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Library Research

Desertion in the Union Army 1861-1866

April 7, 2014

Desertion ran rampant during the American Civil War. In a war that would bring the end to the institution of slavery, little attention is often given to the droves of men who deserted the army dedicated to preserving the Union and setting other men free. In the conventional telling of Civil War history, the tale of deserters is often glossed over. I had very little background knowledge on this particular group when I began my research project on Desertion in the Union Army, and I was rather apprehensive.

I learned that Pennsylvania was actually a hot spot for deserters. The state also sent the second most men to the army during the war, second to New York, meaning proportionately Pennsylvania could have experienced an immense number of desertions. For these reasons, Pennsylvania became the focus of my study. I hoped that by examining the trends in the state itself I could make inferences for the desertion throughout the Union overall.

At this point I started to focus on the response to desertion, and began examining local Pennsylvanian newspapers from the time of the Civil War. I used two databases, the Pennsylvania Civil War Era Newspaper Collection from the Penn State Library, and the Chronicling America database from the Library of Congress. Both provided access to over 65 different newspapers across Pennsylvania, and had uncomplicated search engines. At first my searches were broad, I looked for desertion throughout each year of the Civil War. But once I began observing different responses, such as branding, flogging, or even mentions of tarring and feathering, I began to do searches for those terms, to follow the response throughout the war. This brought more substance to my research.

But for these resources, my background knowledge on the subject was not enough. These newspapers were at such a local level, they often mentioned things I had never heard of without explaining in full what they were. For further context I turned to the Weinberg Memorial

Library. My most helpful source, and the most frequently referenced throughout my research, was *The War of Rebellion* series. This is a huge compilation of all of the documents from the Civil War, full of first-hand accounts, records, and reports. If I needed to check anything that I came across in one of the newspaper articles, I could find it here. To tap into secondary sources I accessed the library's database of America: History & Life. This allowed me to locate articles dealing with more specific topics related to desertion, and the library's PALCI E-Z borrow feature made receiving articles trouble-free. With the help of the library I was able to expand the different types of sources I used for my research.

My final paper for this research project will follow the trajectory of the trend of desertion through the years 1861-1866. I began by focusing on the response on the home front as described by local newspapers, but expanded my scope to the responses of the military and government throughout the war. The resources provided by the library as well as the guidance of my mentor Dr. Pratt allowed me to explore in depth desertion throughout the course of the war, to draw inferences on the trend for both Pennsylvania and the Union as a whole. This experience allowed me to practice and improve my research skills, and allowed me to utilize new resources. I now begin to prepare for my Honors Project, and I plan to use similar research methods with the confidence I lacked before setting out on this particular research project.