“Old Litchfield’s Best Sons:” One Family’s Civil War Tragedy

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In one of the most famous letters of his presidency, Abraham Lincoln attempted to console Mrs. Lydia Bixby, whom he believed to be the mother of five sons killed in combat. “I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement,” the President wrote, “and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.” It is well known that all five of Mrs. Bixby’s sons were not killed in the war; two died, one was honorably discharged, one deserted, and the fate of the fifth remains uncertain.\(^1\) The facts of the case do not diminish the power of Lincoln’s words of consolation. Not only has his message echoed throughout the ages to those who have sacrificed children for the nation, but there were also other mothers, like Connecticut’s Mary Tuttle Wadhams, who lost multiple sons in the Civil War.

The story of the Wadhams brothers’ service during the Civil War provides historians with an important window into what motivated a particular family from a small Connecticut town to enlist and fight in the war. The brothers made clear that their service was motivated by a sense of soldierly duty to their country, a sentiment echoed in writings by comrades about the brothers. Their story also highlights the importance of good leadership to the success of a small unit through the relationship Luman Wadhams developed with the men of his company, most of whom he had grown up with in Litchfield. Furthermore, the Wadhams’ military experience compels the reader to confront the horrors of battle, the grief of those on both the front lines and the home front, and how a close knit community grappled to make sense of its loss. These are topics that have intrigued historians in recent years, and they can all be seen in the service and sacrifices of this one family.

Mary Tuttle of Litchfield married Edwin Wadhams, a farmer from nearby Goshen, in 1828. Together they raised six children: a daughter Martha (born in 1829), and sons Henry (1831), Luman (1834), Edward (1837), and twins Frederick and Francis (1841). Edwin had risen to be a colonel in the Connecticut militia, and his sense of patriotism and soldierly duty ran strong in his three oldest sons.

Twenty-six-year-old Luman enlisted in the 1st Connecticut Volunteer Infantry within three days of Lincoln’s call for volunteers following the firing on Fort Sumter. In 1861, Luman—whose pension record lists him as being five foot ten inches tall, with brown hair, hazel eyes, and a sandy complexion—was a machinist living in the nearby city of Waterbury. He was appointed a sergeant and accompanied the 1st to Washington, D.C. Arriving in the capital on May 13, the regiment spent two months guarding the railroad lines around the city. On July 16, it left the city with Brigadier General Irvin McDowell’s army, and fought at Bull Run on July 21, seeing continuous action for six hours. The regiment had retreated to the defenses of Washington by the 23rd, and on July 27, departed the city for Connecticut. Of their return to New York, The Hartford Courant reported that “the men presented the most dusty, tire, and ragged aspect that we have ever witnessed in a large body of men. They went off with new and bright uniforms, wearing a martial and imposing aspect; they came back ragged and dirty.” Still, they were treated like heroes, and marched to the State Capitol where they were thanked by Governor William Buckingham. It is not difficult to imagine that this reception was instrumental in the fact that many of the regiment re-enlisted and became officers. Among these was Luman Wadhams, who in September 1861 enlisted in Company E of the newly forming 8th Connecticut Infantry, alongside his twenty-four-year-old brother Edward. Gerald F. Linderman, in *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, asserts that while few if any of those who enlisted in 1861 anticipated that serious trouble lay ahead, this was not true for those like Luman who re-enlisted.

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2 Luman Wadhams Pension File, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as NARA).
As Luman’s prior service was a much-desired quality, he was promoted to lieutenant. The regiment was transferred to Annapolis, Maryland, and in January 1862 sailed with the expedition under the command of Brigadier General Ambrose Burnside. Together the brothers participated in the Battle of New Bern, and Edward continued on to Fort Macon, Antietam, and Fredericksburg with the 8th. Luman, in accordance with General Orders 74 of the Department of North Carolina—"reasons over which he had no control," according to his military service record—resigned his commission in April 1862 and returned to employment as a machinist in a Waterbury shop. Another source, however, partially attributes his resignation to ill health. For one who placed great emphasis on doing one’s soldierly duty, this must have been a difficult decision.

Twenty-nine-year-old Henry Wadhams answered Lincoln’s call for 300,000 more volunteers in the summer of 1862 by enlisting in Company C of the 14th Connecticut Infantry on August 3. Born in Goshen, five feet eight inches tall, with brown hair, gray eyes and a light complexion, Henry was a machinist like his brother. The Reverend George A. Hubbell had married Henry and Mary Warner in her native Waterbury in 1859, and together they had a daughter Jessie. Henry clearly possessed military talent, for he was promoted to sergeant, then second lieutenant, then to lieutenant. He also clearly had a temper, for Sergeant Benjamin Hirst reported in May of 1863, “Our second Lieut (Wadhams) has been under arrest over a week so that the command of the Company again devolves on Orderly Stoughton.” Still, Henry served with the 14th through the campaigns of Antietam, Fredericksburg (where he was wounded), Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg.

