possible positions, wounded, bleeding, dying and dead. Near the line where the final struggle occurred, the men lay in heaps, the wounded wriggling and groaning under the weight of the dead among whom they were entangled. In my weak exhausted condition I could not long endure the ghastly spectacle. I found my head reeling, the tears flowing and my stomach sick at the sight.[9]

These regimental losses continued to impact the men after the Union victory at Gettysburg.

It was late that evening, after combat had ceased, when Richard went out in search of his brother's remains. Around midnight, he found his brother's body, and with a heavy heart collected his personal effects and marked a temporary grave. A daily diary was included among Erasmus' personal effects. His father had given it to him for Christmas the year prior. Richard opened the diary to the last page his brother had written on, and underneath his brother's notes

[8] Walsh, *Cowardice*. 9-11.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part II." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 108-109.
[9] Qtd in Ibid., 108.

for the morning of July 2, he wrote, "12 O clock at night I find my Brother Erasmus lying dead where I took this from his pocket: RA Bassett" (Figure 11). After the death of his brother

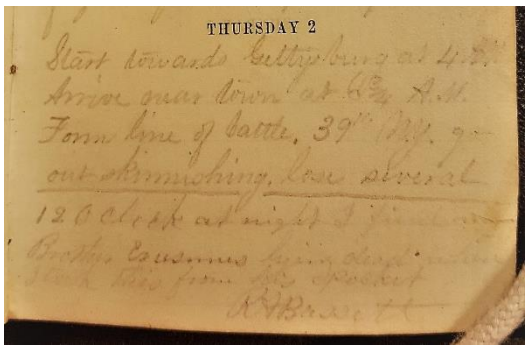

Figure 11. Note found in Erasmus Bassett's pocket after his death.

George nearly a year prior, Richard explicitly addressed the emotional trauma he experienced from losing him. When Richard wrote to his wife after his first day of Battle at Gettysburg, he expressed an inability to form words in an attempt to describe the subsequent loss of his brother Erasmus. He wrote enough to explain the location of the temporary grave he had placed Erasmus' body in and how the family should locate it and closed out his letter stating emotionally, "I thought of George and then to think of Rapsy falling so near him, I could not help weeping."[10]

Erasmus' body was collected by members of his family some time after the battle. He was laid to rest in the same cemetery as his brother George, Hillside Cemetery, a small Methodist plot, in Dundee, New York. As was the case with his brother George's plot, in April 1956, a relative, Robert Trenchard, applied for the flat granite headstone (Figure 12) to mark Erasmus' graves. As of my last visit in spring 2017, this marker as well as a raised headstone

[10] Erasmus Bassett, July 2, 1863, Diary. Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections. Ithaca, New York.; Dreese, *Torn Families,* 120.

(Figure 13) identical to that on brother George's plot remains taken care of by Bassett relations; both are pictured below.[11]

Figure 12. Erasmus Bassett flat granite government headstone.

Figure 13. Erasmus Bassett family headstone.

During the Battle of Gettysburg, the regiment was determined to fulfill its responsibility as dutiful, good soldiers. They sought to expunge the black mark left on them after the Battle of Harper's Ferry and display a level of unquestionable discipline, loyalty, and courage. Erasmus

[11] Trenchard, "Application for Headstone of CW veteran currently unmarked." Ancestry.

received a promotion to full Color Sergeant just before the Battle of Gettysburg. This meant that he carried the regimental flag, or "colors," as the regiment marched into battle. Along with highly ranked officers, Color Sergeants were among some of the most common targets on the field for sharpshooters and infantry alike. The men who manned the colors fulfilled an important job by providing a constant visual of the regiment's position in battle. This helped to orient the men of each unit as they fought.[12] Holding the colors, therefore, made a soldier a quick target for enemy soldiers. By unwaveringly accepting a position as a Color Sergeant before the Battle of Gettysburg, Erasmus knew that he placed himself in an elevated position of danger. His acceptance highlights his readiness to sacrifice himself for his country.

