

# Collecting Civil War Watches

By Clint Geller, FNAWCC

# What is a “Civil War Watch?”

**Loosest reasonable definition (Ebay sellers often fall short of this standard):**

Any watch made prior to April, 1865 that might plausibly have seen service during the ACW.

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# What is a “Civil War Watch?”

**Better, more historically grounded definition  
(most appropriate for reenactment):**

A watch made, or retailed in the US or CSA prior to April, 1865\* of a type that was advertised for, and/or popular among ACW participants.

\* The closer to April, 1861 the better

# What is a “Civil War Watch?”

**Strict definition (for “named,” or “identified” historical ACW artifacts):**

A watch for which documentary evidence exists that it was owned and/or carried by an ACW participant, whether a combatant, or a related civilian personality, *during* the ACW.

**Monitor & Merrimack, Battle of Hampton Roads, March 8 – 9, 1862**

# What is a “Civil War Watch?”

## Other ACW – related watches:

Watches, including those made after the ACW, known to have been owned by ACW participants *after* the war ended, especially when bearing an ACW-related inscription or presentation.

1870s era gold watch by German watchmaker Adolph Lange presented to former US Maj. Gen. Godfrey Weitzel “by his German Friends”

# Why Collect Civil War Watches?

By the President of the United States of America:

## A Proclamation.

**The ACW was the single most important, traumatic and formative event in US history.**

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States,

containing, among other things, the following,

**Emancipation Proclamation, September 22, 1862**

"That on the first day of January in the

# Why Collect Civil War Watches?

**The ACW spurred the American watch industry.**



# Approximate CW and Pre-CW American Men's Watch Movement Production<sup>a</sup>

- AWCo Total, Prior to 4/61<sup>b</sup>: 32,000
- AWCo, 4/61-4/65: 114,000
- AWCo M57 / M59/ KW16/ KW20, 4/61-4/65:  
91,000 / 19,000 / 3,000 / 1,000
- EH&Co Total, Prior to 4/61<sup>c</sup>: 3,000
- EH&Co, 4/61 – 4/65: 4,000
- **Total US Mfg., Prior to 4/61: 35,000**
- **Total US Mfg., 4/61-4/65: 118,000**
- **Total US Mfg. as of 4/65: 153,000 (Men's)**

a: Sources: Waltham & Howard factory records b: includes all AWCo predecessors

c: includes Howard & Rice production

# Why Collect Civil War Watches?

**The revolution in watchmaking technology in the decade preceding the ACW may have affected the conduct of the ACW.**

C. V. Woerd Screw Machine

# From the Diary of U. S. Grant

*"For the first time in history, a major assault was launched by commanders whose eyes were fixed on the hands of watches synchronized the night before. This was necessary in the present case because the usual signal guns would not have been heard above the din of the preliminary bombardment, which included the naval weapons on both flanks..."*

# Watch Used for Ranging of Artillery

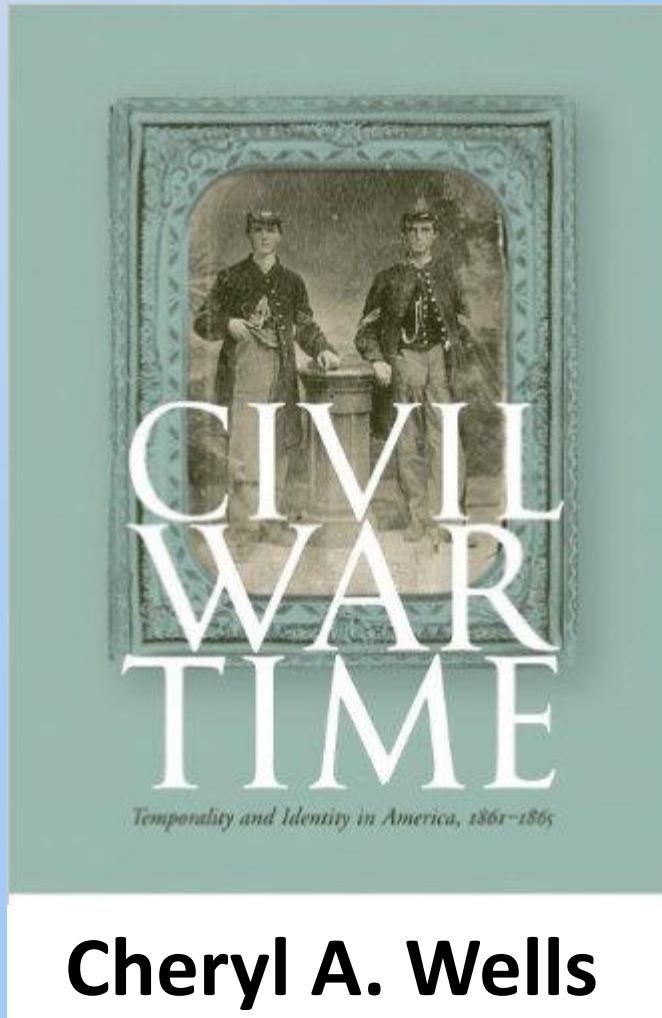
Gen. John Schofield measured the intervals between flash and sound of explosions occurring during the battle of Atlanta<sup>a</sup>.