Henry’s enlistment, along with brother Edward’s continued service in the 8th Connecticut, must have rekindled the martial spirit in Luman, for Luman enlisted for the third time in the sixteen-month old contest – on August 8, 1862 with the 19th Connecticut Infantry, soon to be rechristened as the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery. Luman’s repeated enlistments reflect the sense of duty that would later pervade his comrades’ writings about him. The 19th Connecticut, or the Mountain County Regiment, was Litchfield County’s response to Lincoln’s call for 300,000 additional volunteers in the summer of 1862. The townspeople of the county voiced support for war by pledging a regiment formed exclusively from within the county’s borders to help the state fill its quota. The fervor of the townspeople was exemplified

6 Luman Wadhams Military Service Record, NARA.
8 Henry Wadhams Pension File, NARA.
10 Luman Wadhams Military Service record, NARA.
by “ever patriotic ladies [who] had lavishly provided for th[e] entertainment” of men coming to the village center to enlist.11

Luman’s prior service led to his commissioning as a second lieutenant, and he helped lay out Camp Dutton on Chestnut Hill in Litchfield where the regiment mustered, and there taught the new recruits how to pitch their tents.12 At Camp Dutton, the town’s support for the war effort, as manifested in these newest recruits, continued to be exhibited. Theodore Vaill, the unit’s adjutant, remembered:

Camp Dutton was a beautiful spot, but no place for a regiment to learn its hard and ugly trade. Fond mothers and aunts raked the position with a galling and incessant fire of doughnuts, apples, butter, pies, cheese, honey, and other dainties not conducive to the suppression of the rebellion, and citizens thronged the streets and environs from morning till night.13

On September 10, most of Litchfield’s population turned out for the presentation of a regimental flag to the 19th by Julia Noyes, a granddaughter of Revolutionary War hero and Litchfield resident Benjamin Tallmadge. On September 15, the regiment gave three cheers for Camp Dutton and marched off to the East Litchfield train station, where it boarded a special bound for the docks at New Haven. Vaill recorded the countryside’s enthusiasm for its recruits, writing, “[t]he deep interest everywhere felt in the Mountain County Regiment crowds of people at the stations and all along the railway and by white handkerchiefs and white hands that waved us a farewell and a blessing from window and verandah and hilltop.”14

The regiment soon arrived for garrison duty in the defenses of Washington, where they were renamed the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery. When ordered to Fort Craig, Luman protested to Colonel Elisha Kellogg, “I regret only that it is not to the front.”15 The lack of action had little effect of Luman’s military bearing. In early 1863, Will Plumb of Litchfield wrote, “Luman is the best shot in the regiment. He put a ball within half an inch of the bull’s eye.”16 Luman’s skill was rewarded with his promotion on August 22, 1863, to captain and commander of Company A of the 2nd Heavies.17

Luman’s leadership style provides an object lesson on effective small unit leadership in the Civil War. One soldier recalled, “The rigors of military justice were unknown in Co. A, and some judged that it was undisciplined, who afterwards discovered that by mutual affection and esteem it was splendidly governed. On a field day, and while on duty, Capt. Wadhams was the officer, at other times the friend of his men.” Luman rarely punished his men, believing that “harsh and public punish-

14 Ibid., 15.
16 Will Plumb to Lemira, January 5, 1863, Litchfield Historical Society.
17 Luman Wadhams Military Service record, NARA.
ment destroyed self-respect, which he labored to strengthen. A gentleman from Litchfield, while visiting the 2d C.V.A. remarked to Captain Wadhams - 'I find none of your men in the guard house, and the boys say that it is always so. How do you manage?' 'I talk to my boys,' was the reply.” Lewis Bissell, who knew Luman in Litchfield, wrote to his father that the Captain “often comes into the tents, sits down among his men, and makes himself one of them.” The respect was mutual. One soldier later remembered, “Captain Wadhams was one of the few officers in the service who did not feel that his epaulettes made him a great man. He loved his men and associated with them.”

Luman’s leadership supports historian Reid Mitchell’s analysis of successful Union officers in his book, The Vacant Chair. Mitchell writes that “[o]fficers were neither products of an aristocratic class with long traditions of military service, nor, as a general rule, regular army men, trained to command professional soldiers. . . . Those two models would not do to guide officers in the Civil War.” Few Civil War soldiers had military experience and Americans did not come from a “tradition of subservience.” What, then, worked for successful Northern leaders? Family provided a model, as a “father may command his children but keep their interests at heart.” This is evident in Luman’s reference to his soldiers as “my boys.” Furthermore, soldiers demanded an “egalitarian ethos” from their officers, and disrespected those who received “unmerited indulgences.”

In February 1864, Luman received a beautiful presentation sword from the men of Company A. In speaking of the gift, he said: “That was given me when I had been with the boys a year and a half, when they knew me and I knew them well. For that reason I prize it.” Stationed in the immediate outskirts of the nation’s capital, Luman refused most opportunities to travel into the city. He accepted only three passes over nearly a year and a half. “I came here”, he was wont to say, “not to lounge about Washington but to do my duty.” For Luman, as with so many other Civil War soldiers, personal notions of duty proved to be the motivating factor in their service. Luman did accept a three-week furlough from the army in February 1864. He traveled back to Connecticut and married Louisa Baldwin of Litchfield on February 21 in New Haven. True to his character and his sense of duty, Luman was back with the army two days later; he did, however, bring Louisa with him, and one member of Luman’s Company A reported that “the captain’s wife likes living down here very well so far.”

