“Charcoal scribblings of the most rascally character”: conflict, identity, and testimony in American Civil War graffiti

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Civil War soldiers’ graffiti survive at more than 60 sites, predominantly in Virginia, including churches, court houses, caves, and houses. Although often terse and fragmentary, they provide an intriguing insight into soldiers’ experiences. This essay offers a tentative framework for analyzing how the graffiti functioned: as informal commemoration of wartime experiences; as a social activity, displaying the loyalties, frustrations, and humor of army life; and as an invasive act, vandalizing southern property.

Keywords: Graffiti; inscriptions; Civil War; soldiers

In spring 1862, Corporal Frank M. May of the 64th New York Infantry wrote on the walls of a Confederate home in Virginia: “It seems to [sic] bad to destroy property in this way.” Perhaps there was some good-humored irony in his contributing to the destruction. The walls of the house had been covered with Union soldiers’ signatures, unit affiliations, drawings, and comments in charcoal and pencil. At this site, Historic Blenheim House in Fairfax, and several others including Morgan Chapel in Bunker Hill, Frederick County Court House in Winchester, Roeder’s Store at Harpers Ferry, and the “Graffiti House” at Brandy Station, substantial numbers of inscriptions by Civil War soldiers have survived. They provide an intriguing, if fragmentary, insight into Civil War soldiers’ experiences and attitudes, and the impact of the conflict on the southern home front.

There are over 60 known Civil War graffiti sites, and new sites are still being uncovered.1 The majority of inscriptions were written by Union soldiers, and two-thirds of the sites are located in Virginia and West Virginia. In this territory, the 100 miles or so of land between the Union and Confederate capitals, the impact of occupying armies was such that often the home front and battle front “literally blended together.”2 The graffiti attest to this. Most of the surviving inscriptions are located in homes, churches, taverns, and court houses which were occupied temporarily by troops during the war, commandeered as makeshift hospitals, barracks, stables, headquarters, and jails.

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Several sites such as Historic Blenheim House, Frederick County Court House in Winchester, and the “Graffiti House” at Brandy Station are now heritage attractions. Over the last decade, historic graffiti have become a draw for Civil War tourism, and the sesquicentennial of the conflict has given added impetus and publicity for exhibitions and preservation projects. At these sites, there is ongoing conservation and research into the inscriptions by staff and volunteers. The basic identifying information in many of the inscriptions (name, company, regiment) has been fleshed out into life stories. The inscriptions help bring to life regimental histories, as the soldiers’ presence at a site can often be linked to specific advances, occupations, or skirmishes. Studies by James Pula and Edie Wallace have emphasized the way the inscriptions personalize the history of the war, reminding us “that the grand armies … were composed of individual human beings.”

However, the graffiti have received little attention in the broader historiography of the Civil War, and there is, as yet, no comprehensive central record. This is unfortunate because they have untapped potential as source material for the conflict. In part, this neglect is because the heyday of Civil War soldier scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s occurred before the more complex sites, with substantial numbers of inscriptions, such as Historic Blenheim House, the “Graffiti House,” and Morgan Chapel were well known. There are also several off-putting limitations to the graffiti as a source. For example, it is hard to gauge how many inscriptions originally existed, and whether the surviving examples are representative. It is likely that many inscriptions were covered over postwar, requiring “many appliances of the whitewash brush to efface.” The surviving inscriptions are often terse, fragmentary, or illegible.

Relative to the wealth of evidence available from Civil War soldiers’ letters and diaries, the graffiti are a fairly meager source. For his study of Civil War soldiers, James McPherson read 25,000 letters and 249 diaries. Michael Barton envisages the future of Civil War soldier scholarship as large-scale computerized analysis of these more traditional sources to “generalize about the mentality of large, literate historical populations.” The analysis of the soldiers’ graffiti is, of necessity given the relatively small amount surviving, a more subjective and qualitative business.

Graffiti are a distinctively different genre to letters or diaries, though, and they have potential to supplement these sources rather than simply reflect them. As a genre they are more reminiscent of the messages clustered on the plaster cast of a broken leg, or the messages scrawled on a high school graduate’s shirt on the last day of term. There is a rich, if rudimentary, social creativity at work. Their content is perhaps more indicative of soldiers’ public personas and group behavior. As public documents, open to being mocked or amended by others, there is little vulnerability on show.