a: “46 Years in the Army,” personal memoirs of US Major Gen. John Schofield

# Every Day Use of Watches

- A very ordinary watch could tell you how many hours there were to sundown, or to sunrise, or until your guard watch was over.
- Officers frequently consulted their watches on the battlefield.
- Watches regulated camp activity.

# “Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865”



# A Famous Diary Entry

“ ‘Watch in hand, they await[ed] the approach of the half hour, and as the last second of the last minute [was] marked on the dial plate,’ Captain George S. James ‘pull[ed] the lanyard; there [was] a flash of light and a ten inch shell traced its pathway towards **Fort Sumter**.’ It was 4:30 AM on April 12, 1861...\*”

\*Taken from Wells, *ibid.* Chapter 1, Page 1, quoting from *Army Letters*, by De Fontaine

# Why Collect Civil War Watches?

**ACW presentations and engraving can bear witness to momentous events, to the characters forged, and to appreciations earned in the crucible of war.**

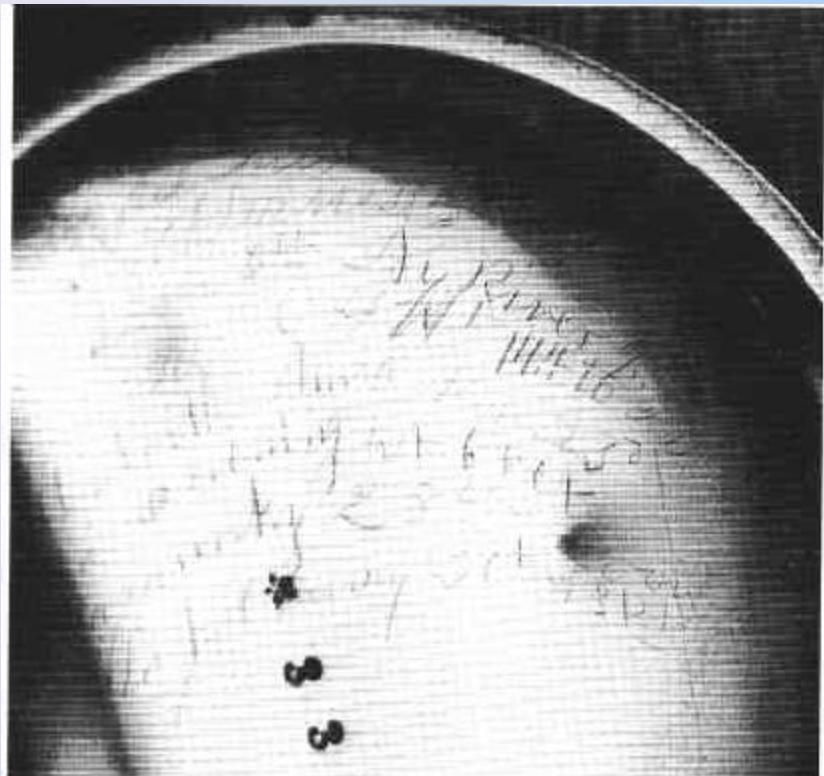
Remains of watch belonging to Lt. George Dixon, skipper CSS Hunley



# “Trench Art”

“A Civil War Watch,” by Clint Geller

August, 1995 NAWCC BULLETIN, p 512



11-line diary scratched into the rear lid of a silver, 11J PSB Grade M1857, finished in 1864

Grant's Overland Campaign, May – June, 1864

Camped at Cedar Mt. Jan 1<sup>st</sup> to May 4, 1864  
Crossed Rapid Ann At 12 M<sup>1</sup>  
Battle of Wilderness 5<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup>  
Todd's Tavern 8<sup>th</sup> Ny River 9<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> 13<sup>th</sup>  
Spottsylvania C. H. N.<sup>2</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>  
Crossed North Anna Mon. 23<sup>d</sup>  
Battle same evening at 6 o'clock  
Crossed Pamunkey 28<sup>th</sup> noon  
Battle Tappahannock<sup>3</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup>

Diarist unknown. Possibly “Wilson J. Barnett”