On March 3, 1864, Edward Wadhams, serving with the 8th Connecticut of General Benjamin Butler’s Army of the James, wrote a Waterbury friend that he was “in

20 “The Wadhams Brothers,” 277
21 Luman Wadhams Pension Record, NARA; Luman Wadhams Military Service record, NARA; Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 220-21.
good health” and “not very busy.” Having initially enlisted for two years, Edward thought enough of his service to re-enlist in December 1863; however, by March he was growing frustrated by the lack of action, writing, “We have nothing particularly exciting in this vicinity though there are a few rebs prowling around” the 8th’s camp in Portsmouth, Virginia. He had heard a report that his unit would soon be sent back to North Carolina, but he didn’t “care much where they take us if we don’t get sent to the Army of the Potomac. It seems from the papers that army is on the move again, so I suppose Henry is seeing hard times.”  

The day before Edward’s letter, Congress restored the rank of lieutenant general and would soon confirm the appointment of Ulysses S. Grant to this rank and to the command of all Union armies. Grant devised a strategy of simultaneous offensives by all Union armies to prevent the Confederates from utilizing their interior lines to offset their inferior numbers. In early May, Grant hurled the Army of the Potomac, with Henry’s 14th Connecticut, against Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania Court House. In the resulting bloodbaths, Henry’s 14th lost 102 men and the Army of the Potomac lost more than 36,000 Union casualties, 57% more casualties than the army suffered at Gettysburg. This led Grant to call upon the defenses of Washington for reinforcements. Luman’s 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery returned to their original role as infantrymen, and Lewis Bissell of Luman’s Company A reported that Louisa Wadhams left camp on the evening of May 17, a sure sign that hard campaigning lay ahead.

There was irony in Edward’s statement that “Henry is seeing hard times.” For while both of his brothers were serving with the hard-fighting Army of the Potomac, Edward was also thrust into heavy combat. The Army of the James was ordered by Grant to operate against the southeastern side of Richmond to either seize the Confederate capital or pull troops away from Lee’s army to defend the city. Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard quickly countered Butler’s offensive, bottling up the Army of the James so that, as Grant would later write, “the enemy had corked the bottle and with a small force could hold the cork in its place.” On the morning of May 16, 1864, Beauregard launched a counterattack against Butler’s position at Fort Darling, known to the Confederates as Drewry’s Bluff. The brigades of Bushrod Johnson and Johnson Hagood of Hoke’s Division struck the exposed right flank of the 8th Connecticut, whose commander ordered a withdrawal to the rear. This left a

22 Edward Wadhams to Isaac W. Smith, March 3, 1864, Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT; Edward Wadhams Pension record, NARA.
24 American Civil War Database, <www.civilwardata.com>
26 Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant (C.L. Webster and Company, 1886), II:152.
gap in the Union line, which Johnson's brigade occupied. During this action – in the “fog and confusion of a disastrous morning,” as one veteran remembered it – Edward’s ramrod was struck by a musket ball. He received another rifle from his captain and returned to the firing line. A few minutes later, he was shot. Captain Thomas Sheffield rushed to him and laid him behind a tree to protect him from Confederate fire. Cutting off Edward’s equipment, he found that the bullet had penetrated the sergeant’s heart, killing him instantly. The fighting was so intense that Edward’s body could not be removed without risking the lives of others, so when the 8th pulled back, it was left behind, covered with boughs.

Of his fallen sergeant Captain Sheffield of the 8th wrote:

To me, his loss is irreparable. When I took command of the company, I was, as it were, a stranger. The men knew me only as the former commander of another company. Upon him I placed my whole dependence, giving him full authority. A great part of the time he was actually in command. I found him ever faithful to the trust, and I can truly say that no man in the regiment was more justly entitled than he to a commission.

Tributes to the fallen sergeant poured into the Litchfield Enquirer. A common theme of these letters was Edward’s commitment to his soldierly duty. One comrade in the 8th wrote:

In the loss of Serg’t Wadhams, Litchfield loses its best and most thoroughly tried representative in the Army, and the 8th C.V. one of its most trusty members, while to Company E, the loss is irreparable. For more than two years he has held the post of 1st Sergeant in his Company, and he was looked upon by all its members as their real head, as the Company officers have been constantly changing within that time. By his consistent character, invarying conduct, and fidelity to duty, he won the respect of all who knew him, and now his Company grieve for their loss as those that have lost more than a friend.

His record as a soldier is surpassed by none in the 8th Regiment, he has participated in every engagement in which it has been, and has always by his acts and words battled manfully for his Country, and the righteous cause in which it is engaged. But my poor words are weak and lame, and seem almost a mockery in paying tribute to the memory of one who was so eminently worthy, but his good example lives, and who of those who knew him well will not rise up and call his memory blessed?

A soldier in the 8th from Washington, Connecticut wrote home about Edward, “One of the very best men in the Regiment, and a dear friend, was killed at Drury’s Bluff. There are few more manly characters than was his, I might as well say none. Always on the right side, without regard to the fear or favor of those over or under him, he was one of those rare men who never could do a mean or ungenerous thing.

27 William Glenn Robertson, Backdoor to Richmond: The Bermuda Hundred Campaign, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 190-191. This action is referred to as the Battle of Proctor’s Creek, the Battle of Fort Darling, or the Second Battle of Drewry’s Bluff.