During the last decade, more emphasis has been given to alternative sources for soldiers’ experiences. Lorien Foote, who has studied Civil War court martial records, claims that the traditional emphasis on letters, diaries, and memoirs leaves “holes in our understanding” of soldiers. She argues that these documents tended to be shaped for a home audience and that middle-class soldiers are over-represented. Likewise, Chandra Manning has extensively researched camp newspapers, suggesting these give an insight into soldiers’ voices and behavior when there was “less need to keep up appearances for the benefit of worried wives and parents.”
On a smaller scale, there is potential for the soldiers’ graffiti to be used in a similar way. The strength of the graffiti as a source is that they give access to soldiers’ voices and experiences in a different form, a different mode of expression. Their language sometimes seems close to everyday speech. They have a visual impact, sometimes covering whole walls and including pictures. Moreover, they were a form of expression open to all: drawings, patterns, and doodles needed only the most basic literacy, and taking charcoal from the fire to make marks on the walls required no financial clout. Graffiti could record fleeting thoughts, emotions, and moments of activity, requiring little by way of time or preparation.

This essay offers a tentative framework for analyzing how the graffiti functioned, focusing in most depth on graffiti from two of the most significant sites: Historic Blenheim House in Fairfax and the “Graffiti House” at Brandy Station. First, the inscriptions marked soldiers’ presence in, and journeys through, the wartime landscape. The more formulaic inscriptions, giving names and dates, echo both nineteenth-century tourist graffiti and gravestone inscriptions. There is an element of self-aggrandizement and self-penned commemoration. Secondly, as Claire Taylor argues, graffiti are “socially connective.” Soldiers read and added to each other’s inscriptions. At some sites, such as Massaponax Church, Morgan’s Chapel, and the “Graffiti House,” there are messages back and forth between Union and Confederate soldiers who occupied the buildings at different times. Some graffiti appear to reflect the everyday preoccupations, banter, griping, and prejudices, the “intense bonds and intense frictions” of army life. There are some surprising gaps, with rare reference to religion, family, or slavery in the examples studied. Thirdly, the physicality of the inscriptions, incised or written onto the fabric of buildings, meant they were also an invasive act. They changed the atmosphere of a space and staked a claim to it. Newspapers condemned how homes, court houses, and churches were “desecrated” and “defaced by charcoal scribblings of the most rascally character.” These three broad functions overlap. Graffiti communicated in multiple ways to different audiences: texts that displayed regimental loyalties and camaraderie also worked as vandalism and provocation.

**Commemoration**

The act of writing – to shape and present thoughts, feelings, humor, and experiences – had particular potency for soldiers during the Civil War. Ninety percent of white Union soldiers were literate, and the circumstances of huge numbers of civilian volunteers being away from home and experiencing extraordinary events precipitated a “profusion of letters, diaries and memoirs for the years 1861 to 1865; the so-called inarticulate became voluble.” Writing about the war in diaries and letters implied an assertion of the writer’s importance; it argued that their experience was worth recording and worth reading.

This is reflected in the way the graffiti give testimony to individual soldiers’ presence at wartime sites. While the content of many soldiers’ inscriptions was fairly formulaic (name, company, regiment, date), the presentation often displays effort and individuality. For example, Charles Schlingerman, a Private of the 58th New York
State Volunteers, wrote a huge signature across the attic wall in Historic Blenheim House (Figure 1). At Brandy Station, one wall is dominated by the signature of Private Michael Bowman in beautifully executed, Spencerian handwriting. Some soldiers wrote their inscriptions next to drawings: Jeremiah Abel’s is next to a ship, Clements Tretbar’s is next to a horse. Others wrote their names multiple times. For example, Robert “Bo” Peed wrote his name at least five times at the “Graffiti House,” and an inscription across two walls in Blenheim’s back parlor reads: “Welte Joseph Welte Joseph Welte Welte.”

Several graffiti are presented in ways that evoke higher-status texts. For example, in the Blenheim attic, Private Theodor Raele decorated his inscription with a wreath and crown reminiscent of the coat of arms of his home principality in Prussia. Private Henry Van Ewyck, a former sign-painter born in the Netherlands, wrote his in precise, formal handwriting, a “difficult technical skill” which signified good education.18 Henry A. Jones’s graffiti in Frederick County Court House mimicked the style of a stone-carved inscription. The names of a gun team “On Picket March 16th 1863” at Brandy Station are on a carefully sketched scroll. In these informal inscriptions, the soldiers could accord themselves grander status than they were likely to receive officially. There may sometimes have been an element of humor to this as well as pride. Such details helped individual inscriptions stand out in the melee of graffiti on the walls.

