

The Civil War 150 Legacy Project: Out of Virginia's attics, voices from the past



During Civil War, scenes of innocence and idealism

The largest donation of Civil War-era ambrotype and tintype photographs to the Library of Congress comes on the eve of the war's sesquicentennial next year.

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Sunday, November 7, 2010

Salvaged from dusty basements and attics, scrawled on timeworn paper that has been folded and refolded, the long-silent voices emerge:

M. Brock, a Union soldier stationed in Leesburg, watched in 1863 as three of his fellow soldiers, seated on the edges of coffins, were shot. "They all fell backward into their coffins and remained as they fell until the whole Column passed them," he wrote. "Melancholy sight to Witness -- shot for Deserting."

John Keefer, perhaps the original helicopter parent, followed his soldier son, George, from one encampment to the next between 1861 and 1863, bringing along extra goodies for the troops. And A.S. Billingsley, a U.S. Army chaplain, wrote at the end of the war to tell Delilah Reed of her husband's death from chronic diarrhea. Reed, he wrote, had read his Bible up to the end, and his remains could "be procured by simply leaving an order with the nearest Express office, whose Agent here will forward the body."

Letters like these, along with photographs, draft cards, maps, sketches and military passes, have been emerging across Virginia like buds after a long freeze, thanks to the state's [Civil War 150 Legacy Project](#), which over the next two years will sweep through 126 cities and counties, scanning images of Civil War memorabilia provided by local residents for an archive project that coordinators hope will eventually hold hundreds of thousands of items.

"They're all so excited about it," said Renee Savits, the project's coordinator for the eastern part of the state. "We had one gentleman in Virginia Beach and he had a military

draft card of his great-great-grandfather and a picture of him, and he was just so thrilled to share it with us."

Savits and her colleague, Laura Drake Davis, who coordinates the western part of the state, announce [the dates and locations](#) where people can bring items, and scan them on the spot.

For much of the material, the archive will be the public debut. "People don't often have an opportunity to share these items," said Davis. "They can share it with their family, but there doesn't seem to be much opportunity outside the family."

The items can be fragile, and the scanning process grueling. One man brought 50 letters, which took Savits a few hours to scan. They must also be flat. "I've had people bring in a whole bunch of stuff, including buttons, and that's not part of our scope," said Davis.

Sometimes, people bring in old items unrelated to the Civil War -- 18th-century documents, for example -- which Savits and Davis must refuse. "People want to contribute, they want to be helpful," said Davis, "but they're not really part of our project."

Amid the memorabilia, glimpses of everyday life rub up against historic events. In one letter, William H. Billings, a prisoner of war in Annapolis, informed friends of his slight cold and cough and also of his sorrow at the "Gallant Chief Magistrate," Abraham Lincoln, "who was so Cowardly Assassinated a few days ago."

Brevet-Major Henry Cranford couldn't wait to write to his "darling precious wife" in New York after the Second Battle of Manassas/Bull Run. Amazed to have emerged from the bloody clashes unscathed, he wrote from astride his horse.

"Oh! how my heart yearns to fold you in my arms and feel your heart beat in extacy [sic] against mine, which has been saved almost by a miracle for you my love," he wrote. "Oh! Lord hasten hasten the time."