29 The Litchfield Enquirer, June 2, 1864, 2.
We left him on the field.”30 Another comrade remembered simply, “In battle he was cool, fearless, prompt, and efficient.”31

While the 8th Connecticut fought at Fort Darling, the Army of the Potomac engaged Lee’s Confederates at Spotsylvania Court House. After nearly two weeks of heavy fighting, Grant attempted to break the stalemate with a march around Lee’s right flank. A heavily entrenched Confederate army on the banks of the North Anna River stopped the march and the battle ensued on May 23-24. On May 25, a Union request for a flag of truce was sent out to retrieve the dead and wounded, but the Confederates refused. That night, Grant decided to abandon the position and move once again around the Confederate right. The rumble of wagons on the Union 2nd Corps line, however, convinced Confederate General Richard Ewell that another assault was imminent, and he sent out skirmishers to probe the Union lines. A withdrawal was not possible with Confederates so close to Union lines, so 2nd Corps commander Winfield Scott Hancock ordered Thomas Smyth’s brigade, containing the 14th Connecticut, to advance and clear the rebels from the Doswell Farm in their front.32 One comrade remembered:

On the 26th, ten days after Edward had fallen, [Henry Wadhams] was called to lead his last charge. All day he had felt dismal forebodings which no effort could expel from his mind. Yet he advanced with alacrity to participate in the hazardous task of a charge with four small companies, on an angle of the enemy’s works, upon the south side of the North Anna River. The little band advanced about 7 ½ P.M., fought their way steadily and bravely, capturing the exterior line of works. Lieut. Wadhams led on his men, stimulating them by cheering words and gallant example.33

Benjamin Hirst of the 14th recalled that the “works were carried after a desperate struggle which lasted until after dark.” The charge provided Hancock with the “breathing room” needed to withdraw from the position and, as Hirst recalled, the works “were held until the dead and wounded [trapped by the rejected cease fire] were removed.”34 Henry Wadhams’ was one of those bodies recovered. A soldier wrote in The Connecticut War Record, “just before eight o’clock, while still advancing, the fatal bullet pierced his body near the center, immediately below the ribs. He fell within the enemy’s works, and lay there while the battle raged.” The comrade recalled, “After dark he was borne by Srgt. Goodwin, and Thomas Hannah, to our lines. He suffered intensely – yet murmured not.” Henry died at 11:30 p.m., and was buried on the north bank of the North Anna.35

30 The Litchfield Enquirer, June 16, 1864, 2.
Once again, tributes poured in for one of the Wadhams’ boys. “Love in him overcame excruciating pain, for forgetting his suffering, he kept saying: ‘Oh, my poor wife and child,’” a soldier remembered. “When duty bade him go, he enlisted at once, as a private. His gentle wife, though it was as severing her heart strings, opposed him not. And now she remembers him as her gift-offering to our country, and bears the irreparable loss in a manner truly worthy a brave man’s widow.”36 Clearly, a commitment to fulfilling one’s duty ran through all three Wadhams brothers.

On May 28, Luman Wadhams and the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery of the Sixth Corps were encamped near the 14th Connecticut of the 2nd Corps. Luman went to headquarters and received permission to go to see Henry. When Luman returned, Colonel Elisha Kellogg asked if he had found his brother. “I found he was killed day before yesterday,” Luman replied.37 Three Wadhams brothers had entered the Overland Campaign; only Luman survived the first three weeks of fighting. Three days later, Luman wrote to his wife:

Do not worry about me, I have endured the march well. We have been much of the time on short rations, but that we expect on such a march – so please not worry. You know we have been called the pets because we were so long in the defenses. We were in the way of duty just as much as here. We are now in the place where there is plenty of work to do, and if I mistake not, the regiment will soon show of what stuff it is made. Keep up the good courage. The separation from you is painful, but, you know, when we used to read of our noble Army of the Potomac, I always felt I ought to be there – and now I am there. Keep up the good courage, and remember you married a soldier.38

Even in the most intimate of letters, the importance the Wadhamses placed on doing one’s duty is apparent.

The lack of a Confederate counterattack at North Anna convinced Grant that Lee’s army was exhausted and that one final push would destroy Lee’s army. Another move around the Confederate right brought the two armies to the crossroads of Cold Harbor, about five miles from Richmond. Fighting began between elements of cavalry of both armies, and infantry units were added to the fight as they arrived. It was a fight of desperation, as both sides were keenly aware that whoever controlled the intersection of the five roads that met at Cold Harbor would hold the initiative in maneuvering around Richmond. In late afternoon, Grant launched a full-scale Union assault, spearheaded by the Sixth Corps. After nearly two years in the Washington defenses, the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery would see its first real action and would come face to face with the horrors of war.39

Grant had underestimated both the fighting spirit of the Confederates and the strength of their entrenchments. Still, the 2nd was initially fortunate to approach a

39 Rhea, *Cold Harbor*, 238.
gap in the Confederate lines and succeeded in chasing Rebels from their forward rifle pits. The 2nd’s skirmishers, however, failed to develop the enemy’s main position, and when neighboring Union units were repulsed, Confederate forces converged on the 2nd.40 Lewis Bissell recalled:

At the time of the charge, I did not nor do I think anyone but Captain Wadhams realized the danger that we would soon be exposed to. He seemed to feel the danger more than any officer in the regiment. He was in front of the company – had his sabre drawn – was very cool – did not seem to be excited in the least – at the same time he knew what was coming. I doubt if any other officer realized as he did what was ahead. Few if any had been under fire before. Most of them were in a great measure ignorant of what was coming.41

