

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Primary Resources for Civil War Military History

By Al McLean

While you can't judge a book by its cover, you can judge a history by its bibliography. A well written book or article on history relies on primary sources. Primary sources are original sources which were created at the time of the event being studied. In Civil War studies, they can consist of military service records, diaries, letters, ledgers, maps, orders, reports, census records, newspapers, photographs and the list goes on.

Primary sources are vital for two reasons. First, they allow the author to interpret history not just retell what others have written before. A history is not just the statement of facts. At some point the historian must provide insight into what happened. Did the general handle his troops well? What was the effect of the event? Primary sources allow the historian to come as close as possible to the actual event. To make an effective contribution to the study of a historical event, historians must base their judgment on what actually happened. Merely repeating the works of others makes no contribution to the study.

Pick up any history and look at its bibliography, if there is an extensive use of primary sources, the book probably contributes to the study of an historical event. By way of example, James I. Robertson's, Jr. much acclaimed *Stonewall Jackson the Man, the Soldier, the Legend* uses over 600 primary sources. Unfortunately, many more recent histories rely only on footnotes and not separate bibliographies for a listing of sources. Even with this limitation it does not take long to determine if a writer is relying on primary sources.¹

Second, researchers need to know how to locate primary sources since often that is all that is available to them. If you want to find out about your great, great grandfather who was a sergeant in such and such regiment, a one volume Civil War history won't help you. To find your relative you will be going to primary sources such as military service records of individual soldiers. Likewise, if you want to study or write on an

¹ James I. Robertson, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend* (New York: McMillan Publishing, 1997).

obscure Civil War action you are forced to rely on primary sources such as the orders and reports found in the 127 volume *Official Records*.

In recent years, the use of primary sources has been transformed by the internet and the creation of searchable databases. Much of this change has come by way of genealogists who are placing massive amounts of records online. In the past searching for newspaper articles was at best a hit or miss matter. Now searchable databases can bring up nearly all articles on a certain event. Locating primary sources has become much easier and searchable databases have improved the chances of finding all the available primary sources on a person or event.

A word of caution is necessary. The historian must be aware of the problem inherent with primary sources. They often reflect the bias of the writer. Many writers will exaggerate their accomplishments and gloss over their humiliations. For example, comparisons of Confederate and Union battle reports often make it impossible to tell who won and who lost a certain fight.

For lack of a better method, this article will list and discuss the best places for locating primary sources.

Official Records

Despite all the recent innovations in historical research, the best source of primary Civil War materials remains a collection compiled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The *Official Records—Armies* and the *Official Records—Navies* contain a total 147,668 pages of primary sources and the *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records* contains 1,136 maps and sketches. *The Official Records* is a monumental collection of orders, reports, accounts, correspondence and maps from the records of the Union and Confederate armies and navies. The novelist and historian Shelby Foote described the Official Records as, “There you hear the live men speak.”²

The full name of the series is *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Replace the word, Armies with the word, Navies and you have the title of the naval records. Obviously, the *War of the Rebellion* portion of the title did not come from a Southerner. They are commonly cited as *OR—Armies* and *OR—Navies*. The *OR—Armies* consists of 127 books, a one book

² United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901); United States Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922); United States War Department, *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895); United States War Department, *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895); Foote, Shelby, *Shiloh*, (New York: Vintage Book, 1992), 225.

index and a large one book atlas containing 821 maps several of which were used in combat. *OR—Navies* consists of 31 books.

Union General-in-Chief Henry Wagner Halleck began the formal collection of Union records when a lack of records made it difficult for him to prepare his 1863 annual report to Congress. The collection of records would continue after the war under various acts of Congress. After the surrender, Federals began shipping Confederate records to Washington in hope of finding evidence connecting Jefferson Davis to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Southern suspicions of government motives would delay the collection of Confederate records for several years. The publication of *OR—Armies* was completed in 1902 and the publication of *OR—Navies* was completed in 1922.

