Courtesy of M. Wesley Clark

Lieutenant John W. Bates

Life in Arlington's Forts During the Civil War

By Dr. Mark Benbow

In August 1864, John W. Bates enlisted in the Union Army near his home in East Weymouth, Massachusetts. The young shoe stitcher signed for a year, receiving a $100 bonus, one third of which was paid immediately.[1] Bates was assigned to the 23rd US Army Massachusetts Volunteers, one of fourteen heavy artillery companies raised throughout Massachusetts in August of 1864. The 23rd was one of several units consolidated into the 4th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Heavy Artillery.[2] In September they were ordered to Washington for garrison duty in the forts surrounding the capital. Bates spent the next year at Fort Reynolds in what is now Fairlington. He was a good soldier, earned a promotion to Lieutenant, and was nominated by his commander to be Quartermaster in charge of distributing and keeping track of supplies, a position he was reluctant to accept because he felt he lacked the proper background. His experience was typical of many soldiers who served their country during the Civil War. It was only by chance that he never "saw the elephant" i.e., experienced combat. He no doubt suffered homesickness, missed his family, friends and the girl back home. Thousands of other Union soldiers in Arlington shared the same experiences as Bates while serving in one of the many forts in the area.[3]

From the summer of 1861 until the summer of 1865 an ever-growing series of forts, artillery batteries and rifle trenches were built around Washington to protect the US capital. By the end of the war, 68 enclosed earthen forts, 93 supporting batteries, and miles of rifle trenches surrounded the city. Thirty-three forts and twenty-five batteries were south of the Potomac River.[4] Between 10-25,000 men at a time served in the forts. Bates was one of an estimated 9,000 artillerymen stationed at one time around the capital.[5] The county also hosted training camps preparing soldiers in the Union's armies for fighting in and around Virginia, including the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James. Arlington County (then named Alexandria County)[6] was, in some respects, temporarily the largest military base in the world.

On May 23, 1861 Virginia held a referendum to vote on secession from the Union. Alexandria City voted along with most of Virginia overwhelmingly for succession, while the small rural Arlington population of approximately 1,400 chose to remain in the Union, the only county in the current state of Virginia to do so.[7] Virginia joined the Confederate States of America (CSA), but Alexandria and Arlington were a part of the Confederacy for only about twelve

hours. Federal troops quickly occupied northern Virginia, extending into eastern Fairfax County and Falls Church.

Union soldiers flooded into the Washington area from all over the northern United States, but especially from New York, New England (some of the first units here were from Vermont), and from the Midwest. Guards were posted on both ends of the Long Bridge (where the 14th Street Bridge is now), the Aqueduct Bridge (where the Key Bridge is now) and the Chain Bridge. The capital's defense plans called for 25,000 men, although in reality that figure was probably not often met as troops were deployed further south.[8] The number of men in the forts was finally bolstered after Confederate General Jubal Early's raid on Fort Stevens in the District of Columbia in July 1864, which frightened the capital enough that more men were sent to the forts, including a newly-enlisted John Bates.

Fort Reynolds (originally Fort Blenker), where Lieutenant Bates was stationed, was one of the first forts to be built in Arlington, set to control the Four Mile Run valley. An artillery battery was added to its west for support, and *abatis* (large wooden spikes made from downed trees) were added to make Four Mile Run a barrier to Confederate troops. Forts Bernard and Craig further strengthened the Four Mile Run line. The Arlington Heights commanded the city of Washington, so they were quickly fortified as well.

