

A GOOD SOLDIER at Arlington House

1861–1864

By Dean DeRosa

Robert Knox Sneden (1832–1918) was a New York architectural draftsman and landscape artist. During the Civil War, he served as a private in the 40th New York Infantry and as a topographical engineer in the Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac. He survived the war and remained unmarried throughout his life. Sadly, he died nearly a pauper at the Soldiers' Home in Bath, NY, in 1918. By his own lights, however, he was a **GOOD SOLDIER** and left a **GOOD WAR RECORD**.

This is indisputable today: his war record includes a personal diary of nearly 5,000 pages containing detailed watercolor paintings, maps,

Fig. 1: Arlington House

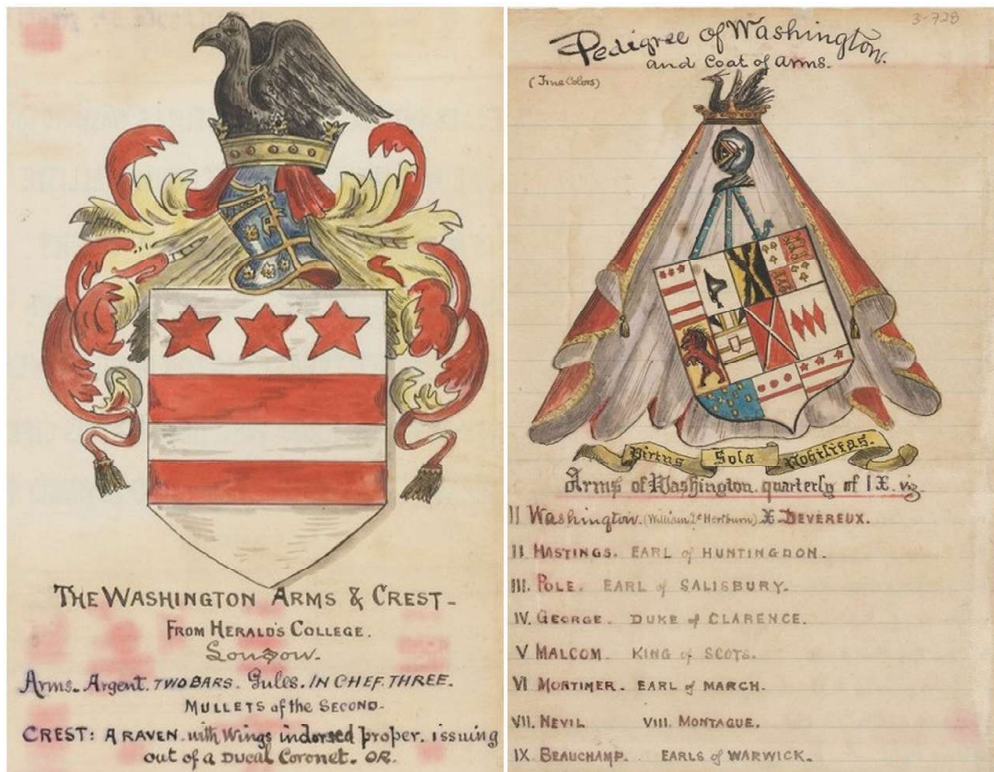


Images from Robert Knox Sneden diary
Courtesy of Virginia Historical Society

Fig. 2: Mount Vernon



Fig. 3: Washington's Coat of Arms and Pedigree



and sketches of Civil War battlefields, landscapes, and prisons.¹ As a member of the headquarters staff of the Defenses of Washington, Sneden served nearly two years in the Northern Virginia area and Washington, DC. In late-1863, however, after transferring to the Third Corps, he was captured by the “Gray Ghost” (Col. John Mosby) and a band of Confederate rangers at the Battle of Mine Run. He was first incarcerated in the Crew & Pemberton’s Warehouse Prison in Richmond, VA, and later in the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia, surviving nearly one and a half years as a prisoner of war under often very harsh and even inhumane conditions before finally gaining parole and returning to New York at the end of 1864.

As a member of the Defenses of Washington staff, Sneden served under Gen. Samuel Heintzelman, at Arlington House (1862) (Fig. 1) and in Washington, DC (1863). During this time, he travelled widely around Northern Virginia and Washington City, sketching and later painting watercolors of several prominent locations and landmarks including Mount Vernon (Fig. 2 and 3), the slave pen in Alexandria, the US Capitol and more.²

Arlington House was the family seat of George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington, and the antebellum home of his son-in-law, Robert E. Lee. At Arlington House, Sneden camped in a tent near the mansion, but likely worked inside the mansion by day. In the mansion, he had occasions to see and sketch odds and ends of Mount Vernon artifacts and related artwork left behind by the Lee family, and even to rummage through a trunk found in the attic containing early correspondence of Robert E. Lee. While at Arlington House, he sketched a notable camp scene of contrabands (former slaves) squatting below the mansion near the river (Fig. 4). The drawing was completed sometime before mid-1863 when the US Government established Freedman’s Village for contrabands and other displaced slaves, near the southern boundary of the once 1,100-acre Arlington Plantation.