Richard's actions during the battle also illustrate his determination to prove his worth and his manhood as a soldier of the Union Army. First, he experienced the pains of his men being shot down all around him as they marched on the enemy. He wrote that they were "…appealing to [him] for help," but that he could only try to give them courage, request they move to the back of the line for assistance, and continue carrying out his orders. Richard stuck to this, even when a bullet struck one of his closest friends from home. In a letter home post-battle, he recalled that this friend pleaded with him for assistance. Dutifully following orders, Richard carried on with a heavy heart, only later to discover the lifeless body of his friend who had died of his wounds sometime during the battle. After the encounter, Richard could not escape the immense anguish he felt over the deaths of his friend and others in his unit, writing "many fell in the charge through the woods… the boys were falling all around me… but I could only give them words of encouragement, and charge on."[13]

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[12] Dreese, *Torn Families*, 120.
[13] Ibid., 72, 119.; Willson, *Disaster, struggle, triumph*, 177-178.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part II." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 69.

In addition to the inner turmoil arisen by his dedication to discipline in battle and his inability to stop and assist his fellow comrades, Richard also fought to prove his manhood when a bullet struck down his brother Erasmus. In a letter home, Richard recalled seeing the colors fall, presumably along with Erasmus, while the regiment charged the enemy; he wrote, "I knew then that my dear brother had fallen."[14] He carried his devotion to country even higher than his commitment to his family that day, continuing to press on, leading his troops further into battle instead of breaking rank to seek out the condition of his brother.

After the loss of two brothers and countless friends, Richard showed signs of significant trauma. When his family inquired about his health and how he was fairing without Erasmus just after his death, Richard responded, "I have no time to give particulars, neither do I feel inclined to say much at present … and I do not know what to say to console the afflicted, for I am as sorely afflicted as anyone." The Reiter Family Collection maintains much fewer documents to inquire about the potential mental health of Richard as he finished out his enlistment without his brother. Further research uncovered a note from Richard's doctor outlining his mental state:

> "He took his company into the Battle of Gettysburg forty-four strong, out of which ten were killed and twenty-four wounded; among the former was a brother, and all were old neighbors and friends. The effect this has had upon this deponent's mind, combined with the arduous duties that followed in the campaigns of Virginia had the effect in reducing him to a mere skeleton."

Research conducted on the impact of casualties on tight-knit units suggest that the effect on unit morale is devastating. Dora Costa states, "the cost of fighting will appear high if many of the men in the company have already died."[15] After having experienced significant loss of his company and regiment during the Battle of Gettysburg, the rest of Richard's enlistment is less documented. It is most likely from these minimal records and from interactions with Richard

[14] Willson, *Disaster, struggle, triumph*, 120.
[15] Costa and Kahn, *Heroes and Cowards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 96.

upon his return home that the Bassett family lore of Richard's mental instability originated. According to Civil War muster roll records, Richard received a medical discharge for "disability" in early January of 1865.[16] No notes of physical disability were made, leaving room for speculation that his mental health may have been the true reason for his discharge.

From the point of discharge, there is even less to go off of when researching Richard Bassett. Family lore suggests that after he returned home from the service he was not able to spend even a year in the town before receiving medical advice to move away. Federal census records trace a path Richard's immediate family took to from Dundee, New York to Minnesota, then to Illinois, and finally coming to rest in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. During this period Richard abandoned his life as a farmer and took up various occupations including becoming a Life Insurance agent and a milk safe salesman. And while Richard did hold down some form of a job, his military pension records indicate that he, or his wife Mary, registered him as an "invalid" in the year 1867, just following the war and in the time frame when family lore assumes the Richard Bassett family made their move to Minnesota. Pension records also indicate Richard's death on April 22, 1896. Details of his death are not provided, however, it is indicated that he died in the town of Wickliffe, Ohio, and his remains are buried in Lakeview Cemetery, outside of Cleveland, Ohio.[17]

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[16] Ibid., 120.; Dreese, *Torn Families*, 121.; "New York, Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900," *Ancestry.com*, 2011, 175, accessed April 23, 2017.

[17] John Reiter, "Bassett Brothers," e-mail message to author, December 4, 2017.; "New York, State Census, 1865," *Ancestry.com*, 2014, 10-11, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1870," *Ancestry.com*, 2009, 296, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1880," *Ancestry.com*, 2010, 160D, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1900," *Ancestry.com*, 2004, , accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1870," *Ancestry.com*, 2009, 296, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; "United States Federal Census, 1880," *Ancestry.com*, 2010, 160D, accessed April 23, 2017, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.; *U.S., Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934 for Richard A Bassett*. PDF. National Archives and Records Administration.; "Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center Obituary Index, 1810s-2016," *Ancestry.com*, 2010, 5735, accessed April 23, 2017.

