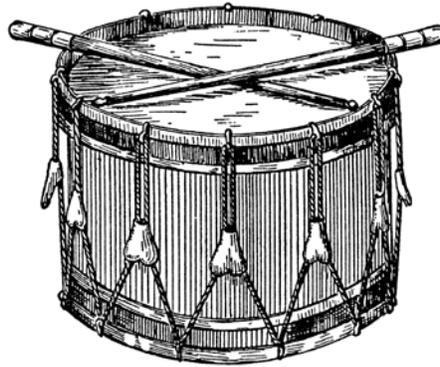


# Researching a Civil War Drummer Boy

by Mary Louise Clifford

*Editor's Note: As the Commonwealth of Virginia commemorates significant state and national milestones during the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865), many of us have grown curious about our own ancestors' participation and points of view, whether from the North or South (or both). This article describes one writer's quest to gather information about her grandfather, who served as a drummer boy during the Civil War. Author Mary Louise Clifford provides insights on how writers' research methods have changed over time as technology has evolved. She also demonstrates her fortitude in piecing together a story that is ultimately a gift to budding historians and an ode to a beloved family member.*



useful. I picked up Bruce Catton's *This Hallowed Ground*, which gives an excellent overall picture of the Civil War. In a used book store I found a battered volume titled *Bands and Drummer Boys of the Civil War*, by Francis A. Lord and Arthur Wise. They repeated one of the stories about my grandfather from the regimental history. I saved related newspaper and magazine articles and photos.

I asked him to write down all the family history and genealogy he knew. He gave me Almon's obituary (dated 1926, the year I was born) and the old family photos from that era. As I did the research to write several books, I felt compelled to search for more information about my grandfather.

In the 1990s, the Library of Congress card catalog was put online, eliminating the need to go there in person. Soon search engines on the Internet hugely simplified all kinds of research. Regimental histories were put online. After 2000, census records became available through ancestry.com, and other subscription sites were developed to assist the genealogist. From the searchable online census, I finally learned that in 1860 Almon was in Springfield, Illinois, living with his mother, half-brother, and sister Josephine, who at age 16 was married to George White. In various city

**M**y father told me stories about his father Almon, who was a drummer boy during the Civil War. At age 14, Almon ran away from home to follow an Indiana regiment marching off to war. The second time he ran away, he changed his name to Albert Walton so his mother couldn't find him. He was mustered into the Seventy-fifth Indiana Infantry Volunteers regiment, was captured at the Battle of Chickamauga, and survived Andersonville prison.

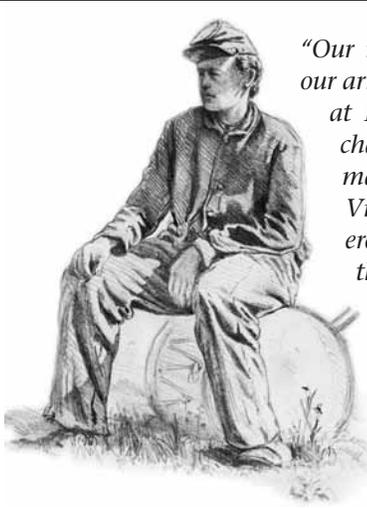
My siblings were not interested in genealogy, but the cardboard photo of the sober youngster with his water canteen and his drum haunted me. Before my father died,

In the 1950s, I learned that I could obtain Almon's compiled military service record by mail from the National Archives. One can still do this, either in person, by mail, or these days by fax, and the service is free for veterans and their direct descendants. Then I sat down in my local library with *Books in Print* to search for a regimental history. I found *The History of the Seventy-fifth Regiment of Indiana Infantry Volunteers* and obtained it through interlibrary loan; it came to me from the State Library in Richmond. The book has no index or bibliography, but I found my grandfather mentioned three times as I read through it.

At every used book sale, I hunted for titles that might be

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*Mary Louise Clifford is the author of 20-some books, ranging in subject from Afghanistan to female lighthouse keepers. For over 50 years she has been collecting information about her grandfather, the drummer boy of company C in the Seventy-fifth Indiana Infantry Volunteers, and takes great satisfaction in having completed the story of his Civil War experiences. For information on her books, visit her website at [www.MaryLouiseClifford.com](http://www.MaryLouiseClifford.com).*



*“Our regiment was ordered to the front and on our arrival in Washington we were sent into camp at Kalorama Heights. After a few weeks we changed camp and crossed the Chain Bridge, marched down through Georgetown to the Virginia side and here we labored diligently erecting fortifications. I often bathed in the swift current on the Potomac at Chain Bridge and took great delight in swimming. One day while enjoying myself in the water, I was seized by a cramp in my right arm and immediately lost my strength, and as I commenced to sink I screamed for help. A young man was standing on the rocks and upon hearing*

*my shout, he sprang into the water and saved me from the angry billows. When we reached the shore I was so filled with joy that I offered him all the money I had, which was only five cents and my fishing line....”*

—From Almon’s memoir

directories, I also found records of Almon’s marriage, his name, and place of residence. Footnote.com (now Fold3.com) provided digital copies of the local newspaper in Poughkeepsie, New York, where Almon lived after 1876.