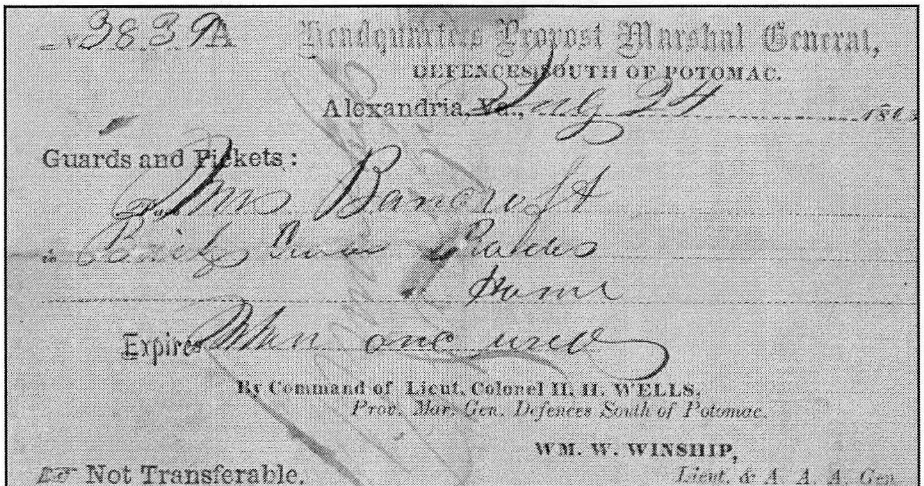
Much of the local civilian population fled as soldiers moved into the area. Throughout northern Virginia, those who remained quickly discovered that it did not matter which side of the war they supported; both Union and Confederate soldiers would take whatever they needed from residents: food, livestock, timber, clothing, shoes, horses, anything. Abandoned homes and barns became quarters for officers, hospitals, stables, or would be torn down for lumber. Sometimes they'd simply be put to the torch to deny them to the enemy.[9] Almost every large tree in the county was felled for fuel, lumber or to provide a clear field of fire. As a result, few trees older than 1865 exist in the county today. The remaining civilians also had to live with tight security requirements, including carrying passes to move from one area to another. Of course not everything was grim. Some locals did a booming business selling supplies to the military. A few local girls found sweethearts and future husbands among the young men in blue.[10]

Life for the soldiers in the forts and camps could be tedious. One of the most famous quotes from a common soldier during the war came from Oliver Norton of the 83rd Pennsylvania. In a letter written from his camp near Falls Church in October 1861 Norton told his sister back home of his daily routine, "The first thing in the morning is drill, then drill, then drill again. Then drill, drill, a little more drill. Then drill, and lastly drill. Between drills, we drill, and sometimes stop to eat a little and have roll-call." A New York officer lamented

"one day is painfully like another...We are getting very weary of the monotony of this kind of life, and long for a change."[11]

The day started with 5:00 am reveille (6:00 am in winter). Soldiers quickly dressed for roll call, followed by breakfast a half hour later. At 8:00 am those chosen for guard duty would report, standing guard for two hours out of every six for the day. The noon meal was followed by another roll call and then for a dress parade, at which that day's messages and orders would be read. Afternoons would also be filled with more drills. After the evening meal, there would be another roll call. Privates had some time off in the evening, but officers often attended training in warfare tactics and strategy to prepare for teaching the never-ending drills.[12]

The schedule while on a campaign was usually less rigorous than for those stationed away from the action. For the soldiers stationed in Arlington the rigor of the day's activities was largely up to their individual commanders. Drilling was expected, but some officers expected more than others. Pity the poor soldier in his wool uniform during a hot Virginia summer if his commander required long drills every day in full uniform: marching, practicing maneuvers, firing weapons, etc. Calvary and artillery units practiced their own disciplines as well as some infantry training. Of course, live ammunition was used for target practice. That's why Arlingtonians still find the cone-shaped lead bullets named Minié balls, named after their French inventor Captain Claude-Etienne Minié, in their gardens today. Artillery units generally did not fire live ammunition for



No. 3839A

Headquarters Provost Marshal General,
DEFENCES SOUTH OF POTOMAC.
Alexandria, Va., July 24 186

Guards and Pickets:
Pass Mrs Bancroft

Expires when one used

By Command of Lieut. Colonel H. H. WELLS,
Prov. Mar. Gen. Defences South of Potomac.

WM. W. WINSHIP,
Lieut. & A. A. A. Gen.

☞ Not Transferable.

AHS collection

One-time pass issued to Mrs. Bancroft, July 24, 1863.

every drill, although they had to use it sometimes, and yes, local gardeners occasionally find cannon balls or shell shrapnel as well as Minié balls.[13]

The cry of "MAIL CALL" would spark a rush to see what letters awaited. Messages would be read and reread, treasured and passed around. Particularly entertaining letters would be read out loud for one's fellows.