# Lt. Ward B. Frothingham, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> MA Infantry



Wm. Ellery Grade 7J Model 1859, S# 95,698, finished 11-12/63, sold at HA on 11/08 for \$7,767

# Why Collect Civil War Watches?

- The ACW was the single most important , traumatic and formative event in US history.
- The ACW had an important impact on the American watch industry.
- The revolution in watchmaking technology in the decade preceding the ACW affected the conduct of the ACW.
- ACW presentations and engraving can bear witness to momentous events, to the characters forged, and to appreciations earned in the crucible of war.
- **Researching fascinating provenances gives watch collecting an added dimension, and perpetuates the memory of the CW fallen and their deeds.**

# John Hodges Jr.\*, Salem MA



\* Salem Zouaves; 19<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> MA Infantry

John Hodges Jr.  
Salem,  
Mass.



Pvt. Hodges, Salem Zouaves, 1861



Lake Cobb Hale  
Hodges Rees Perkins Batchelder  
Damon Brown Palmer  
Wiley

Salem Zouaves  
Wiley House near Baltimore



devotion in their young Lieutenant-Colonel,—his yielding his horse to a worn-out soldier on the march, and carrying the man's rifle, or his pulling off his own stockings to cover the blistered feet of a private. On one occasion a force of veterans was ordered to charge a battery, and the Fifty-ninth was to support them. Three several times they saw them march up with firm step, and three several times they saw them waver and fall back under a tremendous fire from the Rebel works,—a sight which might well have caused an older regiment to falter. At this juncture Colonel Hedges received the order to advance with his regiment. For a moment they hesitated, and but for a moment, and it was a critical moment. Colonel Hedges saw it, and dashing toward the color-sergeant, caught the colors from his hand, and without uttering a word, advanced towards the battery. The effect was magical. A sergeant rushed forward and, waving his cap over his head, shouted, "Look at your Colonel with the colors. Come on, boys! come on!" A charge, and the battery was carried.

On the way to Petersburg he lost men by scores, and officer after officer, until one captain, nine lieutenants, and two hundred and fifty men only were left. An eyewitness thus describes the eventful day at Petersburg, July 30, 1864:—

"I was at the battle of the 30th, and then for the first time met Lieutenant-Colonel Hedges, in the crater, about two hours after the explosion of the fort. His regiment, as well as mine, had advanced beyond the fort that was blown up. I advanced with my regiment, and was wounded, and returned inside of the crater of the fort. On my way to the rear, after being relieved, I saw your brother sitting and leaning back against the embankment, and also near him Lieutenant-Colonel Wright (Twenty-seventh Michigan), both of them being wounded, Colonel Hedges through the thigh, Colonel Wright through the shoulder. I stood in front of them, and talked with them about their wounds, the war, and the prospects. After a moment, they made room for me, and invited me to sit between them, we all wishing to be on the ground awhile to see

the colored troops make a charge, as we had expressed a doubt as to their bravery, and wished to see them personally. After I sat down, your brother leaned lightly on my shoulder, and appeared weak. Colonel Wright spoke, and asked if we had not better go on to the rear. Your brother said, 'We can't get there until the colored troops pass by.' They were then going through the exploded fort to make the charge. As the colored troops passed, the Johnnies ranged their batteries so as to throw their shells into the crater of the fort, and some twenty exploded there within half a many minutes. On the explosion of a shell some ten or twenty feet from us, while sitting in the position I have described, a piece of shell struck him on the back of the head, killing him instantly. He did not fall, as he was supported by me on one side and the bank on the other. I spoke to a soldier to assist me, and he laid him down carefully, examined his pockets, found his watch, some papers, and a pencil, which I herewith enclose. The man took his blanket, after laying him in an easy position, with one hand by his side, the other across his breast, and covered him up, where I left him, and where I doubt not he was buried, as the enemy afterward took the fort, and buried all the dead in the fort in reconstructing."

This surmise was afterwards ascertained to be correct, through a flag of truce. Thus died at the early age of twenty-two, after serving his country from the very outbreak of the war, in almost all parts of the field, and faithfully sharing the fortunes of four different regiments, the brave, generous, and ardent [John Hedges](#).