It is the editorial policy in of Official Records that makes them so helpful to historians. The gathered records filled warehouses and editors were used to bring the collection to a manageable size. The editors required the materials to be significant, official, and produced during the war. The requirement for materials produced during the war can be used as a definition of primary sources. The most controversial requirement was that the materials were to be published as they were produced during the war without later correction or alteration. Since the materials are not retrospective, they reflect the knowledge and action of leaders at the time of the event making them true primary sources.

With the advent of the internet, the Official Records are now online. The most popular version is the Cornell Library, *Making of America* online series There have been complaints about the indexes to the series. Each book had a separate index and the one volume index at the end of the series did not include all the entries in the indexes of the individual volume indexes. This has been resolved by the searchable database system such as the one found in the Cornell *Making of America* series. Since their publication Official Records has remained and, in the future, will remain the best place to locate primary sources of the Civil War.³

Newspapers

During the Civil War newspapers were a major source of information for soldiers and civilians of what was happening beyond their immediate confines. In 1860, America was served by 3,725 newspapers of which 387 were dailies. The city of New York was America's newspaper center with seventeen dailies and the war's most famous editor, Horace Greeley. Most papers were weeklies of four pages containing a large amount of advertising. All papers had a bias in favor of their side of the conflict and many espoused a certain political view point to the extent of putting the words Republican or Democratic in their titles. It was a time when fiery editors were not afraid to launch virulent attacks on their rivals. In addition, editors were happy to give military advice causing them to become known as newspaper generals. In 1861, The *New York Tribune*'s cry "Forward to Richmond" fostered a popular mantra that helped push the Lincoln administration to

³ <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moawar/waro.html> , accessed December 9, 2018.

prematurely send untrained troops south into Virginia leading to the Union debacle at the Battle of First Manassas.

Even with their biases newspapers are an excellent primary source. Only a few papers could place reporters with the armies and all newspapers copied each other's reporting. Some of the best reporting came from soldiers in the field. Papers would reprint letters sent by soldiers to the paper or to family members telling of a certain incident. Some soldiers would regularly write to the local paper describing what was going on with the hometown regiment. Accounts by soldiers were often superior to those by the newspaper staff since their reports were eyewitness accounts not second or third hand rumors. Soldier's writings were often more coherent since they were not written in the flowery overblown prose so popular with professional newspaper writers of the time.

Nowhere has the advent of the internet had a greater effect on Civil War research than the use of newspapers. Until the last few years, newspaper research was at best a hit or miss affair. A researcher would start at the date of an incident and scan later papers hoping to find an article. Now with searchable databases this work can be done in minutes instead of hours. Almost all 19th century newspapers are online with searchable databases. In the footnote is a list of a few of the numerous newspaper searchable databases. From the list, it is easy to see that many of the sources were developed by genealogists. The number of database sources is constantly growing, and this list should only be used as a beginning point.⁴

NUCMC and OCLC World Cat

For almost sixty years the Library of Congress has provided scholars an excellent method for locating primary sources through the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections (commonly known as NUCMC). NUCMC is a catalogue of manuscripts and archival materials located at libraries, archives and societies throughout the United States and its territories. There is no charge for using NUCMC's services. Many of the materials are primary sources such as letters and diaries. The Civil War researcher will also benefit from a new feature titled *NUCMC and the Documentary Heritage of the Civil War*. The materials are catalogued as they would before a library catalog listing with numerous subject headings which lead the researcher to the listing

⁴ *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, 1789 – 1924*, is a free website of the Library of Congress - <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> ; *Virginia Chronicle*, is a searchable database of Virginia and West Virginia newspapers, a free website of the Library of Virginia. - <http://viriniachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=p&p=home&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-----> ; *Genealogy Bank*, is a fee-based website with a searchable database of over 7,000 newspapers from 1690 – the present day. - <http://www.genealogybank.com/static/home/> ; *Newspapers.com*, is a fee-based website with a searchable database of over 4,500 newspapers from 1700s – 2000s. – <https://www.newspapers.com/> , accessed December 9, 2018.

and the materials location. From 1959 until 1993, the catalogues were printed annually in bound volumes. Since 1994, the material has been available on the internet.