Transferring to the Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac in late-1863 brought dramatic changes to the relatively comfortable situation Sneden experienced during the early war years. On his capture by Mosby during the Battle of Mine Run, he was pistol-whipped under interrogation and soon imprisoned, first in Richmond and later in

Fig. 4: Contrabands

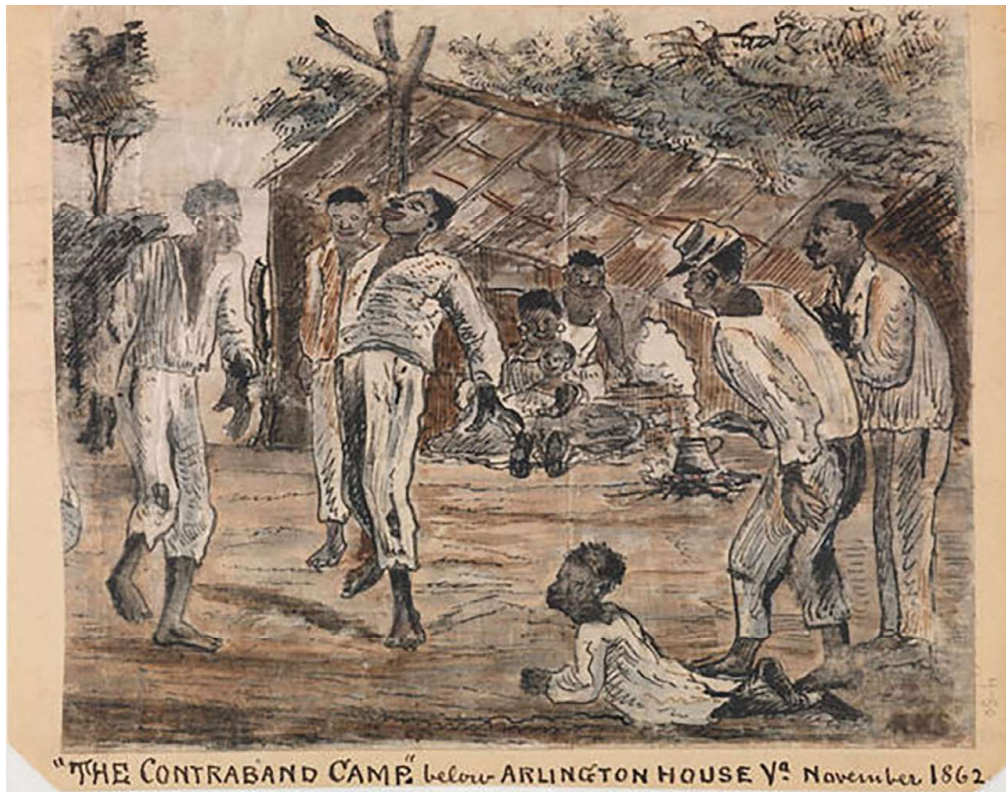


Fig. 5: Andersonville Prison



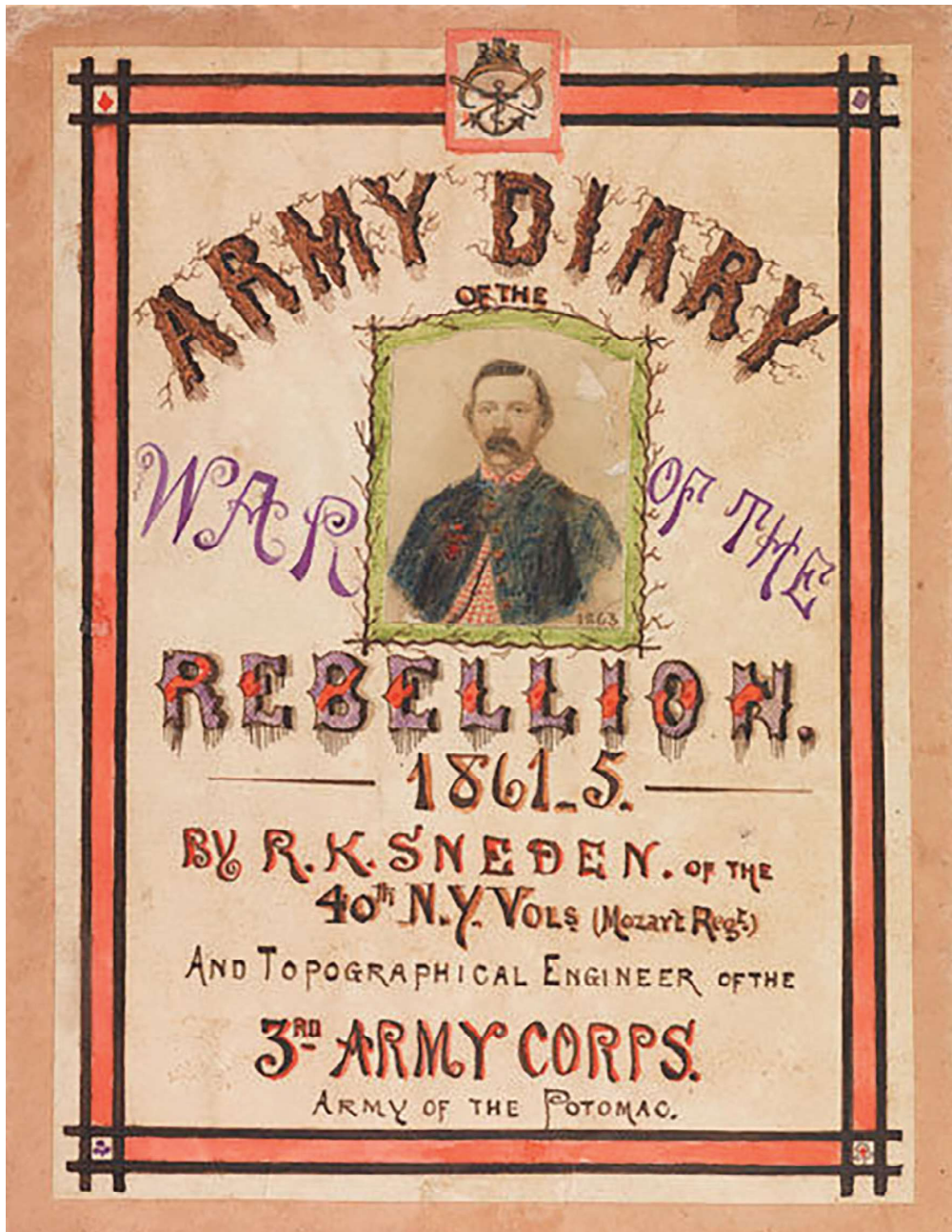


Fig. 6: Cover of Diary

Georgia. Fortunately, he had sent his sketches and other artwork home to New York before his capture. During his incarceration, however, he had little access to sketching materials, and he had to hide carefully the few drawings he was able to accomplish. Crew & Pemberton's Prison in Richmond was a converted tobacco warehouse and principally for enlisted Union prisoners, such as Sneden. It was located near

the more famous Libby Prison reserved for Union officers in the same warehouse district of Richmond, enabling Sneden to make drawings of both facilities while in Richmond. Notwithstanding the importance of Sneden's illustrations of these two prisons, his illustrations of Andersonville Prison in Georgia are more famous. Indeed, shortly after the war his illustrations and sketches of the open-air stockade prison at Andersonville, GA, were featured in newspaper and magazine accounts of the prison's harsh and brutal conditions (Fig. 5). Ultimately, the Swiss-born commandant of the prison, Capt. Henry Wirz, was brought before a military tribunal presided over by Gen. Lew Wallace, who later penned the popular novel *Ben-Hur*. Convicted of conspiracy and murder, Wirz was executed at the Old Capitol Prison in November 1865.

