

# Introduction

The thirty-nine stories contained in this book were gleaned from a larger project concerning the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in Oswego County. Having learned that many of the original descriptive books had disappeared, I set out to recreate the missing membership lists for those posts, utilizing articles, notices, and obituaries published in local newspapers. For them and for the few posts whose members were identified, my goal was to provide birth and death dates; provide names of parents, wives, and children; note the military unit in which each man served; and add biographical material through references to published material. Along the way I discovered that many of these veterans had served in regiments outside of Oswego County or, indeed, outside New York State.

They may have been native New Yorkers working or attending school in another state when the war broke out, such as John B. Alexander. They may have been immigrants desirous of supporting their new country, as was the case of Dr. Lawrence Reynolds. Still others moved to Oswego County from parts unknown after the war, including John B. Brockman.

This investigation uncovered the truly notable lives of men who were, among others, politicians, farmers, ministers, and teachers. Edward Austin Cooke and Thomas DeWitt Deans are only two examples of veterans who devoted years to improving their communities.

Previous study had already revealed stories of soldiers who had not been members of the GAR but who were notable for their sacrifices on behalf of the nation. William C. Raulston, Smith Parke, and Samuel Merwin Olmstead belong to this group.

Women played an important role in the Civil War. They held families together while their menfolk were at the front. They tended cattle, grew crops, and cared for children and elderly relatives. Women formed

relief societies to assist soldiers' destitute families, sent food and clothing to soldiers, and wrote letters to boost the morale of those hungering for hometown news. After the war they founded the Woman's Relief Corps, which participated in the various activities of local GAR posts. A few women, such as Elmina Spencer and Mary Walker, overcame male prejudices and contributed directly to the war effort by caring for wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield and in the hospital.

The men and women appearing in this book represent only a fraction of the millions who put aside personal endeavors to unite in a common cause: preserving the Union. In a larger sense, however, every person so engaged was notable, even if only to family and friends.



Figure I.1. Major George Hugunin, a veteran of the 147th Regiment, figured prominently in the National Guard after the Civil War. Author's collection.

The political and cultural atmosphere in which these people lived was influenced by the great social issues of the time, notably that of slavery. Men enlisted to preserve the Union, not to free slaves. Yet that debate was the catalyst for the secession of eleven southern states following Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency in November 1860. The attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861 catapulted the nation into a conflict whose effects are still felt in twenty-first-century America.

Oswego County was a microcosm of nineteenth-century American society. Abolitionists called for the immediate liberation of slaves everywhere, arguing that perpetual bondage was legalized robbery. Pro-slavery advocates referred to biblical texts which, they surmised, confirmed one man's right to own another. Both groups vehemently claimed God was on their side. Accommodations made by either were pleasing to none—and so the war was fought.

Out of the conflict, which consumed the lives of more than 620,000 soldiers and sailors, emerged the thirty-nine people featured in this narrative. Not all survived the war, and those who returned to civilian life were changed forever. Despite hardships, trauma, and loss, however, each contributed to improving the situation of family, friends, Oswego County, and, indeed, the entire country.