Local civilians could come and watch many of the drills. During one such local mock battle at the end of 1861, a private noted that "Quite a number of carriages were up from the city [Alexandria] and I saw ladies watching the sport with a great deal of interest. They would start at the report of the cannons and give a nice little city scream, as ladies will." He concluded, "I am getting some accustomed to the smell of powder" which was, of course, the point.[14]

Not all camp life was drilling and boredom. Soldiers were creative in finding ways to amuse themselves, as well as following some age-old diversions. Singing groups were popular. *Sängerbünde*, German singing clubs, had been imported to the US by German immigrants and were popular not just with German-Americans, but with soldiers in general. Drinking songs, sad songs, love songs, religious hymns, could all be heard ringing out around the county, sometimes, but not always, accompanied by an instrument. Especially skilled, or merely very enthusiastic, groups of singers would give concerts. One young officer described a moonlit night at Fort Blenker, "I had got an old cornet from one of the boys, and was playing 'Star Spangled Banner,' and other patriotic songs for the officers to sing, and we were all out in the moonlight in front of our tents, making everything ring till twelve o'clock"[15]

Newspapers from around the north would arrive in camp and circulate from one hand to another. Soldiers produced their own papers as well, although if a commander took offense the paper might be short-lived. Generally they filled their pages with poems, jokes, humorous stories, and news from home. Of course, letters from home were not just popular, they were as necessary to morale as food and a warm place to sleep. The cry of "MAIL CALL" would spark a rush to see what letters awaited. Messages would be read and reread, treasured and passed around. Particularly entertaining letters would be read out loud for one's fellows. The soldiers replied with a flood of mail of their own. A majority of northern soldiers were literate, although some of their spelling and grammar would give a modern English teacher nightmares. According to one 1861 estimate, a regiment of 1,000 men might produce 600 letters home

in a day. Stylish patriotic stationary could be purchased from one of the many sutlers, civilian merchants who came to the camps to sell things such as tobacco, playing cards, newspapers, or other non-military supplies.

Bates' sweetheart back home, Nancie Harrington, wrote to him while he was in Fort Reynolds. In October 1864 Nancie filled one letter with "odds and ends" of what was happening in their town and with the people they both knew. A local pastor had purchased a fine new horse. A local business had put up a huge American flag to show support for the war. A frost killed the beans plants in Nancie's garden. She notes that someone they knew had died in the war: "We heard last week that Orace Allen was killed. Do you know anything about it." She clearly missed Bates and sweetly reminded him of time they had spent together. "The beautiful days of autumn are here, with their lucid mornings and quiet evenings. This week I walked down that street you and I used to go to enjoy each other's company. I only wished you were with me." It's a safe bet that Lieutenant Bates wished the same.[16]

Sports filled the soldiers' time as well. Foot races, wrestling and boxing were common. Baseball was growing in popularity, although its rules were not yet formalized into the game the Nationals play. Still, it was similar enough to be recognizably baseball and the earliest known photograph of a baseball game was captured in an 1862 image of a Union fort in Savannah Harbor, Georgia. The

National Park Service

Ft. Pulaski, Georgia. Note the men playing baseball in the background.

photographer focused on a group of solders standing at attention in, yes, a drill. But another group of soldiers can be seen in the background, playing baseball.[17]

For soldiers given leave, Washington and Alexandria were close by, and they provided their own entertainment possibilities, from innocent shopping and sight-seeing to saloons and entertainment that the solders rarely wrote home about. "Hooker's Division," located where Federal Triangle is now, contained an estimated 100 brothels.[18] Alexandria was tamer, or more respectable, depending on your perspective, but thirsty soldiers could find a refreshing glass of beer there, often made by local brewer Robert Portner, whose business expanded serving the military customers.

Drinking was prevalent in both armies, although the Union Army often had more access to alcohol, a reflection of their better supply chain. One paymaster remembered, as he was about to go on his rounds to pay the troops, being issued "a haversack with cooked rations for two days and 'whiskey for five' [days]." Drunken soldiers were common, and were subject to various forms of

Library of Congress

What message were these unnamed soldiers, posing with their cards and liquor, trying to send, and to whom?