But Luman, who had first been under fire at Bull Run but had seen very little action since, was likely unprepared for the magnitude of the violence that awaited his regiment. General Thomas Clingman, commander of the Confederate brigade that opposed the 2nd, reported that:

Discharge from my line at once knocked down the front ranks of the column, while the oblique fire along the right and left cut down the men rapidly all along the column toward the river. In a few moments the whole column . . . lay down. Nothing could have been more unfortunate for them. While they thus lay there, the men of men command continued to reload and discharge their pieces into the thick, dark mass.42

Overwhelmed by Confederates, the 2nd suffered massive casualties, and retreated to the spot where the assault had begun.

The fight cost the 2nd 311 men, over eighty in Company A alone. A day later, Dwight Kilbourn of the 2nd was struggling with the scope of the catastrophe, the horror of which must have been incomprehensible to a member of a unit that had essentially seen no action. He recorded in his diary, “I cannot without a shudder recall the events of yesterday and to attempt to record them is too horrible for one unaccustomed to the ravages of war.”43

Among those hit was Luman, shot through the belt.44 He retained consciousness, and because losses in the regiment were so severe that stretchers were unavailable, some men from Company A made a makeshift stretcher out of their muskets and carried their captain several miles to a field hospital. It is worth noting that comrades risked their own lives to attempt to remove each of the Wadhams brothers from the field where they had fallen. From the field hospital, Luman was transferred to the main Union hospital at White House. The chaplain of the 2nd found him there the

40 Rhea, Cold Harbor, 242.
41 Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 255-257.
43 Diary of Dwight Kilbourn, Department of Special Collections, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, NJ.
44 Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 245-257.
next day, still alive but expected to die. Bissell reported that he hoped “to hear that Capt Wadhams and Charley Adams are alive and will live. The men in the regiment are anxious to hear that Captain Wadhams is alive. They think as much of him as this company does.”

Captain George Mason was Luman’s messmate; he recalled that their shared rations for the four days before Cold Harbor consisted of “corn picked from the sand after Sheridan’s battery horses had eaten and gone.” He saw his friend in the hospital on June 3, and he “conversed a moment asking him if he suffered greatly. ‘Not any’ said he, ‘I wonder at it.’ A smile, a very patient look, and I saw him no more. I believe he died the same or following day en route to White House.” Having lingered for two days in faint hopes of making it home, Luman expired on June 3. His funeral day would be exactly sixteen weeks after his wedding.

Bissell learned of his commander’s death when he encountered some men from the 8th Connecticut, who:

brought the sad news of Capt. Wadhams death. They saw the box containing his embalmed body. It was addressed to his folks at home. We were in hopes he would live. But now the best of officers and men has gone. All of the men in the regiment feel sad in losing so kind an officer, so good a man and soldier. If we ever live to see home again this company will claim the privilege of erecting a monument over his grave. It is a sad time for us and sadder for Mr. Wadhams and his people – three sons lost within fifteen days. Old Litchfield’s best sons have laid their lives on the altar of their country. Their blood has moistened the sacred soil of Virginia. I hope no more will have to be shed in the present campaign.

In the days that followed, Bissell continued to eulogize Wadhams in his diary:

His loss cannot be made good by any other officer in the regiment. If an officer ever had the good will of his company and regiment he had it. None were more respected or obeyed with more pleasure than Capt. W. He was the soldier’s friend and did not feel himself better than the soldier nor did he wish others to think him any better than the privates under him. If more of our officers in the army were in some respects like Capt. W, this war would be pushed through with more vigor and more lives would be saved to the country.

Even in death, Luman set an example of duty and leadership for his men.

Unimaginable grief hit Litchfield upon receipt of the reports from Cold Harbor. Historian Alain White wrote that because months worth of letters from men of the 2nd had mentioned only inaction, “the terrible news of Cold Harbor fell upon the families and friends of the Litchfield men like a thunderbolt.” Mrs. Hubbard, wife of Congressman John H. Hubbard of Litchfield, recalled:

46 Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 250-255.
47 Reverend George Richard, November 20, 1864, Alice Walcott Collection, Litchfield Historical Society.
48 Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 250-255.
49 Olcott and Lear, Civil War Letters of Lewis Bissell, 255-257.
You can have no idea of the intense anxiety in the days following Cold Harbor. . . . The telegraph wires had more news than they could carry. It was impossible to get details. All we knew was, that a terrible battle had been fought and that a great number were either dead or wounded. As Mr. Hubbard was a Congressman, our house was a rendezvous for people hoping or fearing for news. They would often stay till late at night. I particularly remember one woman from Goshen who waited till eleven o’clock, and then went home, cheered with the thought that no news was good news. She had just gone home when we received word that her husband was among the slain.50

West of the center of Litchfield, in the area then known as Harris Plains, were six farm houses to which one or more of the men who had gone to war were brought back dead. George Kenney of Litchfield wrote, “such funerals as we had in those days!”51 Nowhere was it worse than at the Wadhams house, and one recollection helps put the scale of the tragedy into perspective. In the days after Cold Harbor, Deacon Adams of Litchfield was kept busy traveling from the telegraph office in the center of town to homes in the surrounding countryside, with the unenviable task of bringing the news of a son’s death to the parents. He had journeyed out to the Wadhams house to break the sad news of one son’s death, and was on his way back to town when a rider approached and told Adams that he needed to turn around, for another Wadhams son had fallen.52