There is a parallel between the content of the formulaic soldiers’ inscriptions and other nineteenth-century graffiti which give testimony to prisoners’ time in cells and travelers’ arrivals in remote or historic places. These inscriptions also typically include names and dates.19 There is a type of immortality by association by inscribing one’s name on a

Figure 1. The attic in Historic Blenheim House, Virginia. Courtesy of City of Fairfax Collections.
historic or natural landmark that is likely to endure such as the Natural Bridge in Virginia or the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. A soldiers’ graffiti site that is directly comparable to these is Grand Caverns in the Shenandoah Valley. This was a tourist site in the 1800s and there are over 200 inscriptions by Civil War soldiers on the cave walls.20

Several other Civil War graffiti sites have a similar aura of permanence and history, such as Pohick Church and Falls Church (Episcopal) in Virginia which have links to George Washington. The mood and atmosphere in which the inscriptions were written can only be guessed at. At the more exuberant end of the spectrum, there was perhaps an element of “sight-seeing” for some northern soldiers journeying through the southern states during their wartime service.21 Union soldier David Brett described Falls Church in a letter to his wife: “the same that Washington went to meeting in … I went into it just for fun people carry away pieces of bords write their names on the wals mine is there [sic]”22

Ursula Frederick argues that recording the moment of arrival through graffiti is a “symbolic action when considered in light of historic circumstances of exploration, colonisation, war, migration and settlement.”23 In the context of the Civil War, the soldiers’ inscriptions marked their journeys through often unfamiliar territory. At Historic Blenheim House, there are several drawings of ships, including three elaborate ones in the attic, intertwined with soldiers’ names. They may represent soldiers’ journeys; many northern soldiers traveled south to Washington, DC, by sea at the start of their army service. One image, signed by Private Adam Meyer, a coachmaker born in Bavaria, shows a single stick figure steering the vessel.

One soldier who wrote about the inscriptions at Falls Church interpreted them as “evidence of the desires of different individuals for immortality.”24 The formulaic graffiti, giving names and unit affiliations, echo officially sanctioned public inscriptions on soldiers’ grave markers and memorials. Some could be viewed as an informal imitation of these: recording the soldier’s name in the place where they had served and connecting them to the site in a material way.25 The inclusion of dates in many inscriptions adds to the sense of testimony. J. A. Baird argues that the “solid materiality” of graffiti gives them a longevity and physical presence that is apt for informal commemoration. The inscription can “speak for itself long after the writer has gone.”26 Several of the graffiti sites are located on, or near, battlefields, for example at Brandy Station, Gettysburg, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Manassas.27

The heavy loss of life in the conflict provides a context for understanding the importance some soldiers may have attached to marking and preserving their names in some way. The task of identifying and burying the dead could be overwhelming. It was possible for the fate of individuals to simply be lost. Some corpses lay on battlefields for several days before burial, some were buried in unmarked mass graves, others were not buried at all until after the war.28 Moreover, huge numbers died from diseases such as diarrhea, dysentery, measles, malaria, and typhoid.29 In these circumstances, there was often an unsettling anonymity and lack of respect for the dead.30 Some soldiers “improvised dog tags” before battle.31 Drew Gilpin Faust argues strongly for the importance soldiers attached to not dying anonymously: “If a soldier could not save his life, he hoped at least to preserve his name.”32
“relentless carnage in the hospital and on the battlefield,” marking the identifying details contained in formulaic soldiers’ graffiti held greater significance.33

Thirteen of the graffiti sites identified in Virginia were used as temporary hospitals during the war. Research by staff at Brandy Station and Historic Blenheim House has shown that some of the surviving graffiti at these sites were written by wounded or sick soldiers, although this was only one phase of soldiers’ occupation at the sites. At the “Graffiti House,” there is a signature by James Marshall of the 12th Virginia Cavalry who was wounded in the battle of Brandy Station. During autumn 1862, Historic Blenheim House was used as part of the Reserve Hospital System for the Union’s 11th Army Corps. Around 1700 sick men were lodged in and around Fairfax Court House, some in houses, some in tents.34 There are inscriptions by soldiers Luther Bruce, Thomas Perine, and Morris Coats who are on the Reserve Hospital’s register.35 At Ben Lomond farm house, near Manassas, the “last wills and testaments” of soldiers hospitalized there are written on the walls.36

The conditions in makeshift field hospitals were often chaotic and overcrowded. A Confederate surgeon describing a field infirmary after the Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862 said the wounded were “lying on the ground as thick as hogs in a lot. They were groaning and crying out with pain, and those shot in the bowels were crying for water.”37 Any inscriptions written in such circumstances were unlikely to be elaborate. At the Stone House, a building on Manassas battlefield, there are inscriptions by soldiers Eugene Geer and Charles Brehm scratched into the baseboard. They were both wounded at the Second Battle of Manassas, and appear to have sought shelter in the building. The inscriptions are very brief: “E.P. Ge” and “Brehm Aug 30.” Geer later died of his wounds aged 17.38

Collaborative texts

As informal inscriptions that only required access to a pencil, knife, or piece of charcoal from the fire to produce, the graffiti provoked additions. The dates included in many inscriptions show the way graffiti built up over time (sometimes, as in the case of Blenheim House and the Belle Grove Plantation, continuing after the war as residents and guests turned it into a tradition). Comments were replied to, drawings amended, more names written up, and some graffiti scribbled out.