When using NUCMC a researcher has access to archival materials catalogued in a catalogue system known as World Cat. The Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC World Cat) is a nonprofit research organization which produces and maintains the world's largest online public access catalogue. WorldCat began in 1967 to create a cooperative catalogue system for Ohio college libraries. It has expanded to 72,000 libraries in 170 countries giving access to the location of an almost unlimited amount of material. If a book or item is in several libraries World Cat can provide a list of the libraries located closest to the researcher. World Cat is a catalogue of an overwhelming amount of material. Since NUCMC is limited to archival materials, Civil War researchers looking for primary sources should begin with NUCMC which gives a portal into World Cat listings.⁵

Military and Civilian Records

Military and civilian records, usually dealing with individuals, can be excellent primary sources for historians and invaluable sources for genealogists. Two of the sources Compiled Military Service Records and pension records will be discussed here. There are numerous other records such as Confederate Citizen Files, Southern Claims Records and Freedman Bureau Records which can be found in the National Archives. Reference should be made to the publication *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives* which gives a listing of the extensive records at the Archives. Much of the National Archive records are now available through genealogical web sites such as Fold3 and Ancestry.⁶

Compiled Military Service Records—There were 2.8 million soldiers and sailors who served in the Civil War and most were volunteers. Every volunteer, Union and Confederate, had a Compiled Military Service Record (CMSR). An individual CMSR consists of a jacket containing the soldier's name, rank and unit number inside is the soldier's records of service. What is in a record varies from soldier to soldier. Most have the dates of enlistment and discharge. It may or may not have the soldier's date and place of birth and some physical description such as height, weight and eye color. There may be a list of hospitalizations for illness or wounds. To the embarrassment of his descendants often there is a list of times the soldier was absent without leave, a common Civil War occurrence. The CMSR may list when a soldier was captured and released as a prisoner of war. Some even have dates he was paid. Unfortunately, many contain the date of the soldier's death.

⁵ NUCMC is located on the web at <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/> and World Cat is at <http://www.worldcat.org/>, accessed December 9, 2018.

⁶ Anne Bruner Eales, *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Record Service, 2000-2012); Fold3 is a fee-based service providing on line access to the military records of American service men and women at <https://www.fold3.com/>; Ancestry is a fee-based service providing on line access to genealogical records at <https://www.ancestry.com/>, accessed December 9, 2018.

Compiled Military Service Records were created by clerks in the War Department who extracted information from records created during the war such as company records, muster rolls, medical records, promotion lists, hospital lists, and prison camp records. Rarely, does it list battles in which a soldier or sailor fought.

The United States War Department began developing CMSRs in 1890. By that time many veterans were applying for pensions and other benefits. By consolidating a soldier's record in one place the application process became much easier. Work on the Confederate records began in 1903. When the Confederate government fled Richmond many of the records were taken by the train carrying government officials. These records were turned over to the Federals in Charlotte, North Carolina and forwarded to Washington, DC. In 1903, the Secretary of War encouraged Southern governors to forward records to Washington for copying. Unfortunately, many of the Confederate records are missing.

The CMSRs are held by the National Archives. Some libraries have microfilms of the records and with the advent of the internet they are available online. Presently, they can be found on the subscription-based web site, Fold3.

Keep in mind when using CMSRs, a soldier who joins one unit, is discharged and joins another unit may have two records. If a soldier was one of few who served in the regular army, he will not have a CMSR. Instead, records of regular army soldiers will be found separately in the National Archives. Finally, if a soldier is not listed in the CMSR, he may have served only in a local militia or home guard unit

Pension Records—There are two Civil War pension systems. Union soldiers and sailors received pensions through the Federal Government while Confederates received pensions through their states. The Federal System began in 1861 as a recruitment inducement. Originally to qualify for a pension, veterans had to show ninety days' service, an honorable discharge and some sort of disability which did not have to be service connected. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt thought age itself was enough of a disability and he removed the disability requirement. At its peak pension payments to Civil War veterans constituted 42% of the Federal budget.⁷

The former Confederate States did not provide veteran's pensions until 1891 and Southern pensions were never as high as Federal pensions. Over the years, Southern states liberalized pension requirements and Confederate veteran pensions constituted of a large part of the budgets of the individual states.