By querying other researchers on a message board provided by ancestry.com, I found a first cousin once removed who had inherited Almon’s hand-written “memoir.” I had known her grandmother, my father’s sister, in the 1930s. Cousin Betty brought the 22-page, hand-written memoir to me from her home in Fredericksburg. This invaluable primary source told me about two Indiana regiments Almon served in 1862. The year, however, between his enlistment in September 1862 in the Seventy-fifth Indiana Infantry Volunteers and the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863 is summed up in one sentence: “I was in a great many scouting expeditions and marches.” The rest of the memoir is about his prison experiences.

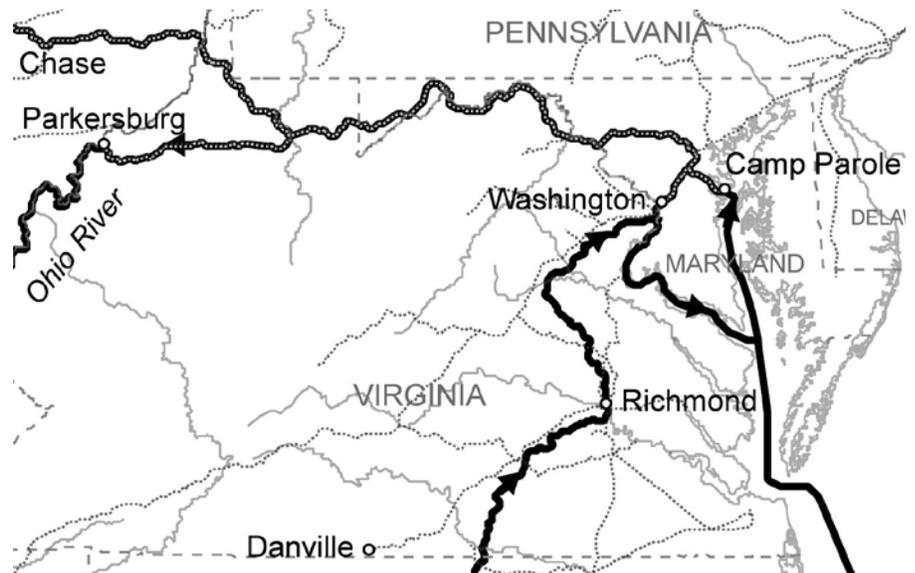
Although the regimental history provides a detailed account of military campaigns and strategy,

it does not describe the day-to-day life of an ordinary foot soldier. To tell Almon’s story, I needed a different kind of document—a soldier’s journal. I Googled the Seventy-fifth Indiana Infantry Volunteers, studying every site listed for ideas. Through this process, I found exactly the journal I wanted, kept by

a member of Almon’s regiment: *Fighting for Liberty and the Right: The Civil War Diary of William Bluffton Miller*, published in 2005 and edited by Jeffrey L. Patrick and Robert J. Willey. I then ordered it on Amazon.com. It provides a complete daily record of what the ordinary soldiers in the 75<sup>th</sup> Indiana regiment were doing. Sergeant Miller mentions my grandfather on page 93, calling him “Little Al, drummer boy of Company C” while describing an incident in which General Reynolds was reviewing the regiment and dismounted from his horse to talk to Al. I wrote the editors and obtained permission to quote from this book.

Almon’s memoir and Sergeant Miller’s journal provided enough information to write an account of Almon’s life from the time he left home until the Battle of Chickamauga, where he was captured. To verify what I was learning about Almon, I wanted to find more official government documents.

Living in Alexandria, Virginia since 2005 made it easy for me and my daughter Candice, who is a maritime historian, to visit the



*This map shows the routes that Al traveled, in both directions, from November 1864 through June 1865.*

National Archives research facilities in Washington, D.C. and College Park, Maryland. The National Archives houses the records of the federal government, which are organized by government agency. The finding aids are divided into three broad categories—maritime, army, and civil. The National Archives has an online guide for researchers (the finding aid for its Civil War military records is on its website at <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war>). Most research, however, must be done on site.

There is a finding-aids room on the first floor of the downtown D.C. Archives, with shelves of notebooks indicating where documents are located and archivists who will help you get started. Once you have found a description of records of interest, you fill out pull slips to request the material, and in an hour or so they are delivered to you in the Main Reading Room. Researchers may take a camera, a laptop computer, and a flat-bed scanner (all carefully examined by security personnel) into the Reading Room.