Robert Sneden was paroled in December 1864 and returned to New York in time for Christmas. However, it seems he never truly recovered from his experiences during the war. Although he returned to his situation as an architectural draftsman, he never rose much in his profession, and, near the end of his life, he was admitted to a soldiers' home. He died there in 1918 and was buried nearby. Remarkably, however, he completed his army diary during the years following the war and completed watercolors of many of his wartime sketches (Fig. 6). Also, as if addressing his large and grateful audience today, Robert Sneden left this memorable quotation: "I leave no posterity, but a **GOOD WAR RECORD!**"

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About the Author

Dean DeRosa has lived in Arlington County with his wife and family since 1975. A retired economist, in recent years he has served as a history interpreter at George Washington's Mount Vernon and a National Park Service ranger at Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial. The article here is an abridged version of an earlier, more extensive presentation by the author of the illustrations and experiences of Robert Sneden during the Civil War while stationed at Arlington House and the Washington City area.

Endnotes

1. Sneden's diary consists of several volumes, the largest collection of its kind covering the Civil War. The diary was acquired by the Virginia Historical Society in the 1990s, and it is the basis of two Virginia Historical Society-sponsored books: Charles F. Bryan, Jr. and Nelson D. Lankford, eds., *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey* (New York: Free Press, 2000); and Charles F. Bryan, Jr., James C. Kelly, and Nelson D. Lankford, eds., *Images from the Storm* (New York: Free Press, 2001).
2. Among the other prominent locations and landmarks Sneden sketched and later painted were Pohick Church, the Marshall Hotel and the slave pen in Alexandria City; the Falls Church and the Fairfax Court House; and the US Capitol and the nearby Old Capitol Prison.