The 126th New York Regiment carries a unique place in the historiography of motivation theory of Civil War soldiers. The regiment experienced a level of shaming and humiliation unmatched by few, if any, other Union units. Their less-than-stellar battle performance at the Battle of Harper's Ferry haunted them until they were given a chance at redemption. The repeated verbal taunts and slander along with the pervasive written libel demoralized the unit in an uncommon and un-replicable way.

With the Battle of Gettysburg, the 126th NYSV proved themselves good and dutiful soldiers. They waited patiently for their orders to attack, filled in a position of the Union line which was extremely vulnerable to continuous Confederate assaults, and exhibited an outstanding level of valor during the battle. The regiment was not only able to gain significant ground on the battlefield, but managed to push Barksdale's Confederate unit over 100 yards behind their own line. This in turn successfully helped the Union effort as a whole, tricking the Rebel forces into thinking they were being flanked or surrounded. One Confederate division commander, R. H. Anderson, reported that "A…messenger from my right informed me that… the enemy was then some distance in rear of my right flank. Going to my right, I discovered that the enemy had passed me more than 100 yards and were attempting to surround me." With this discovery, Anderson pulled his men back to avoid exposure. The 126th and the rest of Willard's brigade had successfully carried out their assault and in doing so unintentionally pushed the Confederate line to back up, relieving some of the pressure on the Union forces in the surrounding areas. All of this came at a cost, however. At the conclusion of the battle, the New York unit had two-hundred and thirty-one members who were killed, wounded or missing; roughly fifty-one percent of their regiment of 455 before the battle.[18]

[18] "126th Infantry Regiment Civil War." NYS Military Museum and Veterans Research Center.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 71-74.

After the following day of battle and subsequent Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate soldiers began to flee, retreat and drop arms; many of the men were captured and the 126th New York managed to collect seven separate strands of colors during this process. General Hays reported between 1,500 and 2,000 prisoners were taken into the unit's custody along with at least fifteen battle-flags and banners. One of these battle flags in particular caught the attention of many of the men and of General Hays, for among its battle names was listed "HARPER'S FERRY." Hay's took this as a chance to inspire his men. Tying the battle flag to the tail of his horse, Hays rode up and down the lines of his men, dragging it through the mud exclaiming, "So we wipe out Harper's Ferry!" To the men of the 126th New York regiment, this was a taste of the sweet revenge they had been yearning for. Many of the men of the brigade wrote home with words stating their reputations had been "avenged" or that their "redemption was complete." Some even went so far as to say that their actions during the battle were a great "triumph;" even Hays himself wrote that the "Harper's Ferry Boys have wiped out Harper's Ferry."[19] The Reiter Family Collection contains a gap in this post-battle period, and Richard's voice, silent on the subject of redemption. Perhaps the overwhelming losses and trauma he experienced had finally caught up with him, as it is evident they did relatively soon after the death of his brother Erasmus.

The experiences of both Erasmus and Richard Bassett illustrate the feelings of determination felt by the unit in the face of their first opportunity at gaining redemption. Losing around fifty-one percent of their regiment during the battle, in numbers alone, the regiment proved its soldiers' willingness to sacrifice themselves for the Union. The engagement on the second day of battle at Gettysburg proved a critical moment for the Union Army. Where the 126th had assisted in the forced surrender at Harper's Ferry in September 15, 1862, they had

[19] Ibid., 108-109.

redeemed themselves by supporting other federal units, holding off the advances of Barksdale's Mississippians, and forcing a Confederate retreat over 100 yards past the Union line.[20] While carrying out their orders proved their discipline as a regiment, the 126th NY not only sought redemption from their battle engagement, but greatly feared again obtaining a cowardly label, and therefore acted recklessly while pursing Barksdale's unit. Even in their attempts to act courageously, the men of the New York regiment overcompensated, losing a whopping fifty-one percent of their unit by the end of the battle, and never truly shaking their cowardly label in the eyes of their Union comrades.

[20] "126th Infantry Regiment Civil War." NYS Military Museum and Veterans Research Center.; Campbell, ""Remember Harper's Ferry !': Part I." *Gettysburg Magazine*, 71-73.

