



DECODING DUTCHESS PAST

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A Trail of Discovery Across 5 Generations: The Continuous Path of Historical Research

by Dean Thomas

The subject of my research has been the 128th New York State Volunteer Infantry Regiment that fought in the U.S. Civil War and was made up of men from the towns and villages of Dutchess and Columbia Counties along the Hudson River.

My research and fact-finding all started when I had a sports injury and was laid up for a few weeks back in the early 1990s. My Mom handed me a book and said, "Here Dean, here's something to read while you're staying off your feet ... your Great Great Grandfather fought in these battles." It was a book about the Civil War Battles of the Shenandoah Valley fought by Union soldiers under General Phil Sheridan ... the "James E. Taylor Sketchbook."

Once I started reading, I was hooked. It set in motion an insatiable desire to learn more about the Civil War, my ancestor's regiment, the 128th NY, their travels and engagements and the impacts to the people and small towns up and down the Hudson River valley. Photographs of the times left the strongest impressions with me, and I thus began seeking out images of the soldiers along with anything else I could find.

When I started out, the internet was in its infancy, so a lot of the fact-finding was done the old-fashioned way, on foot, over the phone or via short exploratory trips. Over time, the internet grew and added to the scope of my research. This enabled me to investigate still more facets of the regiment and its history.

Researching the regiment has provided a wealth of good times, discoveries, eureka moments and lots of memories. And as part of it, I have been lucky to have made several life-long friendships.

Some of my fondest memories include...

- Taking a riverboat ride up the Mississippi River from New Orleans to visit to the Port Hudson battlefield and National Park. As remote as it still is, the area remains much as it had been when the soldiers of the 128th surround-

ed and lay siege to the fortress in the spring of 1863.

- Visiting and standing at the 128th's Cedar Creek monument ... placed near where the regiment was overrun at dawn on the morning of the battle ... looking out over the Shenandoah River, rolling fields and the backdrop of mountains, today so peaceful, realizing this was the very spot my ancestor was wounded five generations ago.

- Of course the highlight has been meeting and engaging with other 128th descendants and researchers, over the internet and in person. There are several who will always be near and dear to me and it will bring a smile to think back on our history related conversations, mutual discoveries, info sharing, etc. ... I think of Joel, Mark, Virginia and Gus just to name a few!

It is every collector's dream I think to have their collection stay together and not have it be parsed out piecemeal to the highest bidders. Thus, one of my hopes in passing this collection of 128th images and documents along to the Dutchess County Historical Society (DCHS), is that they can stay together and as such, provide a more complete body of reference, than could a single image or soldiers letter. Together they can help tell a more complete story.

Research on the history of the regiment has been both very rewarding and quite a lot of effort. Passing it on to an organization like the DCHS, rooted in the very place from which the 128th began, gives me hope that it was not all for naught ... and that it can be shared and built upon by others going forward.

As time marches on, mankind's digital tools continue to become more and more powerful, and my hope is that the information I've collected and organized can be digitized and made more easily accessible and shared to a much wider audience than I could ever do on my own.

At the DCHS, I hope it can be kept safe and made available to future generations using whatever vehicles they deem



Above is a montage of close-ups of a patriotic photo case (The Union Now And Forever), showing William H. Frear of Poughkeepsie. Enlisting in 1864, Frear was taken prisoner at the historic Battle of Cedar Creek (Virginia) in October 1865, in a surprise attack by the Confederate Army. The battle ended up giving the Union Army the advantage. Frear was released from prison and eventually "mustered out," returning to Poughkeepsie in 1865. *Courtesy photo*

appropriate. I am very thankful that the DCHS has entertained taking on the care-taking of these artifacts of a Civil War regiment, a part of our local, albeit not so distant, history!

Dean Thomas lives near Rochester, and is in the process of donating his extensive Civil War collection to DCHS.



The richness of the Dean Thomas Collection comes from not merely the objects, such as photographs and documents and letters, but the enormous amount of detailed, organized and sourced work. *Courtesy photo*

Dean Thomas has had two articles recently published in Dutchess County Historical Society (DCHS) Yearbooks, relating to the local 128th New York State Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. As you'll see, it is an area of intense and longstanding interest to him. He shares his thoughts, here, as he begins the process of offering his collection to DCHS.

The head of Collections, Melody Moore, is creating a recommendation to accept the collection at the next Board of Directors meeting. An acquisition of any collections gift needs the endorsement of the Board to ensure it is relevant and appropriate, and to ensure a preservation and public access plan is in place.

We thought you might enjoy getting a view into the process as it is happening. Any collection this rich in content and detailed sourcing, especially when combined with others on the topic, can evolve into talks, books, articles, documentary theater, documentaries, living history, videos. And so on! One of the most enjoyable parts of our work involves connecting people with like interests.

Know anyone who studies the Civil War? Please direct them to this work, especially as it is formally acquired and made accessible. Bill Jeffway, Executive Director. More at www.dchsn.org/Thomas-prospective.

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