Joining in and adding to the graffiti may have been “a small ritual of belonging.”39 The individual inscriptions are part of a wider network across the walls, communicated through unit affiliations. For example, at Historic Blenheim House, there are inscriptions by 10 members of Company K of the 29th New York Infantry; 6 by Company B of the 83rd Pennsylvania Infantry; and 7 by Company C of the 4th New York Cavalry. A soldier’s regiment and company represented state and home loyalties as well as military identity. Their company “was the army” in terms of most soldiers’ experiences: “within that company he received his orders, his supplies, his companionship.”40 These close bonds are reflected in the graffiti.

There are recurrent military motifs in the drawings such as horses, cannons, and soldiers. In the most overtly patriotic image in the Historic Blenheim House attic, a soldier stands by a firing cannon, next to a Union flag, with the inscription “U.S.A.”
across the top. It echoes the imagery of Union recruiting posters, and carte de visite photographs of soldiers posing with flags and weaponry. These motifs perhaps portray a rather idealized image of war by soldiers confined indoors, whether ill, wounded, on picket duty, or sheltering from bad weather (a graffito at Brandy Station reads “First Snow 9th Nov 1863”).

Some of the inscriptions also reflect military pride and bravado. At Brandy Station, the corner of one room contains a cluster of Confederate graffiti including the boast “Battle of Beverly Ford April 16th 1863 Yanks caught hell.” At a later point, a Union soldier has written across the Confederate inscriptions: “The Army of the United States of America.” The “S” of “States” has a huge flourish striking through the report of Union defeat underneath. Also at Brandy Station, there is a crudely drawn aggressive figure with bared teeth, wild eyes, and a sword hilt in one hand. Across his chest is written: “President J. Davis good on the Boots.” A second figure is partially visible further down the wall, whom he may be kicking.

Some graffiti are almost “visual speech.” The language used in comments tended to be informal, reflecting the vocabulary and rhythms of everyday talk. At Brandy Station, comments include: “How are you,” “Sock it to me,” “The rebels got licked,” “Inglorious skedaddle of r . . .,” and “The bugger has gone with my boots.” A nurse working in the Union camp at Brandy Station in 1864 commented, “Everybody swears here . . . I do not think they attach much importance to it, just from habit.” Grafitti comments aimed directly at the enemy had the tone of verbal heckling. For example, at the home of Andrew Johnson, at the time a pro-Union southern politician, Confederate soldiers’ graffiti included: “Shame on you Andy”; “Traitor of the South”; “Andy you best skedaddle for Lovejoy is after you and if git you you are a goner sartin.”

Similarly, at Morgan Chapel, a Union inscription says, “look out Johnny Reb for we are coming. And by the help of God we are bound to lick you traitors.” A later Confederate reply written underneath says, “You did not at Lynchburg and Winchester.”

Humorous graffiti were perhaps one way to show off and help create a sense of camaraderie. It gives a sense of who were insiders and outsiders. In the graffiti at Brandy Station and Historic Blenheim, the targets of soldiers’ jokes include civilian men, the enemy side, and their own officers. At Brandy Station, a roughly drawn picture of a horse has its bottom turned toward a finely drawn picture of a civilian man, with the caption “He smells a rebel.” Another graffito links together pictures of a wealthy civilian man, interpreted by site staff as a war profiteer, and a turkey vulture with the phrase “birds of a feather flock together.”

Graffiti could act as an anonymous outlet for complaints and mockery. For example, at Historic Blenheim House, there is an illustration of an officer, with his trousers down, haggling with a prostitute. At Brandy Station, there is a picture of a lady with her skirts raised enough to show a fair bit of ankle, hoops, and petticoats, saying, “I am turned over to Lieut Gale.” A similar pose is used to depict women of easy virtue on comic valentine cards of the period. Such cartoons were perhaps a way to humorously, and publicly, puncture the pride and reputation of officers.