## Harvard Memorial Biographies pp 306-7, Vol 2

“...a piece of shell struck him on the back of his head, killing him instantly. ... I spoke to a soldier to assist me, and he laid him down carefully, examined his pockets, **found his watch**, some papers, and a pencil, **which I herewith enclose.**”

## Thorndike Deland Hedges, Brother of John, who received the watch and wrote the HMB passage



*Thorndike Hedges*

Captain, 1<sup>st</sup> NC Volunteers

# How Common Were Watches in ACW Armies?



# Waltham Advertising Targeted Soldiers

Harper's Weekly, Jul 13, 1863

## American Watches

### For Soldiers

### AT REDUCED PRICES.

### American Watches for Americans!

#### THE AMERICAN WATCH COMPANY

give notice that they have lately issued a new style of Watch, expressly designed for Soldiers and others who desire a good watch at a moderate price. These watches are intended to displace the worthless, cheap watches of British and Swiss manufacture with which the country is flooded, and which were never expected to keep time when they were made, being refuse manufactures sent to this country because unsalable at home, and used here only for jockeying and swindling purposes.

We offer to sell our Watch, which is of THE MOST SUBSTANTIAL MANUFACTURE, AN ACCURATE AND DURABLE TIME-KEEPER, and in Sterling Silver Cases, Hunting pattern, at nearly as low a price as is asked for the fancy-named Ancres and Lepines of foreign make, already referred to.

We have named the new series of Watches, WM. ELLERY, Boston, Mass., which name will be found on the plate of every watch of this manufacture, and is one of our trade-marks.

Sold by all respectable watch dealers in the loyal States.

Wholesale orders should be addressed to  
ROBBINS & APPLETON,  
Agents of the American Watch Company,  
182 BROADWAY, N. Y.

# Testimony of Sutler, Luther Caldwell, at the Court Martial of US Maj. Jonathan Ladd, Paymaster, June 10, 1865

.....

We accordingly made an arrangement by which he was to have one quarter of the profits on all the watches we sold at the barracks.

Lawyer: Which was how much on a watch?

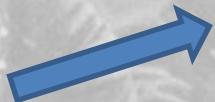
Caldwell: Well the watches cost us \$33.50 and we sold them for \$60.00. He had a quarter of that which was \$6.50 or something like that.

Lawyer: How many watches did you sell under that arrangement?

Caldwell: Well I don't know exactly. I should say something over four hundred.

# Evidence of Common Watch Ownership Among CW Soldiers

- Numerous photos of officers and enlisted men wearing watch chains

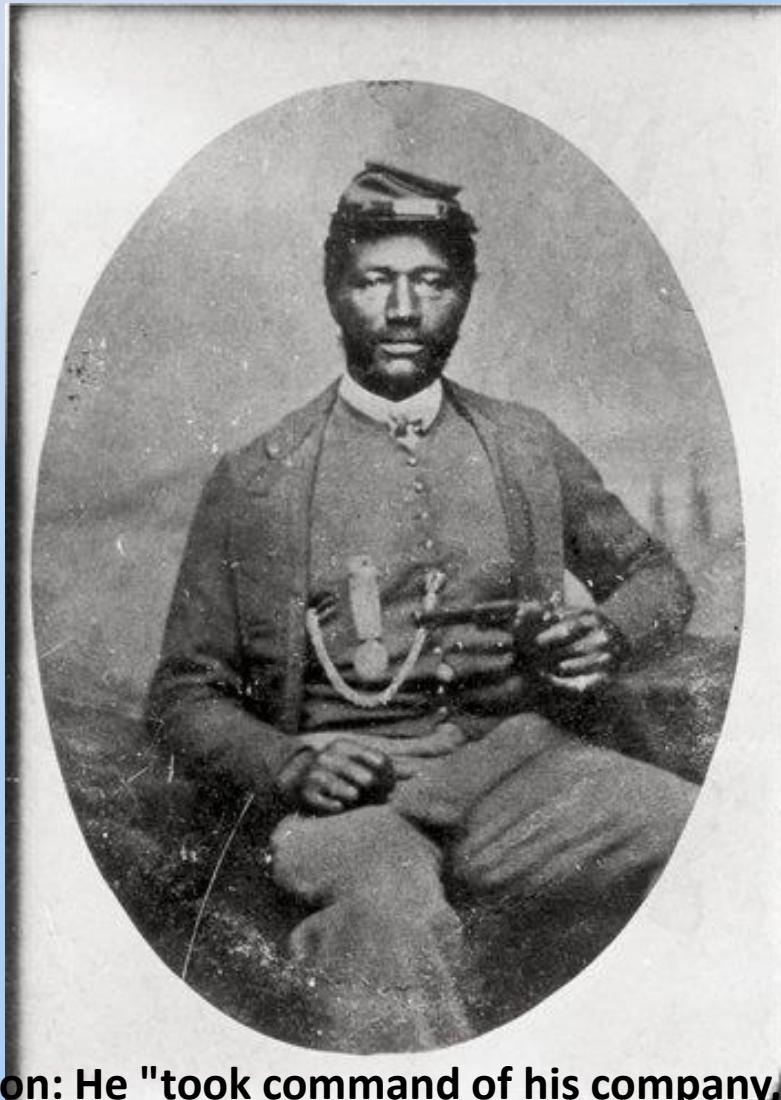






**63<sup>rd</sup> NY Infantry – Meagher's Irish Brigade**

# **1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Powhatan Beaty, 5<sup>th</sup> US Colored Troops, Co. G, Recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor**