After pursuing the obvious lines of inquiry, I asked a Civil War researcher how I should proceed. He advised me to list all of the men in Almon's regiment who were wounded or captured at the Battle of Chickamauga and then check each one's military service record. For those who survived the war, he suggested that I check their pension application/records. (Both types of records can be found in Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762–1984.) At the time, this seemed like a rather daunting task. The regimental history contains the full roster of the 900+ Indiana volunteers and what happened to them, so I listed the 43 who were wounded or captured at Chickamauga. Their military service records told me who had died in prison



*Almon Beneway as Albert Walton from the author's collection*

and which men were sent to the same four Confederate prisons as Almon. I assumed the men of the 75<sup>th</sup> would have tried to stay together throughout that experience.

Then I focused on 10 of the 43 comrades who had survived the war and applied for pensions. Two applications proved to be gold mines. In Private Bortsfeld's application, I found a hand-written letter signed by my grandfather, explaining why he could not support

Private Bortsfeld's request for a pension. That was a pivotal moment for me. Until then, I hadn't been sure what would come of my research, but as I sat in the Reading Room holding my grandfather's letter, I knew the wartime experiences of an ordinary teenage foot soldier could provide a reader with a whole new perspective on the Civil War.

My daughter and I also found an 1885 Dutchess County list of

veterans receiving pensions, which told us that Almon received \$10 a month after 1881 because he developed asthma as a result of his war-time experiences. Through pension records, we also learned that Almon's sister Josephine had married her brother's wartime bunkmate, Sergeant Jacob Lair, just one month after they were mustered out of service.

I knew that my grandfather had spent time in several prisons—Richmond, Danville, and later Andersonville—and I was interested in learning more about what life was like in them by using primary source material. One official report I found, written by a Confederate doctor (filed in Record Group 109, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, 1825–1900), explains why so many prisoners were dying at Andersonville. By 1864, the Confederacy simply lacked the resources to house and feed the thousands of prisoners of war sent by rail to this remote Georgia pine forest.

The National Archives library has a large section of volumes on the Civil War, most of them written in the nineteenth century. On the shelf about prisons I found a first-person account by a POW survivor of the same prisons as my grandfather: John McElroy, *Andersonville, a Story of Rebel Military Prisons, Fifteen Months a Guest of the So-called Southern Confederacy*. We photographed the sections that supported and supplemented Almon's descriptions.

We found Almon's name in records of prisoner-of-war survivors, located in Record Group 249, Records of the Commissary General of Prisoners: in Entry 69, "Registers of arrivals and departures of paroled Federal prisons of war at Camp Parole, 1862–1865"; in Entry 72, "Registers of Exchanged Prisoners of War, 1861–1865"; and in Entry 142, "Miscellaneous Records of Prisoners of War." Almon's

### Civil War Genealogy—A Select Listing of Resources

- Ancestry.com, Civil War Genealogy. Available at: <http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~sroots/cwgene.htm>
- Familysearch.org. Includes access to Civil War records and online genealogy courses
- Fold.3. A collection of original military records. Available at: <http://www.fold3.com>
- Library of Congress, Local History and Genealogy. Available at: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/>
- Library of Virginia, Civil War Research Guide. Available at: <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/civil-war/>; and the genealogical records, available at: <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/generesearch.pdf>
- National Archives, Genealogy Research in Military Records. Available at: <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war>
- National Park Service, Civil War soldiers and sailors database. Available at: <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>
- RootsWeb.com. Available at: <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>
- Virginia Genealogical Society. Available at: <http://www.vgs.org/va-research-aids/75-vra-links>
- Virginia Historical Society. Provides links to online genealogy and Civil War resources. Available at: <http://www.vahistorical.org/>.

name also appears in muster rolls and company Morning Reports found in Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762–1900.

Now I had enough material to write a full text about Almon's war-time experiences. To find photographs, we went to Archives II, located in College Park, Maryland, where we used a flat-bed scanner to capture photos from Entry 111-B: "Mathew Brady Photographs of Civil War-Era Personalities and Scenes, compiled 1921–1940, documenting the period 1860–1865," and Entry 111-BA: "Civil War-Era Photographs, compiled ca. 1921."

We downloaded images from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Digital Collections at [www.loc.gov/pictures](http://www.loc.gov/pictures): Andersonville Prison Photographs, Civil War Photographs, the Morgan Collection of Civil War Drawings, and Photographs of the War of the Rebellion. We ordered and

paid for high-resolution digital images from the New-York Historical Society and the Virginia Historical Society.

All of these pieces were fitted together into a 253-page book, *Drummer Boy of Company C: Coming of Age in the Civil War*. I put in many sidebars containing definitions and supplementary material to help young readers understand the basic concepts. Four custom-made maps show Almon's extensive travels, and 80 illustrations ground his experiences in the period. Feeling great satisfaction in having resurrected that sober drummer boy with his canteen and drum, we published his book on September 20, 2013, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Almon's capture at the Battle of Chickamauga—and Almon now may be the only drummer boy in history to have a page on Facebook and his own web site: [www.CivilWarDrummerBoy.com!](http://www.CivilWarDrummerBoy.com!) 