

Common Valor

Part I

By Leif HerrGesell, Town Historian

History has much to do with our everyday lives. Whether you're driving down State Route 5 (5&20) which used to be a First Nations path or passing by the Nott Road cemetery or one of several old school houses in the area. We are surrounded by history and it impacts our daily lives in myriad ways. Still we barely nod at it and sometimes even take umbrage with things of the past we largely don't understand but seem egregious to us in the present.

I have lived here for many decades and I am still mostly, historically ignorant. There is too much to know. Even the experts are really just scraping the surface. Each and every person is history. So imagine the tens of thousands of people who have lived here in Canandaigua before us and that each of them offered a unique perspective on the times they lived in.

Part of our national discourse lately has been about reparations, Civil Rights and who from the past deserves our thanks or our scorn. This has placed Civil War Veterans and politicians, including former slave turned abolitionist, lobbyist and publisher, Frederick Douglas, squarely in the cross hairs of some. People of at least four races participated in the American Civil War. The two races with the largest number of participants are self-evident. Did you know that Native Americans served on both sides? The Cherokee Rifles for instance served on the Southern side. Brigadier General Ely Samuel Parker, aka Donehogawa a Seneca leader born west of here, in Clarence New York, was one of hundreds if not thousands of Native Americans to serve in the Union Army. He was present With General Grant when Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House in April of 1865 and played a major role in drafting the surrender papers.

A Civil War Veteran's story is just that- just his story and perhaps is composed of the experiences he shared with his comrades and immediate family. Now repeat this concept for every significant and arcane historic subject you can imagine! Steam tractors, Constitutional Law, homesteading, the history of American architecture, etc. History is an endless list of unanswered questions and billions of pages of documentation in which lie many truths. Let me add that we cannot confuse facts with truths. Truths are more slippery and subjective than the temperature, the time of day, the number of players on the field and the speed of light – facts. Truths are where humans interface with facts.

This makes history a gigantic challenge to “get right.” Lately we have people who were not participants in historic events and whose far distant perspective is informed by little or no knowledge, trying to pass judgment on people who are not present to speak for themselves.

These citizens who reside in the past are not here to explain their actions, thoughts, and feelings except through archives which we have to read and myopically ponder. We struggle to use facts like the size of the Union Army, the number of Confederate ships at sea and the average age of the soldiers at Antietam and weigh it against Abraham Lincoln’s Second inaugural address to try and distill a revealing truth about our ancestors and ourselves. Facts and scattered perspectives across the chasm of time will only provide an incomplete or skewed picture. The past is....well, past. It’s not on trial because we have no authority over it. We can only ignore it or learn from it or distort it for our own purposes. I have no authority over Pompei or a medieval serf, or the Captain of the Titanic. If I exert authority over those who cannot defend themselves, I am a bully of sorts. A history bully. If I can say anything I want without supporting evidence or by cherry picking facts about anyone – well I am a bully. We are not witnesses to the past that occurred before our lifetime and thus cannot offer testimony. We are students not executioners.

The Civil War perspective of a 35-year-old black man sold on the auction block in Charleston in 1861, is radically different from a 48-year-old Cheshire woman who receives notice that her 19 year old son died at the Battle of the Harris Farm in May of 1864. She might understandably say that the price of Union and abolition is too high. The man who has been sold like a plow might say “Pay whatever blood price you must that all men might be free!” Both are right because there is no wrong-. What is right for a person is not necessarily what is right for a nation. The same could be said of an 80-year-old Mississippi woman who learns of her nephew’s imprisonment in Elmira, New York in 1863. When people start dying for ideals our perspective changes drastically. The military cemetery at Elmira is filled with over 2,000 Confederates who died of starvation and disease- we’d call that a war crime today just as Andersonville prison in Georgia was a war crime. Moral high ground can get slippery when the slope is coated in the blood of Soldiers. The nation paid a terrible price for the crime of slavery. Our Cemeteries tally the cost.