CONCLUSION:

BRINGING IT ALL BACK

Facing charges of cowardice was a real and serious threat during the Civil War, but after the conclusion of the war, American culture and its relationship to cowardice continued to change with each new conflict the country endured. With the horrors of the First World War, the country saw the terrifying effects of advanced technology in the realms of chemical weaponry and explosives and the effect they had on the young men who shipped out to Europe to fight. These new forms of warfare became increasingly more destructive and deadly. With these advancements, the country began to soften somewhat on the label of cowardice, seeming to begin to understand that there was a breaking point for every individual and that no one could be expected to maintain complete composure in the midst of hellish surroundings.[1] As the struggles with war continued through conflicts such as World War II, the Korean War, and the War in Vietnam, the country's and society's relationship with and understanding of cowardice continued to change. Going along with cowardice was the recognition of and inquiry into the nature of combat trauma, something becoming increasingly studied in these last few decades.

Diane Miller Sommerville's work, for example illustrates this historical trend well. Her research on Southern attitudes toward suicide in the Confederacy during the Civil War shows that Southern views on suicide fluctuated throughout the course of the war. Newspapers

[1] The research cited was conducted primarily in Britain and connections drawn to the United States need still be viewed with some skepticism. Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The "War Generation" and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950," *The Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 02 (2005): 348-352, doi:10.1086/427130.

examined by Sommerville covered the suicides of Confederate soldiers with increasing tolerance and sympathy as the act became more common. Sommerville's research poses an interesting question, highlighting the interplays of suicide, war trauma, and cowardice during the period. While the research on the Bassett brothers does not discuss the topic of suicide, the parallels between the concepts of war trauma and cowardice pose an angle that would be interesting to apply Sommerville's analysis to. Perhaps there might be something similar to the changing perceptions of suicide in the South at work with reactions to and understandings of war trauma and its relationship to cowardice in the North.

Cowardice has continued to complicate the narrative of war for the United States in the years following the Civil War. Even as American society has seemed to gain a better understanding of war trauma and the mental and physical effects and manifestations of the fear associated with it, we have continued to prosecute soldiers for "cowardice." The number of charges filed have gradually dropped off in recent years; in fact, since the Vietnam War, the instances of soldiers being charged with cowardice have all but evaporated completely. The most recent public charge of cowardice occurred in 2003 when an interpreter, Sergeant Georg Andreas Pogany, attached to the Green Berets while on assignment in Iraq was unable to perform his duties after witnessing the death of an Iraqi person cut in half by a machine gun. Though he did not retreat or disobey orders, he did ask for help, as he felt he was experiencing a panic attack and could not force himself to move. He was given medication and put on a plane back to the states within days of the incident. While some punishment for cowardice is less than severe, Sergeant Pogany faced potentially serious repercussions for his supposed "cowardice" including the possibility of death. Prior to this case, the last recorded cowardice case was in 1968 when a Private was found guilty of running away from his unit in Vietnam and was sentenced to two

years in prison.[1] With only thirty-five years difference, the cases have entirely different potential outcomes; one soldier with a minor prison sentence, the other facing the potential loss of his life.

When examining the country's understanding of cowardice and tracing it back through to the Civil War, it is easy to see that the story of the 126th NYSV is only a unique one in part. While the soldiers' experiences of both physical and mental battering throughout the Battle of Harper's Ferry and the circumstances they endured during the battle were exceptional, their experience was still plagued by a fear of a label of cowardice; a label they were not successfully able to escape. This fear is something that was common between most, if not all military units; it was the motivation for countless actions and inactions, actions of courage, general duty, and even of cowardice and is therefore something relatable to the experience of the larger population of Civil War soldiers.

Even the internment of Erasmus, Richard, and the 126th NY as parolees at Camp Douglas was built off of this same fear, namely the fear of continued labeling as cowards and fear of not being able to shed the cowardly label with which they were already branded. Their experiences at the camp included withstanding a continual barrage of newspaper coverage damning their actions at Harper's Ferry and facing the sentencing of the military investigation, who blamed them for not only the fall of Harper's Ferry, but also for the twenty-one hundred deaths at the Battle of Antietam as well. With all of this heightened frustration and anger over their actions at Harper's Ferry, the regiment faced the same underlying issue, anguish over their immobility as parolees, shame as members of the country continually labeled them the "Harper's Ferry Cowards," and fear of not being able to shake that label or falling idle to its trap again.

[1] Jeffery Gettlemen, "Soldier Accused as Coward Says He Is Only Guilty of Panic Attack," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2003, accessed October 2017, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index.