A sophisticated series of comic pictures, at Blenheim, charts the progress of a soldier from being a flag-waving civilian to a pathetic, threadbare figure by the fourth month of army service. The soldier figure in the sequence is portrayed comically
but affectionately: falling over, getting drunk, slouched, and disillusioned. In one image, he sits on a hardtack box, pulling a down-turned expression as he looks at his rations: “hard bread hard on patriotism.” His fortunes are briefly reversed in his second month of soldiering when he is paid and gets drunk on “Pat-riot-hic-aille.” The sequence ends with a humorous, if bitter, list of woes:

4th month
No money
No whiskey
No Rations
No Friends
No Peas
No Beans
No Pants
No Patriotism

While such preoccupations as food and the behavior of officers are familiar from many soldiers’ letters and diaries, there are gaps and silences on some issues which are intriguing. Some themes which letters and diaries show to be important concerns of many soldiers, including religion, death, family, and slavery, are almost entirely missing from the drawings and inscriptions. Among the hundreds of inscriptions at Blenheim and Brandy Station, the two sites surveyed in most depth, there is only one religious reference (“Jesus lover of my soul”). The domestic sphere and religion are almost absent. The soldiers define themselves in military terms in their formulaic inscriptions: pre-war occupations, mothers, religious affiliations, indications of marital status and fatherhood are left out. The images of women, such as a hag smoking a pipe at Brandy Station, seem more likely to represent generic stereotypes or women seen in camp, rather than soldiers’ family. Given that inscriptions were liable to be overwritten and commented on, it follows that more personal subjects were avoided.51

Likewise, there are no direct representations of death, wounding, and sickness. Publicly dwelling on these may have been perceived as weak and unmanly. Moreover, death and wounding were not cheerful topics to ornament the walls of a living space, whether a temporary hospital, barracks, or headquarters. Sentimental imagery of dying and wounded soldiers may have held more appeal to civilians on the home fronts than to soldiers themselves. The lack of references to slavery and abolition is more puzzling. These were not personal or taboo themes and were the subject of some white soldiers’ racist humor, cartoons in popular journals, and discussion in some Union camp newspapers.52

Union vandalism
At the majority of sites identified in Virginia, the graffiti were written by Union soldiers on homes, churches, and public buildings.53 There was an aggressive and territorial subtext. From the perspective of southern civilians, the graffiti were vandalism, an
invasive act. There was a parallel between the soldiers’ occupation of the buildings, and their “appropriation” of the walls.\textsuperscript{54}

Mark Neely has argued that the Civil War was not a total war by later, twentieth-century standards.\textsuperscript{55} However, to some extent direct violence against civilians was displaced into violence against their property. Vandalism, looting, and sometimes burning of southern property by Union soldiers was fairly common, even early in the war when the official policy was one of conciliation with civilians. This destruction undermined civilians’ morale and reduced their means of survival.\textsuperscript{56} Union soldiers’ vandalism often particularly targeted the imposing houses of the “presumed Secessionist aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{57} Many of the graffiti sites, such as Historic Blenheim House, the David Goff House, Ben Lomond Manor, Braehead, and Chatham Manor were substantial properties belonging to supporters of the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{58}

At several sites in Virginia, the writing of graffiti was associated with other damage by Union soldiers. For example, in Hartwood Church, seats were torn out and “the windows and door smashed.” In Falls Church, “the insides” were “all torn out nothing left but the pulpit” (Figure 2). At Coggin’s Point plantation, “every article in both houses that could not be carried off, were more or less broken or damaged.”\textsuperscript{59} Soldiers at Pohick Church were described as “all over it in less than 10 minutes tearing off the ornaments, splitting the woodwork and pews, knocking the brick to pieces.” At Charles County Court House, historic books and records were “wantonly scattered in confusion.” In Fredericksburg, when Union soldiers entered the city in early December

Figure 2. Matthew Brady’s photograph of the interior of Falls Church, Virginia. Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 529311.
1862, “the interiors of many homes became great trash heaps, expensive furniture was strewn in the streets.” Such descriptions evoke chaos. In some cases, the damage may have been the result of foraging for useful materials rather than wanton destruction, but the effect was the same. From the perspective of southern civilians, such treatment of homes and churches was highly provocative and aggressive.