discipline, from whipping (officially outlawed early in the war) to extra guard duty. Of course, drinking to excess had its own built-in punishment, what one soldier described as "severe bee hives in my head."[19] Whiskey was popular, as was gin. Various hard ciders were easy to make, and beer was popular, even though the modern lager beer was still fairly new in the US. Sutlers often sold liquor as well, making trips into local towns unnecessary. One soldier from Pennsylvania described a celebration in November, 1861. He and some of his comrades ""went over to Fort Blenker to a German sutler from N.Y. who sold a wine glass full of whiskey for 5 cents."[20] Alcohol consumption throughout American society was higher in the early and mid- nineteenth centuries than now, which gave rise to various temperance societies, some of which operated in the camps to combat drunkenness.[21] As one non-imbibing officer noted in a letter home, "Major Doull and I have inaugurated a temperance movement in the regiment, and I am glad to see that its effects are becoming manifest not alone amongst the men, but amongst the officers, many of whom have been making brutes of themselves ever since they began to feel that they were outside the influence of home and the restraints of society."[22] Despite such hopeful testaments, total temperance was not always easy to achieve. There were far fewer safe non-alcoholic options at the time. Water was often of dubious safety unless boiled first, although while on campaign a soldier's full beard and mustache could act as a convenient filter when drinking from a pond.[23] Sometimes alcohol was the safest choice for a thirsty soldier.

Pay came at irregular intervals, was often late, and not especially generous. A private made $13.00 a month until May 1864, when it was raised to $16.00. Officers made more, but, until June 1864, African-American soldiers made less. Still, the pay was welcomed and some did manage to save money to send home. Of course, pay could also be spent on whiskey, beer, or gambled away. Games of chance, including card games, were a popular diversion in camp, which often led to regrets. As one soldier wrote home, "...only paid a week ago and have not a cent now...I don't think I will play poker anymore."[24]

More serious crimes than gambling, drinking and profanity are also a part of war. The belongings of civilians thought to have rebel sympathies were considered fair game for Union soldiers to loot. Valuables such as jewelry were a popular target, but the most common items taken were livestock and food with which to supplement the boring military diet. Confederate troops likewise helped themselves. Civilians learned to be wary of both armies. If you supported the "wrong" side, then your possessions were fair game. If you supported the "right" side, what's the matter, don't you support the war effort? In either case, soldiers took what they needed, or, sometimes, just what they wanted. In at least one case, the civilian felt sorry for the poor soldier. After the war Henry Birch filed

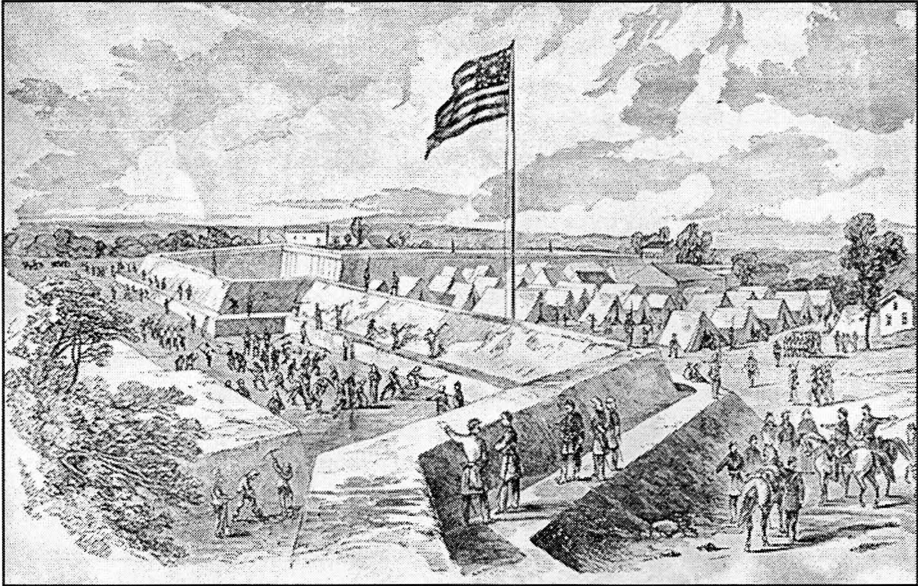
a claim for reimbursement after a soldier "borrow[ed]" a door from his home--"I followed a 8th New York Regiment soldier who had a door from the house in his hands. When I saw the mud he slept in, I just let it go." At least once soldiers who took some fresh-baked bread left the homeowners a thank you note.[25]