The Bassett brothers' experience with the 126th provides fresh insight into the motivations of their unit as well as themselves. Examining this microcosm gives scholars a glimpse into how the 126th New York, along with Erasmus and Richard sought to deal with their "cowardice" and how they desired to expunge it from their records, at all costs. These experiences can be extrapolated to understand how other Civil War soldiers may have handle the fear of cowardice and the pressure to act unafraid of the potential consequences. Both Erasmus and Richard showed courage, commitment to duty, and a willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country. Richard and Erasmus, along with the rest of the 126th Infantry, fought to achieve lasting redemption for all those in their unit, living and dead. Along with the redemption they sought out through the valor their regiment displayed on July 2 during the Battle of Gettysburg, this battle allowed the Bassett brothers an opportunity to gain retribution for George's death. Their willingness to sacrifice and the strong determination they exemplified during the battle, pushing the enemy back several hundred yards beyond their position, brought them closer to this much desired retribution.

As outlined in the first section of chapter two, with George's death, Richard and Erasmus experienced a double-sided torment; losing a brother and being held captive and immobile as prisoners of war. Their experiences of battle afterward were profound, and the brothers exhibited a level of motivation and determination they may otherwise not have. The brothers, whose unit was pinpointed as the ones to blame for the fall of Harper's Ferry, were most likely additionally propelled in some way through a reaction to the commission's claim that, "…a thousand men killed in Harper's Ferry would have made a small loss had the post been saved, and probably saved two thousand at Antietam." [2]

[2] "The Surrender of Harper's Ferry: Report of the Military Commission." *The New York Times* (New York), November 12, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

The brothers and their regiment were also driven by their upbringing and understanding of manhood through the Victorian ideals of the era. Volunteering to do their duty as loyal soldiers of the Federal Army highlights their willingness not only to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their country, but also on behalf of their comrades and for the Bassetts, also their family members. Using Amy Greenberg's conceptualization of nineteenth century manhood ideals through *martial* and *restrained manhood*, we are able to draw connections between the Bassett brothers and the Victorian ideals of masculinity prevalent at the time. George, Erasmus and Richard all depicted the ideals of *restrained manhood* when they volunteered for the Union Army. Loyalty and dependability were two key ideals of American Victorianism and *restrained manhood*; in volunteering, the Bassett brothers exemplified both. The application of aspects of *martial manhood* also drove the actions of the brothers. Youngest brother George, already viewed as a courageous officer, threw caution to the wind by going against direct orders to continue a forward assault during the Battle of Antietam. Acting under the more rash and impulsiveness of *martial manhood*, George lost his life during that battle. Erasmus, along with Richard and the 126th New York took a similar approach when they were finally put into active engagement during the Battle of Gettysburg; the unit recklessly pursued Barksdale's Confederate unit past their point of objective. This recklessness cost Erasmus his life and the New York unit over half of their men in casualties. The Bassett brothers were prime examples of men who Greenberg asserted "mixed" their applications of manhood, utilizing aspects of the respectable and moral *restrained manhood* when it suited them, but also turning to facets of more violent and aggressive *martial manhood* when they needed to as well.

Richard and Erasmus struggled to gain retribution for the death of their brother, but also fought to redeem the reputation of their regiment and regain their individual manhood. In

striving to meet these goals, Richard, Erasmus, and their regiment acted recklessly in an attempt to avoid charges of cowardice. Their zeal to demonstrate their bravery ultimately claimed the lives of many of their unit, including Erasmus himself. Seeing these wartime experiences through the eyes of the Bassett brothers provides a humanizing perspective through which to understand the plight of every Civil War soldier as he toiled on the continuum, with the fear of cowardice and the potential recklessness of acting courageously always present.