The Civil War is still being fought in our homes, classrooms and workplaces and the Capitol building as we grapple with whether or not the Union Soldiers did enough to end slavery or whether they were white supremacists trying to expunge their own guilt and complicity. Our national guilt on this topic is

not guided by historic facts but by our current emotions and no one today has the moral authority to convict the past. We need to understand or we will suffer from our own ignorance and arrogance.

Approximately 300,000 Union Soldiers died to restore the Union and crush slavery. Nearly all of them died far from home of disease or a horrific bullet wound earned in a savage battle. After 1863 African American Soldiers contributed their bodies and lives to the carnage – Colored Troops, as they were known in the Civil War. By the way if you take away the term “Colored” Troops – you deny them their history just to make things comfortable to our contemporary ear. You can’t take away the name “Buffalo” Soldier or the phrase “Chinaman’s Chance.” Look them up, you might find it fascinating.

The second generation, children of the immigrants, have typically considered themselves “native born” American and so would the same be true of former slaves? It overwhelmingly was and was born out of both necessity and desire. They enlisted in the fight because they saw themselves as Americans! All of this righting of wrong would need to be tested and enforced legally by flawed people like us...freedom for the slave was bought with the blood of Union troops Black and White. Taking off the shackles didn’t ensure equal freedom. That was a profoundly more difficult issue than ending slavery with a stroke of the pen and enforcing the 13th amendment at the point of the bayonet.

Circumstance could not be changed, and unless we develop a time machine – still can’t be changed. The past is well...the past. In 1857 Chief Justice Taney’s Dred Scott decision was a case of Government getting it wrong! The Supreme Court of the United States decided that the slave, Dred Scott, wasn’t even entitled to sue in court because he was not an American – on the premise that property can’t be a citizen! Imagine the arguments when that decision was handed down. Representatives were physically beaten in the halls of Congress. It took a war to undo the supreme court's decision and to reverse the seven-member conclusion. There were two dissenting justices.

There are no straight answers to historic questions like this. There are moral answers and then there are the flawed humans justifying their behaviors. Forming a majority opinion in a free republic, to a moral question is still nearly impossible. Imagine the minds and hearts of 34 million Americans in June of 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued or in 1861 when the first salvo was fired in the Civil War or on July 4th, 1863, when the Union Army licked its wounds after stopping the Confederates cold at Gettysburg. Men from Canandaigua and Rochester sacrificed their futures and their souls in those battles.

We can acknowledge facts about the motivations of the Confederacy to maintain slavery and an economic system that existed on the tortured backs of human “property”- but what of the motivations of the Union Soldiers? This is much less clear. There were two broad simple answers- Union and Abolition. Some of our Canandaigua boys espoused one or the other but for some that was lip service or momentary zeal and the real reason was because their friend or brother was going off to war. But that can also change over time – and did.

Abolition became the single driving force after the Emancipation Proclamation. It was a given that if emancipation was enforced that the Union was restored. The two were now inseparable as it became increasingly clear after mid-1863 that the Union would survive if the Union Army kept on fighting. The opinion that the South needed crushing to end slavery for good and all, became the driving motivation for the majority of citizens at home in Cheshire, Academy, and Centerfield and Canandaigua and in the ranks of the Union Armies.

This conversation about the moral motivations of individuals who fought the war should be had by all of us after we spend more than a passing moment studying the Civil War, the Antebellum South, Chattel Slavery and the Post War Reconstruction Era, and don't leave out the roles of freed black Americans both before and after The War, which is actually four eras of politics and Civil Rights freedom. Why does the Canandaigua Town Historian care about all of this big picture Civil War stuff?

Our cemeteries are filled with men who died fighting to stamp out legalized, chattel slavery and end an attempt to divide the nation and which, is once again dividing around the subject of slavery, the Confederacy, reparations, guilt, innocence and courage. So what those Veterans accomplished should be of interest to us as we wrestle with our conscience and try to unravel the truth of our past and find peace in the present.

As the Canandaigua Town Historian I have come across several significant examples of Canandaiguans who fought to end slavery and restore the Union, that I hope you'll reflect upon.

The list of local Veteran's is extensive- their courage unquestionable, but I have found four that many of you have never heard of. Their graves and thus their sacrifice is within your reach.