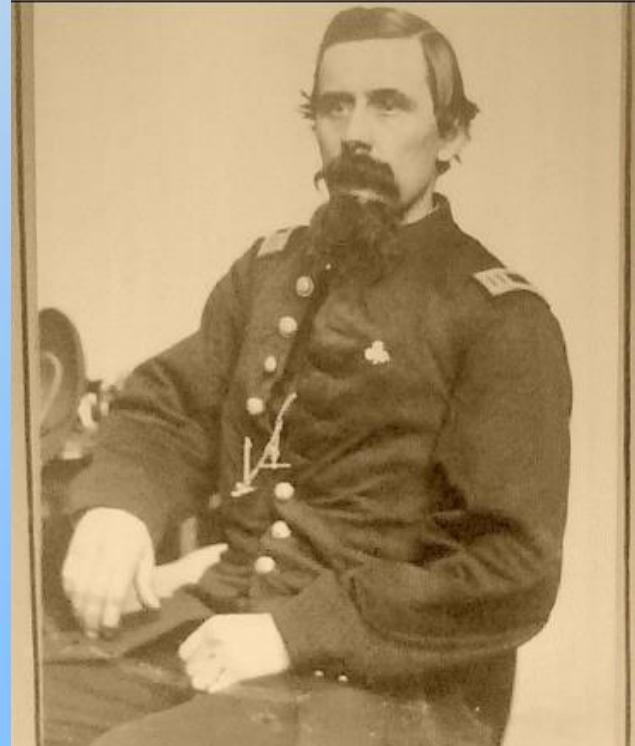
**C.M.O.H. Citation: He "took command of his company, all the officers  
having been killed or wounded, and gallantly led it."**



**Lt. Josiah Mahoney  
8<sup>th</sup> TN Cav., Co. D**



**CSA Maj. Gen J.E.B. Stuart  
Gold English Lever by John Cragg**



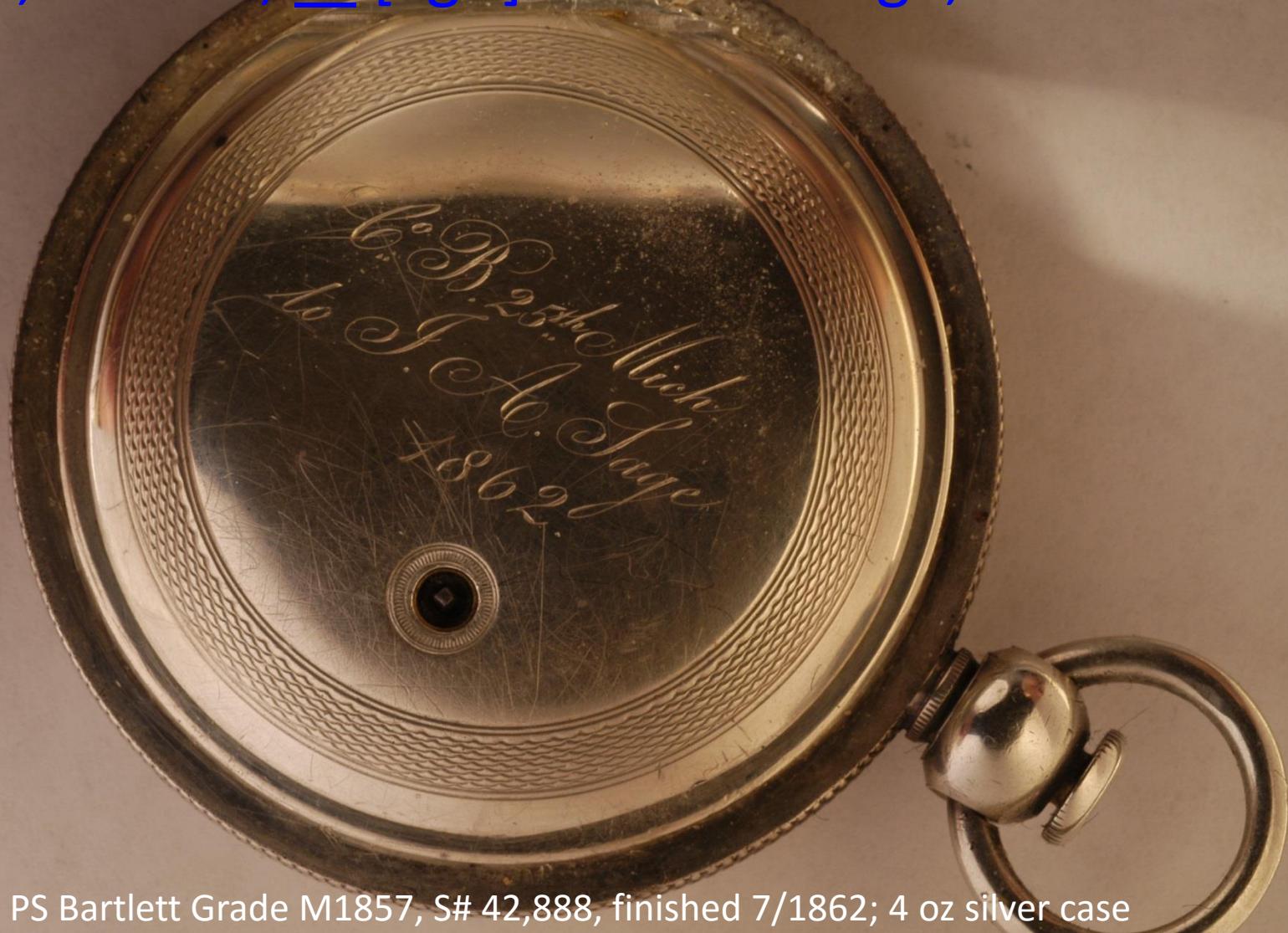
**Captain Elisha A. Hinks,  
19<sup>th</sup> MA Infantry  
Hero at Antietam  
Silver Swiss Duplex by Girard**

