

MAINE COMPASS: Civil War Wall of Names has unexpected power

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Between April 1863 and October 1864, four sons of Eunice Shorey of Littleton died while serving in Maine regiments in the Civil War. Eunice Shorey was a widow, whose husband, Edmond, died on May 4, 1861, shortly after the war began.

Three of the brothers, Greenbush, Samuel and Luther, were mustered together into Co. K of the 1st Maine Cavalry on Nov. 2, 1861 — only six months after their father's death. Edmond Jr. joined the 1st Regiment D.C. Cavalry on Jan. 5, 1864. He had registered for the draft in June 1863.

Additional Photos



Greenbush, then 25, died on April 12, 1863, of disease at Camp Bayard, Virginia. Samuel, then 23, died of disease a month later on May 27, 1863, in a Washington, D.C., hospital. He was buried at the Soldiers' Home National Cemetery in Washington.

Edmond Jr., then 30, died in Washington of disease on May 28, 1864, just short of five months after his enlistment. Luther, then 20, returned home in the summer of 1863 because of illness, then re-enlisted and rejoined his regiment in December 1863. On March 1, 1864, he was taken prisoner at the Dahlgren Raid on Richmond. He died of scurvy on Oct. 20, 1864, at Andersonville Prison.

Two of Eunice Shorey's sons, Elbridge and Aroostook, did not serve. Harrison Shorey, a child of Edmond Sr.'s first marriage, also enlisted — in the 7th Maine on Sept. 25, 1862. He reportedly served time for desertion and survived the war.

Fifteen soldiers from Littleton, population about 550, died while serving in Maine regiments; five were from Co. K of the 1st Maine Cavalry. The Littleton soldiers are among the more than 9,000 Mainers who died in the war, more from disease than battlefield injuries.

Because Civil War regiments were organized by each state, and because the companies that made up those regiments often were recruited within one town, one bloody battle, or disease, could leave many in one community mourning.

How does one begin to understand the number of deaths and the impact on Maine families and communities? Maine Historical Society has visually represented the deaths of members of Maine regiments with a Memorial Wall that is part of the society's exhibit, "This Rebellion: Maine and the Civil War," on display through May 26. Inspired in part by the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., the wall is 40 feet long, 7 feet high, and, on nine panels with four columns on each, contains the names of more than 8,500 members of Maine regiments who died during the war, as well as names of those missing in action at war's end.

As the Vietnam Memorial taught us, a wall of names has unexpected power. Even 30 years after that memorial with its 58,000 names opened in 1982, visitors still leave photographs, flowers and other remembrances or visit solely to walk its length and read names.

Likewise, Maine Historical Society's Civil War Memorial Wall — 40 feet of names, with ranks, regiments and hometowns — leaves few viewers unaffected.

Compiling thousands of names can be a rather daunting task. To create the Memorial Wall, the Maine Historical Society sought the help of University of Southern Maine history students Elizabeth Brown, Amanda Leach, Andrew Robinson and Matthew Rodney, who each worked either fall or spring semester of the 2012-13 school year, carefully going through Maine Adjutant General's reports, company by company, regiment by regiment, reading a "remarks" column that gives the status of each soldier. What emerged, after much checking and double-checking against other lists and other sources, was a database with the information that appears on the Memorial Wall, as several other details.

The students and I, while working on the project, began to understand why a compilation — and display — of names of soldiers who died is so compelling. In many ways, numbers alone have lost the power to amaze us, but names are different. Brown of Brunswick said, "It is one

thing to be told and to know that 8,000 or 9,000 men from Maine died during the war, but another to spend hours and hours writing down the name of each of those men. It certainly changed my own understanding of the Civil War.”

Rodney of Litchfield said, “Working on this project has made me realize the true nature of the Civil War. It’s something that is always taken for granted, but when you see 60 names of young boys all from the same town among the dead you realize just how devastating this war really must have been for the country and our state.”

The wall offers other lessons as well. One example is the number of soldiers whose first and middle names are “William H.H.,” and “Martin V.B.” William Henry Harrison, the ninth president, died a month after his inauguration in 1841. Apparently, many boys born after April 4, 1841 were named for the first president to die in office — and those young men were the perfect age to serve in the war. Martin Van Buren, the eighth president, also inspired parents to name their sons after him. Also, dozens of “George W.” and “Benjamin F.” first name and middle initial combinations appear; many of those men are named for George Washington or Benjamin Franklin.

Soldiers’ letters suggest that patriotism, especially preservation of the Union, drove many to enlist. Soldiers’ names may reflect that long-felt national pride in northern New England. The names on the wall seem to implore us to learn more about the individual stories — from questions about why soldiers enlisted and how they experienced the war, to how those at home like Eunice Shorey bore the deaths and injuries of so many. The Memorial Wall helps us see the impact of a long, deadly conflict.

Candace Kanen is curator for “This Rebellion: Maine and the Civil War” and for Maine Memory Network

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