Jasper Housel who was born in 1775 moved into the Academy Tract of Canandaigua near Monks Road in 1825 bringing with him his family including his 18-year-old son Joseph.

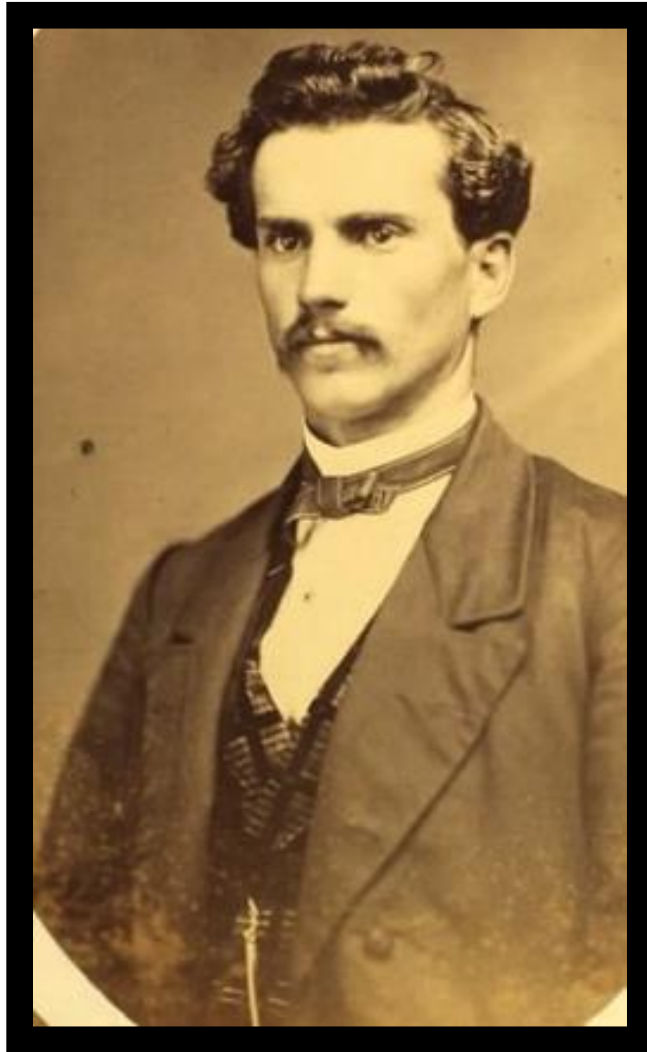
That son, Joseph Housel Sr., was born in 1807 and married to Caroline Sanford who was also from the Academy Tract and together they had several children, among them Charles and Joseph Housel Jr. They are nearly all interred in the Academy Cemetery on the corner of Seneca Pointe Road and a dead-end section of old West Lake Road.

The boys had a cousin on their mother's Sanford side of the family who was also from the Academy neighborhood. He was Charles Sanford the son of their mother's brother, Joseph Sanford not to be confused with Joseph Housel Sr.! Two Joseph Housels and one Joseph Sanford and a Charles in each family has made this a bit confusing for family historians over the years no doubt. To keep it simple I will refer to Civil War Soldier Sanford as: Chas. Sanford, and to his cousin Charles Housel, simply as Charles.

Chas. Sanford was the first of the three young men to go off to fight the "Secesh" as the rebellious, secessionist southern states were called. He enlisted in August of 1862 and joined the 4th NY Heavy Artillery. Men joining artillery and cavalry units were usually making a conscious decision based upon an interest in horses in the case of cavalymen or mathematics and science for artillerymen or simply because the thought of the infantry's long marches on foot didn't appeal.

Chas. Sanford enlisted in Rochester and probably rode there on the New York Central Railway, getting on at the station in Canandaigua. Many soldiers traveled to other towns to enlist in regiments that were being raised in which they wanted to enroll or in order to serve with a friend or relative or for a specific kind of service like the cavalry or artillery, or because it was the only regiment being raised when they came of age. Whatever the reason Chas Sanford had, he went out of his way to enlist. His cousin, Charles Housel, went a few weeks later joining the 148th NY Volunteer Infantry.

