

John H. Merrell Civil War Diaries Foreword

I can't pinpoint the moment this project stopped being a matter of idle curiosity and became a serious effort to share John Merrell's Civil War diaries with his descendants. I vaguely remember Mom and Dad pulling out the old diaries when I was very small. I clearly remember Dad reading parts of the diaries out loud shortly after he and Mom received photocopies of some of the materials they donated to the UCLA special collections library in 1965.

About two years ago when we were down for a visit Dad came into the kitchen one sunny morning as we were lounging over our coffee and showed the photocopies of the diary to my sons. He shared a few passages out loud. I was fascinated.

Some months later I asked Mom and Dad to send me the whole set of photocopies, since I wanted to computerize them so they would be more accessible to anyone who wanted to read them. They went one better and hand-carried the diary material all the way to Davis. I didn't jump in and get to work right away, but I did take inventory of what was there, and wrote to UCLA to get copies of the missing materials.

I took a day to see the original diaries at the special collections library at UCLA. The pages of some of them are quite blue, and one of the librarians there at UCLA told me they used old uniforms as part of the rag content of the paper, thus the blue color. Some of the volumes are intact with their original covers, while others are loose leaf, with the original covers gone. Sometimes John Merrell had a new blank book to use, other times he used end parts of old blank books, and sometimes I think he even wrote over old, faded journals.

I consider this to be a work in progress. I didn't have time for anything more than a cursory proofreading, as you will no doubt discover. Please let me know of mistakes that need to be corrected. If you have anecdotes or memorabilia relating to John H. Merrell, please send copies to me. He mentioned photographs taken of his unit, himself, and several of his fellow soldiers. I am hoping those photographs are squirreled away carefully in someone's hoard of family treasures!

I have come to really like Great-Grandfather Merrell. He had a keen sense of humor and a strong streak of determination which I believe has passed to his descendants in generous measure. I hope you will enjoy getting to know him through his Civil War diaries as much as I have.

Barbara Linderholm
December 1992

INTRODUCTION

The following is a transcription of original diaries kept during the American Civil War by my great-grandfather, John H. Merrell. The original diary volumes, together with other letters and memorabilia from the Haines, Evans, and Merrell families, were donated to the UCLA special collections library in 1965 by my father, Paul Frederick Olson, and my mother, Helen Elizabeth Evans Olson, granddaughter of John Merrell. To view the materials at the UCLA library, request "Special Collection #1131, Haines (etc.) family papers". Two days' notice is recommended since the materials are kept in a remote storage building, supposedly with humidity control and other features to enhance and safeguard valuable source materials.

Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling have usually been modernized in order to make the text more accessible to the reader. Punctuation was often either non-existent in the original, or had faded so badly as to be illegible, so I have had to make numerous decisions as to where one sentence ends and the next begins. Sometimes this was clear from the context, but sometimes it was ambiguous, and it is possible I occasionally chose incorrectly.

I have retained contemporary differences in the way words were used, because such differences in usage illustrate the times during which the diaries were written as well as the personality of John Merrell.

I did modernize spelling, but I must point out that spelling in the original was not consistent. John Merrell changed the spelling of several words over the course of time. For example, early in the diaries he used "pease" or "peace" to refer to cannons, while later he changed the spelling to "piece." "Reveille" also went through several spelling evolutions until he settled on the version you see here. I think his spelling became more sophisticated as he was exposed to military instruction manuals which he had to study in order to take charge of the cannon battery as corporal and later as sergeant.

The spelling of names is often inconsistent in the diaries, and I also found it particularly difficult to decipher the initial capital letters of names. The same person's name may thus be spelled differently at different places in the diary.

The text indicates that eleven diaries originally existed. Volume Nine is not in the UCLA collection, and may have been lost in the mail during the Civil War. I worked from photocopies made from microfilm of the original diaries. Some pages of text are missing in both the original and the photocopies, but it is possible that the photocopies are incomplete in some cases and additional material can perhaps be found in the originals. Sometime I hope to have the time to go through the originals thoroughly.

The original diaries are badly faded in places rendering words, entire passages, or even several pages in sequence illegible. The handwriting style itself is sometimes difficult for the modern reader. Ambiguous words or phrases are either set off by [brackets] or followed by [?]. I also use [brackets] to enclose a word left out in the original but obviously intended to be included by John Merrell. I have omitted obviously unintentional duplicate words or phrases. I use ---- to indicate illegible or indecipherable words or passages which I could not reconstruct with reasonable accuracy. My own comments occasionally inserted to clarify text are also in [brackets]. Parentheses and underlining, when they appear, are the author's own.

I have standardized the date line used to open each diary entry, although there was considerable variation in the original. Sometimes John Merrell wrote a complete date including day, date, month, and year, and sometimes he entered just a partial date, often as little as just the date ("17th") with no month or year indicated. Sometimes the day was listed first, sometimes the date or the month was listed first.

John Merrell often used abbreviation in the text of the diary, for example, "received" was usually written "recd", "and" was often "&", and military rank was abbreviated "Col" or "Gen" or "Lieut" (without periods)!

Several of the diary books include lists of letters received and answered at the back, and also lists of goods issued to soldiers, detachments assigned to guard duty, etc. I plan to include those in an appendix eventually.

I have little biographical information about John H. Merrell. I do not know the date or place of his birth, or the names of other family members other than those mentioned in the diary. I believe he was from Oneida, New York (based on mailing address given in beginning or ending pages of several diaries), but I can't explain why he set off for war from Toledo. He does have relatives scattered various places in Ohio, which you will discover as you read. He had a sister, Mollie, and a brother, Thomas. He may also have had a brother, Harlow. His cousin Albert volunteered as a soldier, and they often are close enough to visit each other, though they were not in the same battery. I hope to be able to add a biographical appendix at a later date.

The diary opens as young John Merrell is on his way from Toledo, Ohio, to Camp Dennison, near the Little Miami River, east of Cincinnati.