Both Union and Confederate supporters lived in the area. A family named Minor lived on "Minor's Hill" just west from where Yorktown High School now sits. Confederate sympathizers, the Minors had two pretty daughters. At some point, the young women flirted with a group of four Union soldiers and invited them for tea. While hosting the young men, one of the sisters signaled some nearby Confederate soldiers. As the men in gray approached the house, the young women told their guests to hide in the cellar. They then turned the Union soldiers, now separated from their weapons, over to the Confederates. Two of the would-be prisoners escaped and quickly returned with their unit. Their commander gave the Minor family an hour to pack, then burned the house to the ground in retaliation for the girls' "despicable act."[26]

For Bates and his comrades based around Washington, the living quarters were usually better than those for soldiers out in the field. There were several types of tents soldiers could use. Larger tents with a stove in the middle could sleep a dozen men, sleeping with their feet close to the stove and laid out like the spokes in a wheel. The wedge-shaped "A" tents could sleep four to six men, depending on the size of the men. A dog tent (the name reflected the initial low opinion of the soldiers for it) could hold two. In permanent areas such as the forts, barracks could be built which would be far more comfortable than tents. Sometimes soldiers spruced up their camps, including constructing large gateways made of woven branches over the camp entrance.[27]

Soldiers such as Lieutenant Bates generally had sufficient food in camp, which was not always true in the field. Soldiers often did their own cooking. Beans, beef, crackers, bacon, rice, potatoes, apples, bread, carrots, were all commonly served. Vegetables were most common in season, and in winter were often scarce and "desiccated potatoes" were a staple. The crackers were notorious for being impossibly hard and often worm-ridden. The source of the "beef' was sometimes only distantly related, if at all, to actual cows. Shooting wild game could add variety, but that was a bit more difficult in a fortified area such as Arlington than on the march, although it was possible. Any deer or rabbit entering the county probably had a death wish. Coffee was a vital part of the diet, "strong enough to float an iron wedge." A rough rule of thumb held that the longer a man served, the stronger he liked his.[28]

What about combat? If you were stationed in one of Arlington's forts, you might never hear a shot fired in anger. There was an occasional shot fired by a Confederate scout or sympathizer, but the fighting remained outside Arlington's



AHS database

Fort Corcoran under construction, late May 1861. Fort Corcoran was located just above Rosslyn, in the area between present-day 18th Street and Key Boulevard.

boundaries. Many soldiers based in Arlington's forts did see combat, but only after their units were sent into battle further south. Disease, not combat, was the most likely killer for those in Arlington. Malaria, typhoid, cholera, "camp fever," the flu, and other illnesses could run quickly through a camp if hygienic conditions were right, and in the 1860s, they were more often right for spreading disease than for preventing it. Outhouses were sometimes available, but open trenches were also very common. Soldiers from rural areas were often used to simply relieving themselves in the woods. An inspector visiting some Washington area camps in 1861 noted that the "stench [was] exceedingly offensive." [29]

The smell was not the most serious problem. Unfortunately, the connection between some diseases and water polluted by human waste had not yet been fully accepted. Soldiers north and south alike were plagued by diarrhea, sometimes called "Helen Quickstep," although locally it was likely known as "the Virginia Quickstep." One soldier noted in his diary "bowels moved 18 times in 3 hours."[30] Lice, fleas and ticks also made life uncomfortable for the troops, in camp and in the field. Still, life in one of the organized camps was better than life on the march. A Union soldier in the Civil War had about a 1 in 14 chance of dying of disease, but Bates' regiment, the 4th Massachusetts Volunteer Heavy Artillery, lost two officers and 23 men to illness, and none to combat out of

approximately 1,000 men, a far lower rate than normal.[31] Bates was discharged in September 1865, went home, married his sweetheart, Nancie, and opened a small store. He joined the Union veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic. Lieutenant Bates complained of the ill effects from malaria and rheumatism that he blamed on his service time. He was awarded a pension of $12.00 a month in 1892 and died in 1910.

