

6. John Henry Williams – Faithful Soldier

Writer, Sharon Denmark describes the typical union soldier:¹

“A soldier in the Union army was most likely a slim young man a little over 5’8” tall with brown hair and blue eyes. He was probably a farmer and a Christian.

“ . . . The war was largely a young man’s fight — Union enlistment records indicate that more than 2 million soldiers were age 21 or under when they joined the cause — and some estimates place only 10 percent of the Federal force over age 30. There were, of course, cases on either extreme. Older soldiers typically filled more specialized roles or were officers; some teenagers lied about their age and saw front line combat, but many others served in other capacities, notably as musicians.

“ . . . The risk of falling ill was highest for new recruits, with each passing year in service affording growing immunity. In his book, “Army Life: A Private’s Reminiscences of the Civil War,” Theodore Gerrish recalls a time spent too long in camp and writes, “One of the most disastrous features of the gloomy situation was the terrible sickness of the soldiers...men were unused to the climate, the exposure, and the food, so that the whole experience was in direct contrast to their life at home.” Common viruses and infections included typhoid fever, malaria, pneumonia, tuberculosis, pox (both small and chicken), scarlet fever, measles, mumps and whooping cough.”

John Henry Williams fit the profile for the Union Soldier. His enlistment record indicates he was 5’8”, had light hair and blue eyes and was a farmer when he enlisted at the age of 21. His middle name, Henry, was a family name. He was a direct descendant of famed English author and theologian Matthew Henry. This was obviously a source of family pride. The obituary for his mother, Catherine Henry Neely Williams Martin, highlights the relationship to Matthew Henry. At the very least, John had a Christian heritage.

John was born on April 4, 1841, to William and Catherine Henry Neely Williams in Washington County, Indiana. William was only 22 years old when he died leaving his young widow, Catherine, with a baby less than a year old. Catherine married James McGready Martin just two weeks shy of John’s ninth Birthday. James and Catherine had four children.

¹ Denmark, Sharon, “Life of the Civil War Soldier in the Army,”

During the summer of 1862 the governors of the northern states were concerned that the war was dragging on with little progress being made in the restoration of the union. On June 28th they took the initiative to issue a letter to the president. From Bently's history:

... the governors of the northern states addressed a memorial to the President, urging upon him the necessity of a more vigorous prosecution of the war. They suggested the propriety of calling upon the different states for additional troops to fill up the vacancies already existing in the field, and to organize such new forces as might be deemed necessary for the prompt suppression of the rebellion. They told him that the people were with the government -- that they were willing to sacrifice life, property, everything, for the restoration of the Union and the perpetuity of our free institutions that they would respond to any demand made upon them, and that every available means should be brought to bear upon the one great object in view: the termination of the war.

To this urgent appeal the President replied as follows :

EXECUTIVE MANSION, \\
Washington, D. C., July 1.

GENTLEMEN :

Fully concurring in the wisdom of the views expressed to me in so patriotic a manner by you in the communication of the 28th day of June, I have decided to call into the service an additional force of 300,000 men. I suggest and recommend that the troops should be chiefly of infantry.

The quota of your state would be _____. I trust they may be enrolled without delay, so as to bring this unnecessary and injurious civil war to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion. An order fixing the quotas of the respective states will be issued by the War Department.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

This resulted in vigorous recruiting throughout the union and the state of Illinois did not shrink from the responsibility of this call from its favorite son. Charles Ballance Esq., a prominent citizen of Peoria was tasked with recruiting for the 77th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Although he intended to command the newly formed infantry himself, he deferred to those who felt a more experienced military man should be given the command. Capt. D. P. Grier, who had already seen action in the Missouri Volunteer Infantry, was appointed Colonel in charge of the newly formed unit.



77th Illinois National Flag



77th Illinois Regimental Flag

John Henry Williams, from Minonk, Illinois was surely among the first to join the new unit. He enlisted in the 77th Illinois Volunteer Infantry on August 9, 1862. He was mustered in Company B on September 2 and transferred to Company H on October 1. The Illinois 77th was established at Peoria.