# Evidence of Common Watch Ownership Among CW Soldiers

- Numerous photos of officers and enlisted men wearing watch chains
- Units sometimes gave watches to noncoms, possibly as enlistment incentives

Sgt. – Lt. James A. Sage  
Model 1857

“Co. B, 25<sup>th</sup> MI, to [Sgt.] James A. Sage, 1862”



7 Jewel, PS Bartlett Grade M1857, S# 42,888, finished 7/1862; 4 oz silver case

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- C.O.'s sometimes gifted watches to subordinates, and vice versa

# Gifts To and From C.O.'s

Solid Gold Balance  
Giles, Wales & Co. 18K Hunting Case



**AT&Co Grade M1857, S# 85,087, 10/1863**  
"Presented by Col. Edward Anderson,  
12<sup>th</sup> Ind. Cav., to Maj. J. B. Cobb of ours"

Temperature Compensated Balance  
18K HC: "J. R. Reed & Co., Pitts"



**AT&Co. Grade M1857, S# 107,296, 2/1864**  
"Presented to J. T. Copeland, Brig. Gen. Vol. S.  
By the Officers of Camp Copeland\*, 1864"

\* Located in Braddock PA, near Pittsburgh



Major Josiah B. Cobb

12<sup>th</sup> Indiana Cavalry



Col. Joseph Tarr Copeland

Michigan Cavalry Brigade

# Evidence of Common Watch Ownership Among CW Soldiers

- Numerous photos of officers and enlisted men wearing watch chains
- Units sometimes gave watches to noncoms as enlistment incentives
- C.O.'s sometimes gifted watches to subordinates, and vice versa
- Watches mentioned in officer's memoirs, and diaries, and in the Lieber Code.