When the war was over the soldiers went home, leaving Arlington to its farmers and small settlements. Trees began to grow again in the county and those civilians that had fled began to come back. The forts, mostly made of earth and wood, fell apart, were stripped for building material, or slowly began to sink back into the earth under each year's rain. Fort Whipple became Fort Myer in 1881, but suburban development in the 20th century claimed what traces of the other forts remained. Bulldozers leveling ground for subdivisions to house the returning veterans from World War II finally accomplished what the Confederates never could, the destruction of the forts that guarded Washington.[32]

Dr. Mark Benbow is the Director of the Arlington Historical Museum, Assistant Professor of History in Marymount University's School of Arts and Sciences, and a previous contributor to the *Arlington Historical Magazine*. He thanks M. Wesley Clark, one of Lieutenant Bates' descendents, for loaning the Arlington Historical Society Nancie's letter, photos of John Bates, and other material from his service time. Thanks also to Warren Nelson of the Arlington County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee for his help. An earlier version of this article appeared in *Arlington Magazine* for November/December 2013.

References

[1] For comparison, Bates probably made about $300–$500 a year, working sixty hours weeks, before joining up. http://outrunchange.com/2012/06/14/typical-wages-in-1860-through-1890/ (*Accessed 10/25/2013).*

[2] http://www.civilwararchive.com/unionma.htm (Accessed 9/1/ 2013).

[3] Bates' record of service is listed in *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors and Marines in the Civil War* (Norwood, Massachusetts: Norwood Press, 1933), p. 34. Other documentation is included in the records of the National Archives. Copies were provided to me by M. Wesley Clark, one of Bates' descendents.

[4] Benjamin Franklin Cooling III and Walton H. Owen, II. *Mr. Lincoln's Forts: A Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), p. xi.

[5] C.B. Rose, Jr. "Civil War Forts in Arlington," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (October 1960), p. 19.

[6] I will refer to "Arlington" when I am referring to the county, and "Alexandria" when referring to the

city.

[7] C.B. Rose, Jr. *Arlington County Virginia: A History* (Arlington: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), pp. 97–98.

[8] Cooling, *Mr. Lincoln's Forts*, p. 15.

[9] For details of the plight of civilians in the area, see Noel G. Harrison, "Atop An Anvil: The Civilians' War in Fairfax and Alexandria Counties, April 1861–April, 1862" in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* Vol. 106, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 133–164.

[10] After the war, the Southern Claims Commission was established to review claims by Unionist southerners for losses suffered through the actions of Union troops. Several Arlington residents filed claims; see Ruth Ward, "Life in Alexandria County During the Civil War," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (October 1984), pp. 3–10.

[11] Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), p. 54; J. Howard Kitching, More than a Conqueror (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1873), p. 41.

[12] Wiley, *Billy Yank*, pp. 45–47.

[13] The Arlington Historical Museum at the Hume School has several examples on display.

[14] Wiley, *Billy Yank*, p. 51.

[15] Ibid., pp. 157–169; J. Howard Kitching, *More than a Conqueror*, p. 40.

[16] Nancie Harrington to John Bates, October 8, 1864, letter in possession of M. Wesley Clark, Fairfax County.

[17] *http://deadballbaseball.com/?p=1690* (Accessed 10/24/2013).

[18] Donald E. Press. "South of the Avenue: From Murder Bay to Federal Triangle," in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*, J. Kirkpatrick Flack, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), pp. 54–56.

[19] J. Ledyard Hodge, quoted in "An Incident of the Civil War," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (October 1963), p. 15; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, p. 253.

[20] Mary Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2112), p. 117.

[21] Wiley, *Billy Yank*, pp. 254–255.

[22] Kitching, *More than a Conqueror*, p. 42.

[23] James H. McNeilly, "Memoirs," unpublished, in the possession of the author.

[24] Wiley, *Billy Yank*, p. 49; *http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/usct/usct-united-states-colored.html* (Accessed 9/5/2013).

[25] Ward, "Life in Alexandria County," p. 10; John L. Saegmuller, "Civil War Reminiscences," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine,* Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 1975), p. 11.

[26] Saegmuller, "Civil War Reminiscences," pp. 9–10.

[27] Wiley. *Billy Yank*, pp. 55–56.

[28] Ibid., p. 241.

[29] Ibid., p. 126.

[30] Ibid., p. 136.

[31] *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_Regiment_Massachusetts_Volunteer_Heavy_Artillery* (Accessed 8/30/2013).

[32] Roy C. Brewer, "Fort Scott—Past, Present and Future," in *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October 1965), p. 44.