Pension applications usually contained dates of birth, residence, rank and period of service. Many had affidavits and depositions. Most valuable to the historian are

⁷ The percentage of the Federal budget consumed by pensions varied by year and at its height was 42% per Mavis A. Vinovski, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographics," in *The Journal of American History*, 76, no. 1 (1985):55.

narratives of service. Of course, these narratives were given years after the service and may have been embellished in hopes of a pension.

The system was subject to fraud. The record of Albert Woolson, a drummer boy for a Minnesota regiment, has been confirmed. When he died in 1956, Woolson was the last surviving Union veteran. At that time, there were three surviving Confederate veterans, all of whom were receiving a pension. The last of the Confederates died in 1959. Later research has shown that all the surviving Confederate veterans had obtained their pensions fraudulently and had not served in the war. That made drummer boy, Albert Woolson, America's last surviving Civil War soldier.

Federal pension records are at the National Archives and Confederate records are at the various state archives. Again, with the advent of the internet, many pension records can now be found online with various internet genealogical services.

The Real Pick and Shovel Work

After going through all the previous sources, it is time for the real pick and shovel work of historical research. Four questions should be asked about a Civil War event or soldier.

1. What units were involved?
2. Who were the leaders?
3. What are the secondary sources?
4. Where were the participants from?

Units—The Civil War was fought by regiments. In combat, infantry lined up on their regimental flag. When asked to name his unit a Civil War soldier identified his regiment.

There are a series of regimental histories of almost all regiments from Virginia. Likewise, other states have numerous regimental histories. Although regimental histories vary in quality, most cite several primary sources that can be helpful to the historian.

More importantly, regimental identification provides the researcher a way of narrowing the search for primary materials and saving hours of useless review. For example, a historical society may have fifty sets of soldier's letters. These are usually listed by the soldier's name and his regiment. Knowing the regiments involved in an event allows the researcher to focus the search to materials relevant to the study.

Leaders—Thousands of biographies have been written about Civil War leaders. Many of the biographies are soldiers who were not high-ranking officers. If you are researching an occurrence, determine who were the leaders. Biographies are not primary sources. Still a well written biography will cite numerous primary sources.

Histories—Bibliographies of well written histories can provide a long list of diaries, letters, and other primary sources. The history of an occurrences not related to your research that involved the soldiers and regiments you are researching can lead you to primary materials that also cover the time of your study. Again, knowing the regiments involved in your study can help narrow your search.

Participants place of origin—Determining where the participants in an event came from opens a new set of sources of primary materials. All states have historical societies and state libraries with extensive archives. Determine the home area of the soldiers you are researching. If those soldiers left letters, diaries or other primary materials, there is a good chance that these materials were given to the archives of the historical society or library of the soldier's home state. Likewise, many colleges and universities have archives with materials from soldiers of that institution's state. If the soldier attended college be certain to check the archives of his alma mater. Local historical societies can also be a valuable resource. Primary material is often given to local historical societies of a soldier's hometown or where an event occurred.

During the Civil War, sesquicentennial concerted efforts were made to collect Civil War archives material. The most extensive is the James I. Robertson, Jr. Legacy Collection at the Library of Virginia created by teams of archivists went to every county in the state scanning Civil War materials developing a collection of 33,000 pages of primary materials.⁸

A Final Word

This final advice may not sound like sophisticated research. Yet, it can be most helpful and rewarding. List names, places, battles, units, and other words from your study, including misspelled forms of the word, and insert the words into your internet search engine looking for random hits. Occasionally the results will be absolutely amazing.

⁸ The James I. Robertson, Jr. Legacy Collection at the Library of Virginia can be accessed at <http://www.virginiamemory.com/transcribe/ceollections/show/8> , accessed December 9, 2018.