# The “Watch Fever\*”

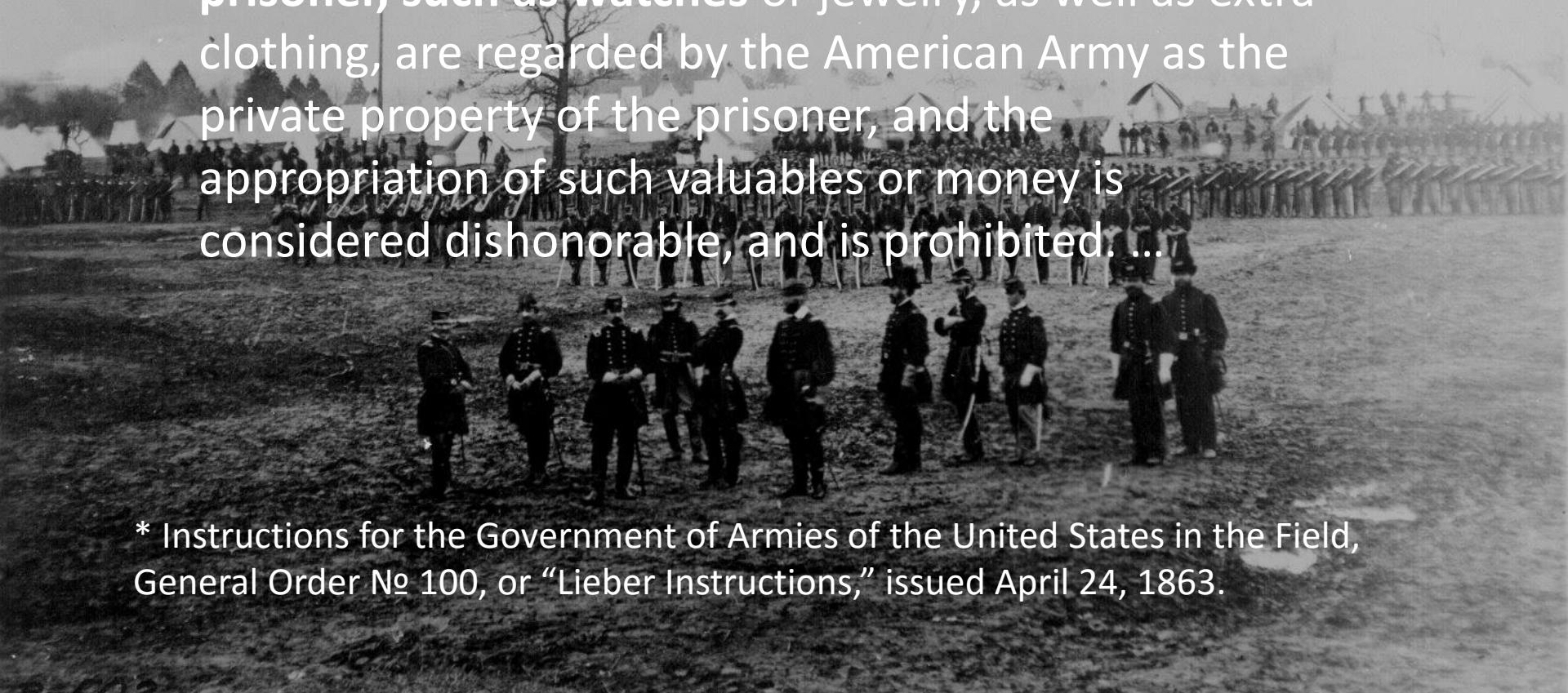
**“During the winter of 1861-62 our camp was visited with the ‘watch fever,’ so called; and it raged with such fury at one time that nearly every man was affected with it, and had a watch in each pocket. Many got nipped so badly by their first trade, that it also became their last one. The desire for watch trading ran so high that small knots of men could be seen hovering over a few embers, almost into the small hours of the night (morning), trading watches. The guards were finally instructed to arrest anyone who appeared like a watch fiend, after taps. The fever turned after awhile, ... .”**

\* From: *“The Third New Hampshire and All About it,”* by Captain D. Eldredge, 3<sup>rd</sup> NH Volunteer Infantry, published in 1893.

# Lieber Code of Military Conduct\*

Art. 72.

Money and other **valuables on the person of a prisoner, such as watches or jewelry, as well as extra clothing**, are regarded by the American Army as the private property of the prisoner, and the appropriation of such valuables or money is considered dishonorable, and is prohibited. ...



\* Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field, General Order № 100, or "Lieber Instructions," issued April 24, 1863.

# So, how common were watches in ACW armies?

## My Guestimates:

- 1 watch, most often American, per 20 Union soldiers, counting officers
- 1 watch, most often *foreign*, per 50 CSA soldiers, counting officers

# Kinds of Civil War Watches

- **American Watches:**
  - *The AWCo and predecessors*  
(S#'s below about 158,000\*)
  - *E. Howard & Company*  
(S#'s below about 6,880)
- **Swiss and English Watches:**
  - cheapest in the US Market
  - most popular among CSA troops

\*Some movements with S#'s significantly below 158,000 were finished *after* April, 1865

# General Characteristics of ACW ERA Watch Movements

- Key wound (KW) from rear; key set (KS), either from front or rear.
- Gilded brass watch plates, never nickel.
- Roman numeral, and nearly all unsunk or single sunk\* dials.
- There were no American watches that were specifically designed or advertised for railroad service during the ACW.

