

# The Union Preserved : A Guide to Civil War Records in the New York State Archives

By Marian S. Henry

Since 1978 the New York State Archives has been accepting custody of Civil War records from various state governmental agencies. The resulting collection contains much material of value to historians and genealogists, if one is patient enough to navigate through the vast sea of paper and microfilm. Fortunately, a navigator is available in the form of a 172-page book titled *The Union Preserved*

[1999, edited by Harold Holzer and compiled by Daniel Lorello]. Subtitled “A Guide to Civil War Records in the New York State Archives,” this book is the tangible result of a project of the Archives Partnership Trust, a 501(c)3 public benefit corporation whose self-proclaimed purpose is “to describe and make available the Civil War-related records that are held by the New York State Archives.” It was published jointly with Fordham University Press.

The bulk of the guide consists of descriptions of 111 series of records created by sixteen offices, boards, or bureaus. Series are grouped according to the agency that created the records and each section begins with an administrative history of that agency. The introductory essay to the book, “A State of War,” written by Harold Holzer and Hans L. Trefousse, is a capsule history of the Civil War with various illustrations (including the preliminary copy of the Emancipation Proclamation). The first chapter, “Documenting New York’s Role in the Civil War,” by Daniel Lorello, is an overview of how the records were created, preserved, and collected. The records are available at the New York State Archives’ research facility in Albany.

## New York State Archives

Cultural Education Center, Room 11D40

Albany, NY, 12230.

Tel: (518) 474-8955.

Email: [archref@mmail.nysed.gov](mailto:archref@mmail.nysed.gov)

The vast majority of the record series contain little or no genealogical information. This material is useful to writers, historians, scholars, but not genealogists. In Appendix A of the guide, “Conducting Genealogical and Local History Research in Civil War Records in the New York State Archives,” it is stated: “Three record series out of the many records described in this guide may be especially helpful to researchers seeking information on individual soldiers or sailors from New York who served in the Civil War” [p. 93]. It is true that the three series, described below, contain genealogical information perhaps useful to a large number of genealogists, but there are other records with just as much information for a smaller subset. For example, if your ancestor was an officer in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Regiments of New York State Volunteers, you want Series A4152, “Roster of Officers of New York State Volunteer Regiments 1861-1862.” Ranks include second lieutenant up to colonel and surgeon, assistant surgeon, chaplain, adjutant, and quartermaster. Or, if your ancestor served in the 51<sup>st</sup> regiment, you can look for Series A0087, “Records of the 51<sup>st</sup> Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1861-1864,” which include medical discharges, leaves of absence, payrolls, etc.

The only record series that contains extensive genealogical information is Series 13774, “Town and City Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War,” created by the Bureau of Military Statistics. The description in the guide reads:

“These registers are printed forms issued by the bureau of Military Record and completed by the state’s town and city clerks pursuant to Chapter 690 of the Laws of 1865. The registers provide the individual’s full name, residence, date and place of birth, present rank, regiment and company, dates of enlistment and muster, rank, length of enlistment, place of enlistment, race, amount of bounty paid by town or bounty if disbursed by supervisor, marital status, previous occupation, parents’ names, and dates of any promotions, resignations, discharges or deaths” [p. 57].

The good news is that there is an index. The bad news is that data are missing for many major communities such as New York City, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Rochester, Utica, etc.

An extremely large record series (1,363 volumes) to mine for information is Series 13775, "Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts of New York State Volunteers, United States Sharpshooters, and United States Colored Troops," created by the Bureau of Records of the War of the Rebellion. The description is as follows:

"Arrangement: By branch of service (artillery, cavalry, infantry) and therein numerically by unit number. Entries for each unit are arranged alphabetically by last name of officer or enlisted man. The abstracts are printed forms filled out during the late 1880s through the early 1900s from original military records... For each individual the following information is included: date of enlistment, age (in years), place of enlistment and for how long, date mustered in, grade, company and regiment, date left organization, how, in what grade, explanation, and remarks." [pp. 65-6]

The Archives has an unpublished seventeen-volume personal name index for this series.

The third series selected by the guide as having general genealogical interest is Series A0389, "Registers of Officers and Enlisted Men Mustered into Federal Military or Naval Service During the Civil War," a six-volume set created, again, by the Bureau of Military Statistics. The description is as follows:

"These folio-sized volumes provide both military and civil information on New York men mustered into federal military or naval service during the Civil War. Much of the information in the series was compiled from questionnaires distributed by the bureau to the soldiers themselves, friends, relatives, medical officers in charge of United States hospitals, and local officials ... between 1683 and 1867 ... three types of categories: New York Volunteers in service, New York Volunteers formerly in service, and New York volunteers deceased. ... The first subseries ... [consists of] three volumes that provide information on individuals who were still in federal service when the data was collected. Information provided includes; county, town, village, or city (including ward number); name, age, and color; place of birth; marital status; trade or occupation; voter or alien; ability to read or write; regiment first entered; date originally entered service; length of first enlistment; first rank; promotions, transfers etc.; length of unexpired term till June 1, 1865; current regiment and rank; whether or not drafted; substitute or representative recruit; and remarks. ... Second subseries ... [consists of] two volumes very similar to the subseries described above ... The final subseries consists of one volume entitled 'Deaths of Officers and Enlisted Men Which Have Occurred While in the Military or Naval Service of the United States or From Wounds or Disease Acquired in Said Service since April 1861, Reported by the Families to Which the Deceased Belonged at Home.'

Unfortunately, there are no indexes.

The Bureau of Military Statistics, responsible for collecting and compiling Civil War records, was created on April 8, 1863, with an initial appropriation of \$6000. Bureau chief Lockwood Lyon Doty, was required to "collect and preserve

an authentic sketch of every person from this state who has volunteered into the service of the general government since April 15, 1861 and likewise a record of the service of the several regiments” [p. 17]. Doty, however, had a grander vision. In his first annual report he declared his intention to collect “every fact relating to the rebellion, and especially to the part which New York has taken in the war, whether now recorded or printed, or still existing in memory” [p. 17]. He developed a one-page double-sided form that asked the following questions of the soldiers:

- date and place of enlistment
- regiment
- company (or ship) and rank
- promotions or transfers
- previous military history in the militia or U.S. Regular Army, Navy, or European
- military organizations
- battles or skirmishes participated in during the Civil War
- descriptions of wounds received or illnesses contracted while in the service
- date of discharge or death
- date and place of birth
- parents’ names and nationalities
- level of education
- if married, wife’s name and number of children
- residence at date of enlistment
- profession prior to enlistment
- military experiences of relatives in either the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, or European wars
- relatives presently in service including regiment and rank
- if the individual was deceased and the form completed by an acquaintance, remarks concerning the individual’s general character could be included.

Doty even asked that a photograph be attached to the form. And it was done. Unfortunately, subsequent political rivalry resulted in most of the material being discarded (sigh).

*The Union Preserved* is available from [Fordham Press](#) and [Amazon.com](#).

Lockwood Lyon Doty (1827-1873) authored *A History of Livingston County, New York, from its earliest traditions, to its part in the war for our Union: with an account of the Seneca nation of Indians, and biographical sketches of earliest settlers and prominent public men*. The book was published posthumously in 1878.

Harold Holzer, an Abraham Lincoln and Civil War-illustration expert, is vice-president for communications at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and has authored, co-authored, and edited sixteen books, including *The Union Preserved*.

Daniel Lorello is associate archivist at the New York State Archives.

Hans Trefousse, a Civil War scholar, is the author of two books about Andrew Johnson, and *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice*, among others.