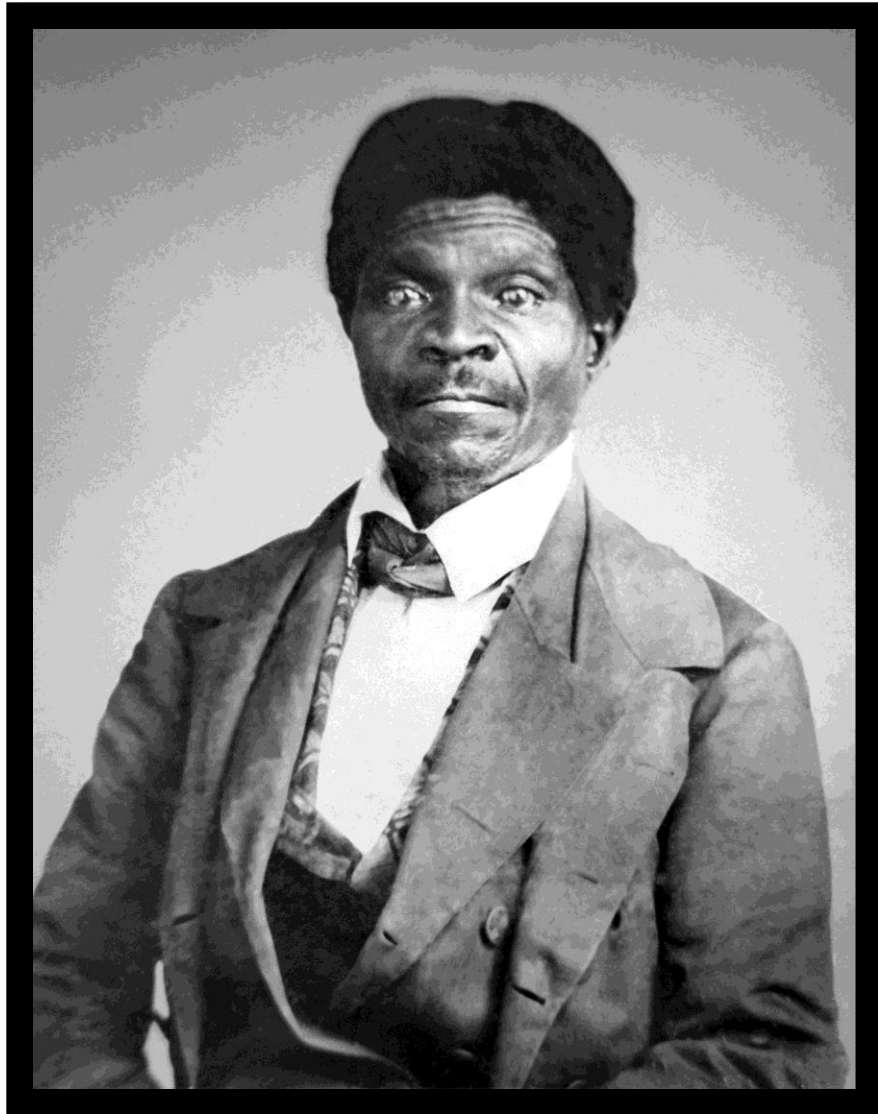
Chas. Sanford and Charles Housel had watched for a year as Union troops received defeat after defeat at the hands of the Rebels. Word of the war reached Canandaigua in the form of travelers, convalescing wounded troops, telegrams from local volunteers and officials in the area of conflict and from war correspondents writing for daily and weekly papers. The Rochester area papers were available here in Canandaigua along with the New York City "rags" and of course *The Ontario Repository and Messenger (The Daily Messenger)*. From the stampede after the first battle of Bull Run, to the second battle of Bull Run a year later, Sanford watched as the Union tightened the noose, but the Confederates emerged victorious from many of the big battles. To a young man in the hills of Canandaigua this must have been maddening as he itched to get into the fight. Chas. Sanford was 19 and was most likely untouched by the harsh reality of war.