Private John Haley wrote that the graffiti at Hartwood Church and St. James Church contained “obscene language and pictures.” It seems likely that many of the more offensive images in churches and homes have long since been removed or covered over. At Historic Blenheim House, the home of a Confederate family, the Union soldiers’ graffiti included a crude picture of a naked pregnant woman. Graffiti, spread through people’s homes, in bedrooms, closets, parlors, and attics, were an intrusion into domestic space, a mark that the “Yankees had dared invade the sacred home – entering the most private recesses of domestic life.” A Virginia woman who fled her home in 1861 wrote that it made her “blood boil when I remember that our private rooms, our chambers, our very sanctums, are thrown open to a ruthless soldiery.” Graffiti, along with other damage, were a provocative reminder that this intrusion had happened.

Vandalism of churches and buildings of historic significance could draw condemnation from both sides. Such attacks were unsettling, showing a lack of morality and patriotism. In the context of a Civil War, damage to historic buildings was a sensitive issue. There was a shared heritage between the two sides. Union and Confederate leaders drew on the same patriotic symbols, rituals, and historic heroes. A northern newspaper report about graffiti and damage to historic Charles County Court House said, “I cannot persuade myself that New England soldiers would be guilty of such vandalism.” The article sought to shift the blame to immigrant soldiers of the “German persuasion.” There is an echo of this in an inscription at Historic Blenheim House. Frank M. May’s inscription bemoaning the graffiti has a reply underneath: “this is the work of devils with … Blenkens Dutch Division.”

In conclusion, the surviving graffiti provide an intriguing additional source for studying Civil War soldiers. They are part of the material culture of the war, and are still in situ, in clusters, at the sites of battles, encampments, advances, and field hospitals. They are a distinctively different genre to soldiers’ diaries and letters. As source material, they land, perhaps awkwardly, between the disciplines of history and archaeology, but they have rich potential to be studied by both.

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Notes

1. A list of graffiti sites follows to give a bare bones overview. It is likely many more sites exist which are less well publicized or as yet undiscovered. Sources of information for graffiti are often fairly informal, and so this list is not infallible. The number of inscriptions at each site varies widely. Virginia: Aquia Church, Stafford County; Arlington House, Arlington County; Belle Grove Plantation, Middletown, Frederick County; Ben Lomond Manor House, Prince William County; Blenheim House, Fairfax; Braehead (Howison House), Fredericksburg; Caroline Street, Fredericksburg; Chatham Manor, Fredericksburg; Glen Owen, Berryville, Clarke County; Graffiti House, Brandy Station, Culpeper; Grand Caverns, Grottoes, Shenandoah National Park; Hope Park Mill (Robey’s Mill), Fairfax; Langley Ordinary, Fairfax; Liberia Plantation House, Manassas; Lightner’s Store, Falmouth; Lunenburg County Court House, Lunenburg County; Massaponax Church, Fredericksburg; Melrose Caverns, Harrisonburg; Moncure Conway House, Falmouth; Frederick County Court House (Old Court House Civil War Museum), Winchester; Mayhurst Inn, Orange; Mount Vernon, Fairfax; Mt. Zion Church, Loudon County; Pohick Church, Lorton, Fairfax County; Rector’s Warehouse and Station, Rectortown, Fauquier County; Riddick’s Folly, Suffolk; Salem Church, Fredericksburg; Shenandoah County Court House, Woodstock; Stone House, Manassas; Woodlawn Meeting House, Fairfax; Union Church, Falmouth. West Virginia: David Goff House, Beverly; Lockwood House, Harpers Ferry; Master Armorer’s House, Harpers Ferry; Morgan Chapel, Bunker Hill; Moulder Building, Shepherdstown; Organ Cave, Greenbrier County; Roeder’s Store, Harpers Ferry; Tyree Tavern (Halfway House), Ansted, Fayette County; Virginia Supreme Court Library (Greenbrier County Public Library), Lewisburg; White Hall Tavern, Harpers Ferry. Maryland: John Otto Farmhouse, Antietam National Battlefield; Landon House, Urbana; Linden Hall, Hagerstown Vicinity; Maryland Heights (rock carvings). South Carolina: Cassina Point, Edisto Island; Drayton Hall, Charleston (Civil War-era graffiti on door, unclear whether by soldiers); Seabrook Plantation, Edisto Island; Secessionville Manor, James Island. Tennessee: Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, Greeneville; Denmark Presbyterian Church; Lost Sea, Sweetwater. Alabama: Historic Huntsville Depot, Huntsville. Georgia: Colonial Park Cemetery, Savannah; Warren House, Jonesboro. Louisiana: Old Arsenal Powder Magazine, Baton Rouge. North Carolina: Gatesville Court House, Gates County; Old Laurel Hill Church, Laurinburg. Florida: Thompson House, Bagdad. Kentucky: Cumberland Gap National Historic Park. Minnesota: Fort Snelling, St Paul. Pennsylvania: Daniel Lady Farm, Gettysburg; Fort Mifflin, Philadelphia; Tonoloway Primitive Baptist Church, near Warfordsburg.