The town, wrapped in black mourning crepe for its many fallen sons, was stunned by the tragedy that befell the Wadhams. In attempting to come to grips with the town’s grief, residents of Litchfield invoked the Wadhams brothers’ sense of duty and devotion to the cause. The Litchfield Enquirer took space from its coverage of Cold Harbor to single out the sacrifice of the family:

Among the many families who claim the tenderest of sympathies of all in these days of our anxiety and mourning, none will have more deserved our condolences than the family of Colonel Edwin Wadhams of this town. Only a fortnight since we chronicled the death in battle of Edward, Orderly Sergeant of Co. E, 8th Reg’t. Today it is our melancholy task to chronicle the deaths of two other sons, Lieut. Henry Wadhams of the 14th Reg’t, killed May 26th and Capt. Luman Wadhams, Co. A, 2d Conn. Artillery, killed Wednesday, June 1st. Thus, within two short weeks, the family have received intelligence of the death of all three of their noble young sons and brothers who enlisted in support of the Government, and to fight the traitors in league against it. May the God of Battles temper their severe affliction with the glorious thought that they all fell in the front ranks, and in the hour of victory which their hands helped achieve for a grateful country.53

Community organizations paid tribute as well. To commemorate Luman’s death, St. Paul’s Lodge of the Masonic Fraternity resolved:

53 Litchfield Enquirer, June 16, 1864, 2.
That we sincerely grieve over our sad bereavement of a most worthy and excellent man, true patriot, and beloved brother of this fraternity and will ever cherish his memory . . . .

That we do most deeply sympathize with the bereaved widow and parents, sister and brothers, of our departed brother, and earnestly commend them support and comfort to that Being whom all true masons own as their Great Light and who knows how to dry the mourners' tears.

These tributes did not go unnoticed by the soldiers who remained in the fields of Virginia. One of Luman's one-time comrades, Will Plumb, wrote:

We well know how you all feel we can face the enemy here or look on the dead or dying soldier with comparative calmness, for such is our duty, but when we read the words of sympathy and mourning from our friends at home, it touches a tender spot and we give way to our feelings.

It is little wonder, as historian Carol Reardon has noted, that morale in the Union army sagged as the casualty lists from Grant's Overland Campaign grew.

Recent literature has focused on the role death played in American society at the time of the Civil War. Drew Gilpin Faust has written that "Civil War soldiers . . . lived in a culture that offered many lessons in how life should end." For soldiers and their families, and for the nation at large, the notion of a "Good Death," in which one dies at home with loved ones gathered around the deathbed in order to assess the "state of the dying person's soul," was an essential component of coping with death. The war, however, with its "sudden and unnoticed end" for the soldiers "slain in the disorder of battle" and the "unattended deaths of unidentified diseased and wounded men," posed a challenge to the societal construct of the Good Death. How could Colonel or Mrs. Wadhams look into the dying eyes of one of their three sons to receive the consolation that their child was bound for heaven if the child lay in a Virginia field hospital 400 miles away?

The letters of condolence and tribute that poured into the local newspaper in the wake of the Wadhams' deaths were written, in part, to provide an alternative means to a Good Death for Edward, Henry, and Luman. As such, they were part of the mechanisms used by Litchfield residents to make sense of their loss. These letters fit the mold of what Faust has called a "checklist" for the writers of Civil War condolence letters. They praise the soldiers' manliness, their patriotism, and their qualities as soldiers. They ascribe a higher purpose to their deaths, in much the same way

54 Litchfield Enquirer, June 22, 1864, 2.
55 Will Plumb to "My Dear Sister," June 12, 1864, Litchfield Historical Society.
58 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 15, 24.
Lincoln comforted Mrs. Bixby by proclaiming that her sons’ deaths were not random nor in vain, but rather were a “sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.”

These letters offer an interesting insight into the meanings soldiers ascribed to their comrades’ deaths. In recent years, scholars have increasingly cited slavery as a factor in motivating Civil War soldiers to enlist and fight. In his work *For Cause and Comrades*, James M. McPherson places soldiers’ attitudes “for or against” alongside more traditionally recognized motivating factors such as a sense of duty, personal honor, home and hearth, unit loyalty, comradeship, and religious conviction.59 He goes further in suggesting that service in the army converted may Northern Democrats into supporters of Lincoln and his policies.60 Chandra Manning, in *What this Cruel War was Over*, argues that soldiers “plainly identified slavery as the root of the Civil War.”61 Gary W. Gallagher, in *The Union War*, also highlights the interconnectedness between slavery and the Union cause, citing 1862’s Second Annual Message to Congress (“In giving freedom to the free we assure freedom to the free - honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve”) as evidence of Lincoln’s early recognition of this.62

The eulogies for the Wadhams brothers, however, show none of this. Matthew Warshauer, in *Connecticut in the Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice and Survival*, offers a possible explanation: “There existed in Connecticut a serious and formidable antagonism toward abolition and blacks.” Warshauer continues by stating that while “many in Connecticut came around to supporting Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, they did so primarily as a war measure that confiscated the South’s main labor source.”63 The tributes and condolences of their comrades, however, speak but little of victory, instead setting the Wadhamses’ deaths within the context of soldierly duty.