The regiment left Peoria on October 4, 1862 and moved to Covington, Kentucky. They had the following assignments:

- Kentucky: October 1862 - November 1862
- Army of the Tennessee: November 1862 - January 1864
- Department of the Gulf: January 1864 - February 1865
- Military Division West Mississippi: February 1865 - July 1865

Their battles and campaigns included operations against Vicksburg [Chickasaw Bayou, Arkansas Post, Port Gibson, Champion's Hill, Big Black River, Siege of Vicksburg], Red River Campaign, Pleasant Hill, and Ft Blakely.

Private John Henry Williams was not among those who left camp on October 4, 1862 and probably never joined the regiment again. Once more the typical civil war soldier, John fell victim to disease. His obituary states,

"shortly after entering the service he contracted a disease that unfitted him for service on the battlefield but he loyally did his duty by doing camp duty and acting as train master of baggage train. It may be added that this disease left its marks upon him to his dying day."

Nearly thirty years later, on June 15, 1892, John retired and applied for a disability pension. The application cited chronic diarrhea and stomach trouble along with disease of the eyes and rheumatism. The chronic diarrhea leads to speculation that he may have contracted typhoid fever which caused hardening of the intestines and led to the death of many civil war soldiers.

John probably would have been eligible for a medical discharge. To his credit, however, he remained faithful to the cause and, rather than take the easy way out, continued to contribute within the constraints of his disability. Although he probably

never engaged in battle or fired a shot, his contributions in camp duties and train master were surely valuable to the war effort.

The members of the Illinois 77th were mustered out on July 10, 1865 in Mobile Alabama. John is listed as sick and absent.

Years later, John's daughter, Ethelena, related that he never fired a shot in battle because his brother was fighting in the Confederate Army. There may be a germ of truth in this, but it has not been confirmed. John had no brothers as his father died leaving John as his only offspring. John had half-brothers but the oldest was only ten years old when the war began. It is possible that John's step-father had been married before and John had a step-brother but no record of this is known to exist. Perhaps the relative was actually a cousin or an uncle. Or maybe Ethelena just misunderstood and passed along a story with no basis in fact. If there is any truth to this account, it doesn't appear to have diminished his pride in serving in the Union Army

Following the war, John married Amanda Martin. The couple eventually moved to Nebraska. They were among the first homesteaders in Nebraska. They became the parents of Elmer and Ethelena. Ethelena married Sharold Quincy Adams and they moved to Colorado.

Even in civilian life, John continued to be a supporter of the union cause. He was a member of the "Grand Army of the Republic (G. A. R.). He belonged to the Morton Post, No. 17 which met in Hebron, Nebraska at the Thayer County Courthouse every first and third Friday.

John died on Jul. 21, 1904 at the age of 63 in Hebron, Thayer, Nebraska.



The Grand Army of the Republic Badge.
Authorized by Congress to be worn on the
uniform by Union veterans.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Army_of_the_Republic

References

1. Denmark, Sharon, "Life of the Civil War Soldier in the Army," *Hallowed Ground Magazine*, Winter 2013. <http://www.civilwar.org/hallowed-ground-magazine/winter-2013/life-of-the-civil-war-soldier-army.html>
2. Marjorie E. Adams, Nebraska Gen Web Project, *NE Gen Web* (<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/topic/resources/pioneer/registry/williams.htm> : accessed), .
3. Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls Database, Illinois State Archives, (two entries for J. H. Williams) <http://www.ilsos.gov/isaveterans/civilMusterSearch.do?key=276276>
4. Lieutenant W. H. Bently, "*History of the 77th Illinois Volunteer Infantry – September 2, 1862 to July 10, 1865*," Peoria, IL, Edward Hine, Printer 1883.
5. 77th Illinois Regiment Infantry, <http://americancivilwar.50megs.com/77thIllinoisInf.html> 12/
6. "77th Illinois Infantry Regiment" http://civilwar.illinoisgenweb.org/reg_html/077_reg.html 12/
7. Excerpt from John Henry Williams's obituary as related in an email from Marjorie Adams to Jim Gresham, December 2013.
8. "History of the NE G.A.R. Posts," Dave Wells Omaha, Nebraska, June 12, 2000 <http://www.civilwarmuseumnc.org/history%20GAR.html>