2. Ayers et al., Virginia from Secession to Commemoration, 1.
4. Loewenwarter, Blenheim Soldier Research Inventory.
5. Wallace, “Marking Time,” 10. Similarly, Pula writes that the graffiti remind us “that it’s the individual triumphs and tragedies of everyday people that shape our history.” Pula, “The Writing on the Wall,” 49.
11. On the other hand, some letters and diaries are also highly colloquial, humorous and blunt in their depiction of soldiers’ experiences. There is not always a wide gulf between this more traditional source material and alternative sources such as the graffiti. Some soldiers, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, annotated and illustrated their letters and diaries in creative ways which have echoes in the graffiti on the walls. The prevalence of graffiti, letters, diaries, camp newspapers, and memoirs for this conflict are all linked to the high literacy of Civil War armies. Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 53, 64; Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 258; and Howe, *Touched with Fire*.

12. Historic Blenheim House is situated about 20 miles outside Washington, DC, in the city of Fairfax. At the time of the Civil War, it was a “brick building recently erected and fitted up in handsome style.” The owner, Albert Wilcoxon, supported the Confederacy. The property, part of a 367-acre farm with six slaves, was marked as a local landmark on both Union and Confederate military maps. Over 120 names on the walls have been traced back to specific Union soldiers. Most of the legible graffiti are in the attic, because this was not painted over postwar, but there are inscriptions throughout the house including hallways, bedrooms, and inside a closet. The dated signatures fall into roughly three phases: Union soldiers who passed through Fairfax during the “advance on Manassas” in spring 1862; a period of use as part of the Reserve Hospital system for the 11th Army Corps in autumn 1862; and signatures by soldiers involved in the Defences of Washington in spring 1863. In contrast, the “Graffiti House” in Brandy Station, Culpeper County was probably a commercial building at the time of the Civil War. It was close to the Orange-Alexandria Railroad which had strategic importance as a military supply line through Virginia. Over 40 soldiers’ signatures have been identified at the site. Unlike Blenheim, there is a mixture of Confederate and Union graffiti. The earliest dated graffito names a group of Confederate soldiers on picket duty on 16 March 1863. Confederate cavalry reviews were held nearby in spring of that year, and the building may have been used as a field hospital following the Battle of Brandy Station on 9 June 1863. The Union graffiti probably dates from the winter encampment of the Army of the Potomac in the area from November 1863 to May 1864, when it is thought the house was used as an army administrative office. “Outrages Committed by the ‘Grand Army’ in Fairfax County,” *The Daily Dispatch*, August 9, 1861. National Park Service, “Registration Form: Blenheim,” 14; Historic Blenheim Civil War Interpretive Center, *Historic Blenheim Site Tour*, 1–4. Historic Blenheim Civil War Interpretive Centre, *Blenheim Soldiers*, 1–2. National Park Service, “Registration Form: Graffiti House,” 5. Brandy Station Foundation, “Graffiti House Wall Information,” 1–2.

13. Taylor, “Graffiti and the Epigraphic Habit,” 95. For the purposes of this essay, graffiti are defined as drawings and inscriptions soldiers made on permanent structural surfaces which were not their property. This encompasses charcoal, pencil, scratched, stencilled, and carved marks. There is potential for a looser definition, which would include related texts such as arboglyphs carved by soldiers on trees and notes written in books at southern sites by Union troops. At the time of the Civil War, “graffiti” was a newly coined word used to describe ancient scratched inscriptions at sites like Pompeii. However, the “habit” of people “writing their names and scribbling sentences in public places” was a familiar one. “The Graffiti of Pompeii,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, December 16, 1859, Issue 143.


18. Ibid., 8–9.

25. Some national cemeteries were created during the war. However, the process of burying and commemorating the dead during the conflict was often “haphazard” and “an act of improvisation”; formal commemoration was by no means guaranteed. Grant, “Patriot Graves,” 88. Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 65, 217–18. Kelly Merrifield, “From Necessity to Honor: The Evolution of National Cemeteries in the United States,” National Park Service. http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/national_cemeteries/Development.html. The style of Civil War-era U.S. military headstones had limited text, typically an “arched name and abbreviated military organization.” United States Department of Veterans Affairs, “Pre-World War I Era Headstones and Markers.” http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hmcivil.asp.
27. An extension of this is graffiti by veterans who returned to battlefield sites after the war. Banks, “Gettysburg Hidden History.” http://john-banks.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/hidden-history-at-gettysburg.html.
28. Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 66, 212.
29. Robertson, Soldiers Blue and Gray, 150.
30. Mitchell, The Vacant Chair, 142.
32. Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 119, 121.
33. Mitchell, The Vacant Chair, 143.
34. Historic Blenheim Civil War Interpretive Center, Blenheim Soldiers: Attic Guide, 1. “Court House” was used to refer to both the building and the main town of the county (where it was located).