Carol Patterson-Martineau, in a study of Connecticut’s Windham County in the Civil War, argues that “both extensive pro-Union nationalism and the abolitionist leanings, made Windham County unique within the state.” By contrast, she describes Litchfield County as a “democratic stronghold.”64 The reaction to the deaths of the Wadhams brothers, however, suggests that perhaps politics prevented any substantive meaning being ascribed to them.

Warshauer has written that “as small as Connecticut was, and remains, it was a remarkably diverse place that defied easy summary. Each town and county must be

60 Ibid., 177.
studied on its own, and that is rarely done."\textsuperscript{65} Even more rare is the study that captures the transitions that took place within these communities. The sampling of reactions to the Wadhamses' death suggests that eulogies simply asserted the goodness of a vague cause and emphasized soldierly duty because to further identify the cause for which they died would be too controversial. Eulogies, whether spoken at a funeral or published in a newspaper, are meant to draw people closer, and perhaps the only way to do this was to avoid discussion of the cause for which the Wadhams brothers died.

The Overland Campaign's sheer numbers of casualties led to a shortage of not only stretchers but also of coffins. Enlisted men like Edward were often buried without coffins in shallow, unmarked graves; only one in three Union soldiers killed in battle was buried in an identifiable grave. By the time burial parties were able to commence operations, the bodies had usually already been looted and stripped "by soldiers so desperate for shoes or clothing as to rob the dead with little feeling of impropriety or remorse."\textsuperscript{66} The bodies of officers like Luman and Henry, however, were usually treated differently. Elaborate transportation mechanisms and contraptions - such as a coffin that could be packed in ice - allowed for the return of the bodies of fallen officers to their homes. As the tenets of the Good Death prescribed that families see their "loved ones in as lifelike a state as possible, not just to be certain of their identity, but also to bid them farewell," embalmers did a brisk business, with undertakers charging an average of $100 per corpse. For many in mourning, it was worth the expense to contemplate the fallen "in a state of seemingly sleeplike repose."\textsuperscript{67}

Luman's body was returned to Litchfield, where a funeral was held on June 12. The Congregational Church was "crowded to its utmost capacity by sympathizing friends, and large numbers of strangers from out of town came to pay their respects to the lamented deceased." The services, led by the Reverend George Richards, were deemed to be "impressive and interesting." At the front of the church, "the remains of the deceased were dressed in his full military suit, and his coffin covered by the Flag under whose folds he fell."\textsuperscript{68} For Americans of the Civil War era, desirous of being present when a loved one passed, the funeral provided an opportunity to show their grief as well as to pay tribute to the fallen - another means toward making sense of the loss. Central to this process was the funeral sermon, which was often composed to provide context and meaning to the deceased's life and death.\textsuperscript{69}

Were those attending Luman's funeral using the occasion as an opportunity to mourn all three brothers? No evidence has been found to indicate whether the bodies of Edward or Henry were returned to Litchfield. If they remained on the soil of Virginia, they faced the danger - intended or not - of being cared for by unsympa-

\textsuperscript{65} Warshauer, \textit{Inside Connecticut's Civil War}, 3.
\textsuperscript{66} Drew Gilpin Faust, \textit{"A Riddle of Death": Mortality and Meaning in the American Civil War}, (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College, 1995), 11.
\textsuperscript{67} Faust, \textit{This Republic of Suffering}, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{The Litchfield Enquirer}, June 16, 1864, 2.
\textsuperscript{69} Faust, \textit{This Republic of Suffering}, 153, 162.
thetic Confederates, for whom, Faust writes, “the hundreds of thousands of Union bodies in their midst provided an irresistible target for Southern rage.” Comrades frequently swore to provide each other with a “decent burial;” the definition of decency, however, was often dependent upon the movements of the armies, and many casualties of the relentless fighting of the Overland Campaign were buried in haste. James Moore, an assistant quartermaster sent to Virginia in June 1865 to supervise internments at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, reported hundreds of unmarked graves and skeletons that had been left without burial, so that “all traces of their identity [were] totally obliterated.”

Many of these bodies eventually found their way to one of the many national cemeteries that were created after the passage of the National Cemetery Act in 1867. Edward may have been reinterred in an unmarked grave at City Point National Cemetery, where many of the fallen from Fort Darling lie. The dead from North Anna were reinterred at the Fredericksburg National Cemetery or the Richmond National Cemetery; thus, it is more difficult to speculate as to Henry’s final resting place.

The Wadhams brothers were not the only members of that family singled out for tribute. A writer for The Connecticut War Record held the Wadhams women up as models for how patriotic women should cope with grief: “These modest ladies will regret that I mentioned them because I might justly say similar words of a thousand delicate American women whose days of sorrow have provide to be matchless in heroism.”

Solitary and composed grief and gazing upon a vacant, flag-draped chair, however, proved insufficient ways for Luman’s widow, Louisa, to cope with her loss. Married for not quite four months, the month of June brought for her news of the death of two brothers-in-law, Luman’s letter urging her “not to worry about me,” reports of his wounding and suffering, hopes for his recovery that she shared with his comrades, and finally, his embalmed body, returned for burial on their sixteen-week anniversary. One of Luman’s men wrote to her, “Not alone do you mourn – you have lost a kind, true husband. We have lost more than an officer – a friend – a brother.”