\* Exception: “American” Grade M59s, most of which were double sunk

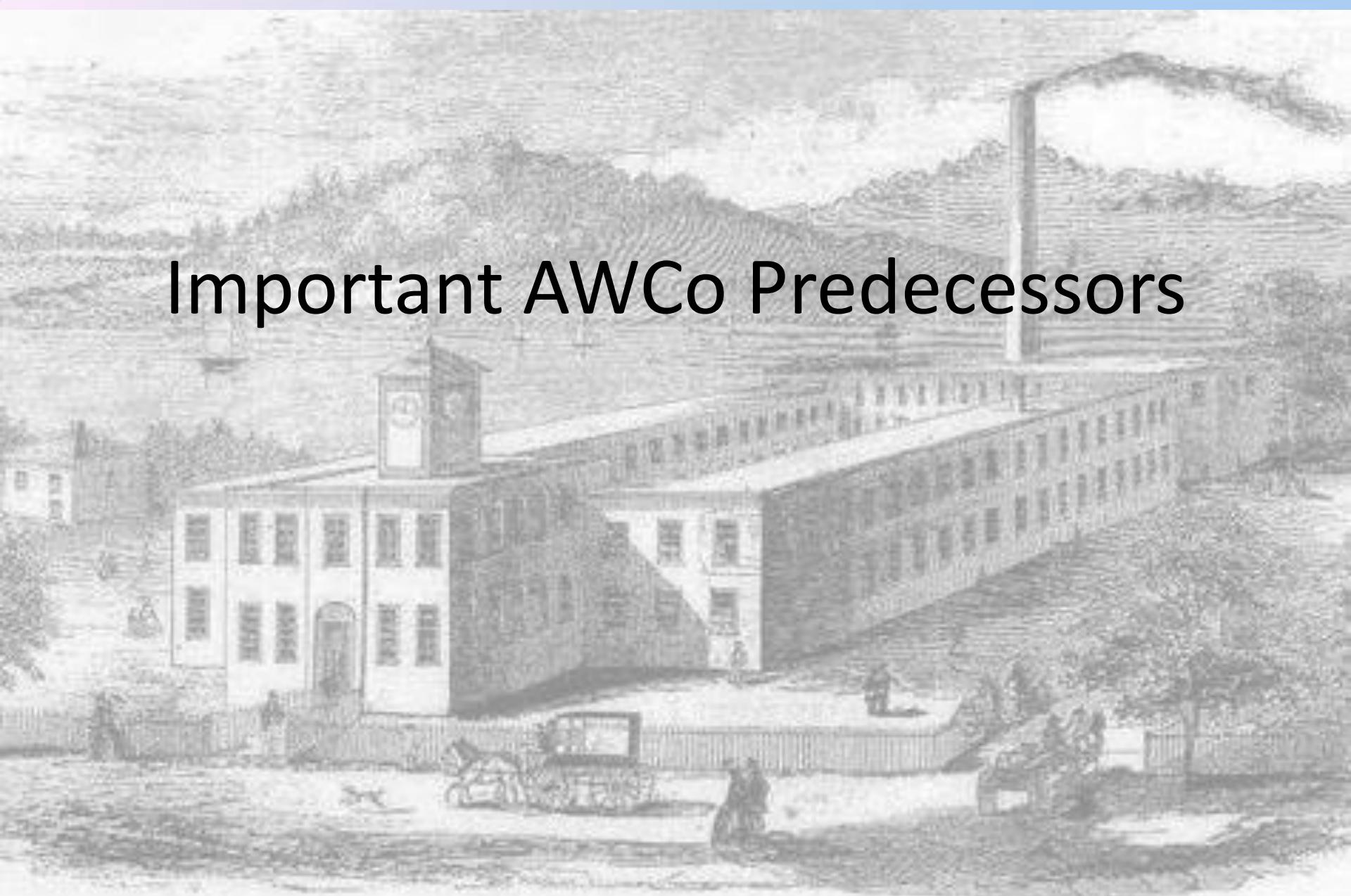
# General Characteristics of ACW ERA Watch Cases

- Hunting style cases predominated, but open face cases also existed.
- American cases will be solid silver or solid gold, only very rarely gold filled, and never nickel.
- Foreign cases may be brass (which sometimes will be gold, or silver plated).
- American cases and movements often sold separately
- Foreign movements and cases were sold as pre-assembled units; English watches often had matching movement and case S#s.

# American CW and Pre-CW Watches

- **American watch movements were made to standard sizes; cases often were sold separately, selected either by a retailer or a consumer.**
- AWCo & BWCo made some of their own cases; Howard did not. Some very early BWCo movements were sold in English cases.
- Gold cases were most often nominally 18K, but could be 12K or 14K
- Silver cases were typically coin silver (90% pure)

# Important AWCo Predecessors



**Boston Watch Co. Factory in 1857, operating as AT&Co**

# Samuel Curtis, S# 375



Unsunk dial



**S# 375 is the only "Curtis" known to have a Geneva stop works**