42. The site’s staff have suggested this imagery was influenced by Union patriotic envelope designs showing the Confederate president Jefferson Davis being beaten up or mauled, sometimes by Abraham Lincoln. For example: “Champion Prize Envelope, Lincoln & Davis in 5 Rounds. 2nd Round [Pictorial Envelope]” (New York, 1861), call number PR-022-3-29-2, Library of Congress.


44. Cornelia Hancock, Letter March 2, 1864, 3rd Div. 2nd Corps Near Brandy, in Jaquette, Letters of a Civil War Nurse, 57.

45. National Park Service, “Andrew Johnson National Historic Site: Information on Graffiti Collated by Kendra Hinkle,” unnumbered, 2011. The writer of the last inscription has been tentatively identified as Allen B. Lovejoy, a private in the 38th Tennessee Infantry.


47. Giles and Giles, “Signs of the Times,” 50.


50. Men would often comment on the bravery and morality of other soldiers in letters home, informally policing their behavior. In some letters, with “varying measures of glee and shock, soldiers told of their officers having sex with prostitutes and other women.” McPherson, For Cause and Comrades, 80 and Mitchell, The Vacant Chair, 30.

51. There are exceptions, for example, there are some soldiers’ prayers on the wall at Morgan Chapel, Bunker Hill. O’Connell, “American Graffiti,” 44.

52. Wiley, The Life of Billy Yank, 352–53; for example, Harpers Weekly, December 21, 1861; and Manning, What This Cruel War Was Over, 108, 191. There is a single racist comment, alluding to Northern support for emancipation, in Confederate graffiti at Massaponax Church. Brown, “The Writing on the Wall,” 52. There are graffiti by African American Union soldiers at the Huntsville Depot, Alabama.

53. Brandy Station is unusual in that research has shown the majority of graffiti were written by Confederate troops in 1863 before any Union inscriptions at the site. However, it was probably a commercial building at the time of the war, with little personal or religious significance. Likewise, other southern sites with Confederate graffiti include a cave and a watermill. National Park Service, “Registration Form: Graffiti House,” Section 8, 5.


55. Neely, “Was the Civil War a Total War?,” 445.

56. Mitchell, The Vacant Chair, 101–02.


59. Judson, History of the Eighty-Third Regiment, 49; “Yankee Vandalism on the James River Plantation” Memphis Daily Appeal, September 5, 1862, Vol. 8, No. 212; “Outrages Committed by the ‘Grand Army’ in Fairfax County,” Daily Dispatch, August 9, 1861. The “literary vandals” of the 83rd Pennsylvania who stole books to read from the Coggin’s Point
Plantation also, according to the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, trashed the furniture and wrote graffiti on the internal walls cursing the owner. Members of the 83rd Pennsylvania also left graffiti at Historic Blenheim House. While it is a very fragile link, the implication that some soldiers may have written graffiti at different places they passed through, not just one-off inscriptions, is a persuasive one.


63. Rable, “Hearth, Home and Family,” 100.


67. About a third of the signatures at Historic Blenheim House are by immigrant soldiers, including some from regiments in Blenker’s Division which was predominantly German. Perhaps some immigrant soldiers did care less about damage to historic sites; arguably “men who were born and raised in the United States, with American values and traditions, were more likely to be patriotic than foreigners who did not share this background and knew little about American history, institutions and way of life.” Kamphoefner and Helbich, *Germans in the Civil War*, 26. However, it is likely there was prejudice in blaming immigrants for vandalism, too; German soldiers were often stereotyped as crude, slow-witted, and drunken. Robertson, *Soldiers Blue and Gray*, 27; Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 312; Kamphoefner and Helbich, *Germans in the Civil War*, 21, 24. Blenker’s Division had a reputation for being rather disorganized and unpredictable, in legend at least a “foreign legion” of “strange geniuses, radicals, reds, impracticables, unfortunates, soldiers of fortune, exiled patriots, politicians, authors and what not.” “General News,” *The Local News*, November 29, 1861; “The Mountain Department. The Advance Movement – Blenker’s Division – the Obstacles with Which Gen. Fremont Contends – Incidents of the Campaign,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1862.

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