

Rhode Island Soldiers in the Civil War - Books and Resources

By Maureen A. Taylor

"If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I loved you, nor that when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name... Sarah do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for me, for we shall meet again..."

Excerpt from Sullivan Ballou's last letter to his wife, written one week before his death at the Battle of Bull Run.

Ken Burns immortalized two Rhode Island soldiers in his PBS-TV documentary on the Civil War - Sullivan Ballou and Elisha Hunt Rhodes. The recitation of the poignant words written by Sullivan Ballou to his wife one week before his death on the battlefield was among the most affecting moments of Burns's documentary. Elisha Rhodes kept a diary during his years of service that a descendant published as *All For The Union: a history of the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Great Rebellion as told by the diary and letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes...* (edited by Robert Hunt Rhodes, A. Mowbray, 1985). Yet these men were only two of the more than 24,000 soldiers who served in the infantry, cavalry, heavy artillery, light artillery, and in the hospital guards.

The best way to begin searching for your own Civil War ancestors in Rhode Island is to seek out the many print and manuscript resources that are available. They may help you discover some new facets of your ancestor's participation in the war.

Printed Sources

After the Civil War had ended, publishers sought to capitalize on public sentiment by printing books regaling Rhode Island's role in the conflict. Every researcher of Civil War soldiers in Rhode Island should consult the following books. The reference department of your local public library can help you locate copies and possibly borrow them via interlibrary loan.

- Rhode Island Adjutant, *General Annual Report of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations for the year 1865*, 2 vols. (Providence, E.L. Freeman, 1893-95)
If your ancestor fought in a Rhode Island regiment they will appear in this comprehensive two-volume set. Soldiers are arranged by regiment and indexed alphabetically by surname. These volumes also show when soldiers enlisted, their rank, and the battles in which they participated.
- John Russell Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers Who Were Engaged in the Service of their Country during the Great Rebellion of the South* (Providence, S.S. Rider and Brother, 1867).
Sullivan Ballou's romanticized biography appears in this volume along with an engraved portrait. There is no index, but it doesn't take long to browse the table of contents.
- *Regimental Histories of the American Civil War*,
UMI Research Collections -- Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bell & Howell Information and Learning, 1991.
Civil War Unit Histories part 2: Rhode Island.
Bell & Howell provided a valuable resource to Civil War researchers when they filmed these regimental histories onto microfiche and made them available to libraries. If you want to verify a history exists, check the catalog at the Library of Congress www.loc.gov or look in *Rhode Island: A Bibliography* by the Committee for a New England Bibliography (University Press of New England). Each citation shows where editors found a copy. These histories provide a general overview of each regiment as well as some specific exploits.
- *Personal narratives of events in the war of the rebellion, being papers read before the Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society*, 7 volumes (Providence: N. Bangs Williams Col, 1878-1915).
Wouldn't it be wonderful to find an account of the war in your ancestor's own words? It just may be possible to find such a narrative in these volumes, in which members of the Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society shared their memories. Even if you your ancestor was not included you might locate an account by

another member of their regiment.

- Rhode Island Adjutant General's Office, *Names of officers, soldiers, and seamen in Rhode Island regiments, or belonging to the state of Rhode Island and serving in the regiments of other states and in the regular army and navy of the United States, who lost their lives in the defence [sic] of their country in the suppression of the late rebellion* (Providence Press Co, 1869)

Check this volume for names of participants who died in service to their country.

Unpublished Materials

There is an abundance of manuscript material on Rhode Islanders in the Civil War. Collections include letters, diaries, census documents, and enlistment papers, just for a start.

Rhode Island State Archives

337 Washington St.

Providence, RI 02903

The Archives has enlistment papers, regimental books, and compiled military records. Write to them for a copy of their leaflet on Civil War material.

[The National Archives](#)

Once you discover the regiment or regiments your ancestors served with you can write to the National Archives for military service records and pension materials. In particular check the "Index to compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who served in Organizations from the State of Rhode Island." (National Archives micropublication M555 7 rolls) and "Compiled records showing service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations" (M594 [225 rolls]. For Rhode Island, see rolls 186-187.

[Rhode Island Historical Society](#)

121 Hope St.

Providence, RI 02906

(401) 331-8575

Their library contains copies of the books mentioned in this article as well as a large manuscript department. Contact them prior to visiting.

[John Hay Library](#)

Brown University

Providence, RI 020912

Search [Josiah](#), the library's online catalog, to find information on their collections. This is a private library that allows qualified researchers access to use their facilities.

Census Documents

The Rhode Island state censuses of 1865 and 1905 indicate whether or not respondents served in the military. The 1865 census, with index, is on microfilm at the Rhode Island Historical Society and both censuses are available at the Rhode Island State Archives. One of the remaining pieces of the 1890 United States Census is the Schedule for Union Veterans and Widows (Index by Accelerated Indexing). Copies of this micropublication are available at the Rhode Island Historical Society and branches of the National Archives.

Photographs

Photography helped bring the war home. Men wrote letters home and enclosed pictures taken by itinerant photographers that accompanied the troops. Relatives at home also sent pictures of their loved ones to ease the homesickness. You can discover clues about what regiment an ancestor served with by examining the uniform worn in these images. Some, like the French-inspired Zouaves, wore gaudy, distinctive outfits of full trousers, vests, and hats. Start your search with the digitized military images online at the [United States Military History Institute](#).

Websites

There are also a number of websites that make searching for your Civil War veteran easier. One site that helped me find data on my own ancestor is the [Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War](#).

Although this site is a work in progress, it contains muster rolls for a number of Rhode Island regiments. You may use the search feature to try to find your ancestor and read the regimental histories and highlights of major battles. If you locate an ancestor in their database, send an [email](#) to them so they can add your name to the next project they have planned - a database containing the descendants of all Rhode Island Civil War soldiers.

Still looking for a Civil War soldier or sailor? You might be looking in the wrong state. Because Rhode Island is such a small state, your ancestor might have crossed the state line to enlist in Massachusetts or Connecticut. Even if you find a record in Rhode Island, don't forget to check the adjacent states as well. The term of service varied and sometimes men served in more than one regiment.

Military service was only one way that Rhode Islanders contributed to the war effort. Rhode Island factories and mills provided fabric for uniforms, as well as rifles and cannons for the troops. Women and children supported the troops through relief projects and wrote letters to the soldiers. While you might not find an Elisha Hunt Rhodes or a Sullivan Ballou in your family tree, you may be able to uncover interesting facts about your ancestors living in Rhode Island during the Civil War.