Faust has written that in the wake of the loss of a loved one, “wives, parents, children and siblings struggled with the new identities – widows, orphans, the childless – that now defined their lives.” Perhaps the words of Luman’s former comrades awoke a new spirit in Louisa, or perhaps having lived among the men of the regiment for nearly three months, she felt an impulse to take her husband’s place among the men. She determined that she needed to do something to help the soldier-

70 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 224, 214.
71 Robert E. L. Krick to author, December 22, 2011.
74 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 170.
husbands of other young war brides. Volunteering to follow the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery into battle as a nurse, Louisa found the regiment with Phil Sheridan’s army in the Shenandoah Valley. She wrote to the Reverend George Richards, who had helped her join the nurses, on October 31, 1864, in the aftermath of the Battle of Cedar Creek, where the 2nd Connecticut Heavies had played a decisive role:

I must tell you of my initiation. I had not slept since leaving Washington, but you may well guess sleep was far from my thoughts. The doctor told me to prepare myself with a basin, towel, etc., and left me with another lady to await the coming of the ambulance train. Now I think it would be impossible to describe my feelings, while sitting there waiting. I had thought it over many times at home before leaving, how I should bear the sight of those poor wounded, dying men, and I knew my after efforts depended a great deal on it. The train came, they brought them in on stretchers, and placed them on straw beds on the floor of the church, as thick nearly as they could lie.

And I, I went to work, washing first, feeding next, then the surgeon asked me ‘could I dress wounds?’ I told him I would try, and I did. And not until near morning did I leave those poor, wounded, dying men. I never stopped to ask myself how I was bearing it, never thought to cry, never felt like it, I only felt these men were suffering and I must help them, and I, if I were to go home tomorrow, I should thank God that I had come, if only for that one night.\(^{75}\)

Through fulfilling her own sense of duty, Louisa was able to come to grips with the family’s tragedy.

The war ended; life went on for the survivors. The Wadhams’ father Edwin, a one-time colonel in the militia, died in 1865. An old soldier, even he must have been shaken by the magnitude of the sorrow that descended upon his family. Mother Mary died in 1879.\(^{76}\) Henry’s widow Mary was remarried to Orrin A. Robbins on September 10, 1867, and it was he who raised Henry’s daughter Jessie.\(^{77}\) Luman’s widow Louisa married Larmon Abbott, a minister, on Christmas Eve, 1866. Together they had a daughter. Upon her second husband’s death, Louisa lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Oberlin, Ohio, wintered in Coconut Grove, Florida, and traveled to California and Switzerland. She died in 1918, still fighting her own battle to reclaim Luman’s pension that she was forced to give up when she remarried.\(^{78}\)

The brothers’ surviving comrades returned from war in August 1865, marching under a victory arch erected over East Street in Litchfield. While passage through the arch represented the transition back to being a civilian, the experience of war marked them for the rest of their lives. Over the ensuing decades, these veterans organized reunions and worked to establish monuments to their service. Ultimately, four monuments were erected in borough of Litchfield: a monument to all the town’s Civil War veterans on the green, a nearby marker identifying the site of the recruiting tent for the 19th Connecticut Infantry (which became the 2nd Connecticut Heavy

\(^{76}\) Litchfield Historical Society Obituaries File.
\(^{77}\) Henry Wadhams Pension record.
\(^{78}\) Luman Wadhams Pension record.
Artillery), a granite drum resting atop a base adorned with the words “Mustered Out” that stands in the veterans’ section of the West Cemetery, and a monument at Camp Dutton. As was true in their letters honoring the Wadhams brothers, the monuments erected during the veterans’ lifetimes honored service and duty over any identified “cause.” This is in keeping with Thomas J. Brown’s findings in The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration—in the decades after the war, when the nation was trying to put itself back together, honoring the “common soldier” was a popular motif for Civil War monuments, as “ideas about death and citizenship cut across sectional lines.”

The last word, however, must lie with the three brothers. Three months after Luman’s death, the Connecticut War Record printed a joint obituary. It concluded, “All enlisted for three years in this great struggle for nationality and freedom. Of all, we now must write, with a reluctant hand, ‘KILLED IN BATTLE.’” Four years later, in writing the regimental history of the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery, Luman’s comrade Theodore F. Vaill, succinctly described the scope of the family’s tragedy: “Three brothers, in three different Connecticut regiments, in three different army corps, all slain in the approaches to Richmond within the space of fourteen days.”

The final tribute lies in the West Cemetery in Litchfield. While one comrade wrote home in the wake of Luman’s death, “Precious monuments of real affection are the tears of soldiers.” Lewis Bissell, another soldier, hoped to survive the war so that he could help Company A “claim the privilege of erecting a monument over his [Luman’s] grave.” It stands there still, an obelisk commemorating the lives of three brothers, soldiers all, with the epitaph: “The battle is fought, the victory won. Rest Soldier, Rest.”

79 Thomas J. Brown, The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 16.
81 Vaill, Second Connecticut Volunteer Heavy Artillery, 55.
82 “The Wadhams Brothers,” 277.