In addition to a discussion of nineteenth century manhood, this thesis addresses cowardice in hopes to prevent overlooking its importance in future research and only begins to broach other topics such as that of war trauma and its relationship with cowardice. In prospective study, it would benefit this analysis to look more explicitly into the life of Richard Allen Bassett. As Richard was the only brother to survive the Civil War, an examination of how he carried on his life in the postwar years could add to our understanding of how Richard's experience in the war affected him posthumously. While family stories supposed that Richard moved away from his family's hometown of Dundee, New York to escape life without his brothers, perhaps there was more to his move.[3] Historian Kurt Hackemer recently presented research entitled, "Civil War Veteran Colonies in the Western Frontier" at the biennial Society of Civil War Historians Conference in Pittsburgh.[4] Based on his article "Wartime Trauma and the Lure of the Frontier: Civil War Veterans in Dakota Territory," his presentation discussed a new area of inquiry into Civil War veterans, specifically, veteran colonies. Hackemer discovered these colonies in various states on the middle and western region of the United States including in Oklahoma, Illinois, Ohio, and Minnesota, to name a few. He proposed that these self-formed veteran colonies were safe havens for Civil War veterans to take refuge by themselves or with their families from a

[3] John Reiter, "Bassett Brothers," e-mail message to author, December 4, 2017.
[4] Kurt Hackemer, "Civil War Veteran Colonies in the Western Frontier" (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society of Civil War Historians, Omni William Penn Hotel, Pittsburgh, June 1, 2018).

general population who did not understand the readjustment struggle of veterans. The colonies provided an area where the soldiers could relate to one another and were able to understand the trauma each had endured throughout the course of the war; losing friends, family members, witnessing horrors, carrying out killings, and perhaps most importantly of all, experiencing fear. The Dakota Territory allowed veterans "a space where social and cultural norms were not yet set and could therefore be defined on [their own] terms." Hackemer noted in his presentation that uncovering these types of colonies is a challenging task; there is no grand comprehensive list or obvious method with which to locate them. One must utilize extensive searching using individual veterans in order to begin to seek out these veteran colonies.[5]

While Hackemer's research in Minnesota focused in the area of Detroit Lakes, up in the northern portion of the state, it presents interesting potential for the motive behind Richard's postwar move to the state. Richard moved his family to Nicollet county, Minnesota, a great distance from the Detroit Lakes region studied by Hackemer, but it does pose the question, did Richard know about these colonies? Was he seeking out such a place when he moved his family to Minnesota? Or perhaps in the years after as they continually moved from place to place - Minnesota, to Illinois, to Ohio - from 1865 until his death in 1896? If he was, this could open up the potential for further analysis; but even if he only sought to be away from New York, it still leads to unanswered questions of how he viewed his service as a federal soldier; did he believe that he and his unit had redeemed themselves from their cowardly label through their actions in battle? Did he feel forever plagued by the "Harper's Ferry Cowards?" What label, if any, did he attach to himself? And did moving help him to escape the traumas of the war? Attempting to

[5] Kurt Hackemer, "Wartime Trauma and the Lure of the Frontier: Civil War Veterans in Dakota Territory," *The Journal of Military History*, no. 81 (January 2017): 75, 86-87. ; Hackemer, "Civil War Veteran Colonies in the Western Frontier" (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society of Civil War Historians, Omni William Penn Hotel, Pittsburgh, June 1, 2018).

address these open-ended questions can help lead to a better understanding of how Richard handled his unit's cowardly label and how it may have affected him in the years following the war. With this understanding, scholars may be able to draw conclusions about the more general veteran population and their dealings with the traumas of war and label of cowardice.

There is great promise for a more extensive examination of Richard to be done in the coming years. Recently, another collection of Bassett family letters and personal effects was located in the state of Washington. The collection holder informs me that his letter collection is comprised almost solely of materials written by Richard Bassett, with some reciprocal correspondence from his wife and other family members included.[6] While this collection was discovered too recently to be fully utilized and applied in this research, future projects will most certainly take advantage of its vast resources.

With many questions left to ponder and to expand upon, this thesis hopes to have presented the reader with the interesting predicament of cowardice; a topic understudied, yet difficult to talk about without reference to its opposite, courage. This work sought to present both concepts as more fluid entities than as we currently understand them through the historical literature. It presents the understandings of these concepts as linked with, and to, ideals of Victorianism and of manhood during the era, much as they still are in our modern-day society. Through this understanding, I hope historians and other academics are better able to discuss the intricacies of these labels and the feelings which drive them. Creating a narrative which appeals to the everyday reader will help to foster a more open discussion of these complexities and can be done through the humanization of the subjects being researched. Through this humanization, it is my opinion that we are less likely to overlook the conceptual intricacies and can help to

[6] Roger May, "Letters," e-mail message to author, June 3, 2018.

avoid an oversimplification of these ideals. As our understandings of cowardice continue to change, we must also adapt our research methods to match.

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