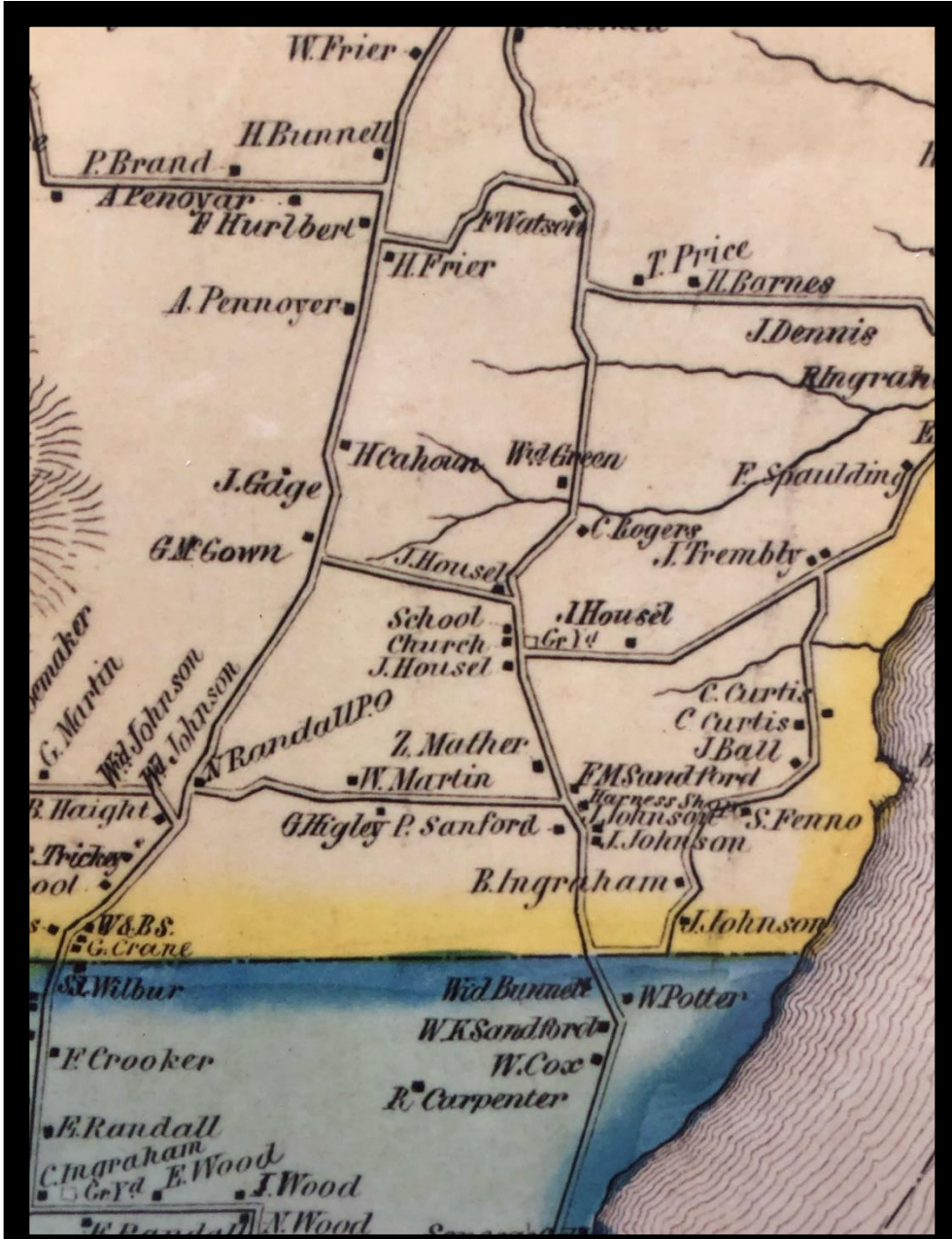
Taken before his enlistment in the 148th NY Volunteer Infantry, Charles Housel grew up in Canandaigua's Academy Tract hamlet which, borders the S. Bristol town line on State Rt. 21. Charles' grandfather Jasper Housel had settled on the Academy tract in 1825.



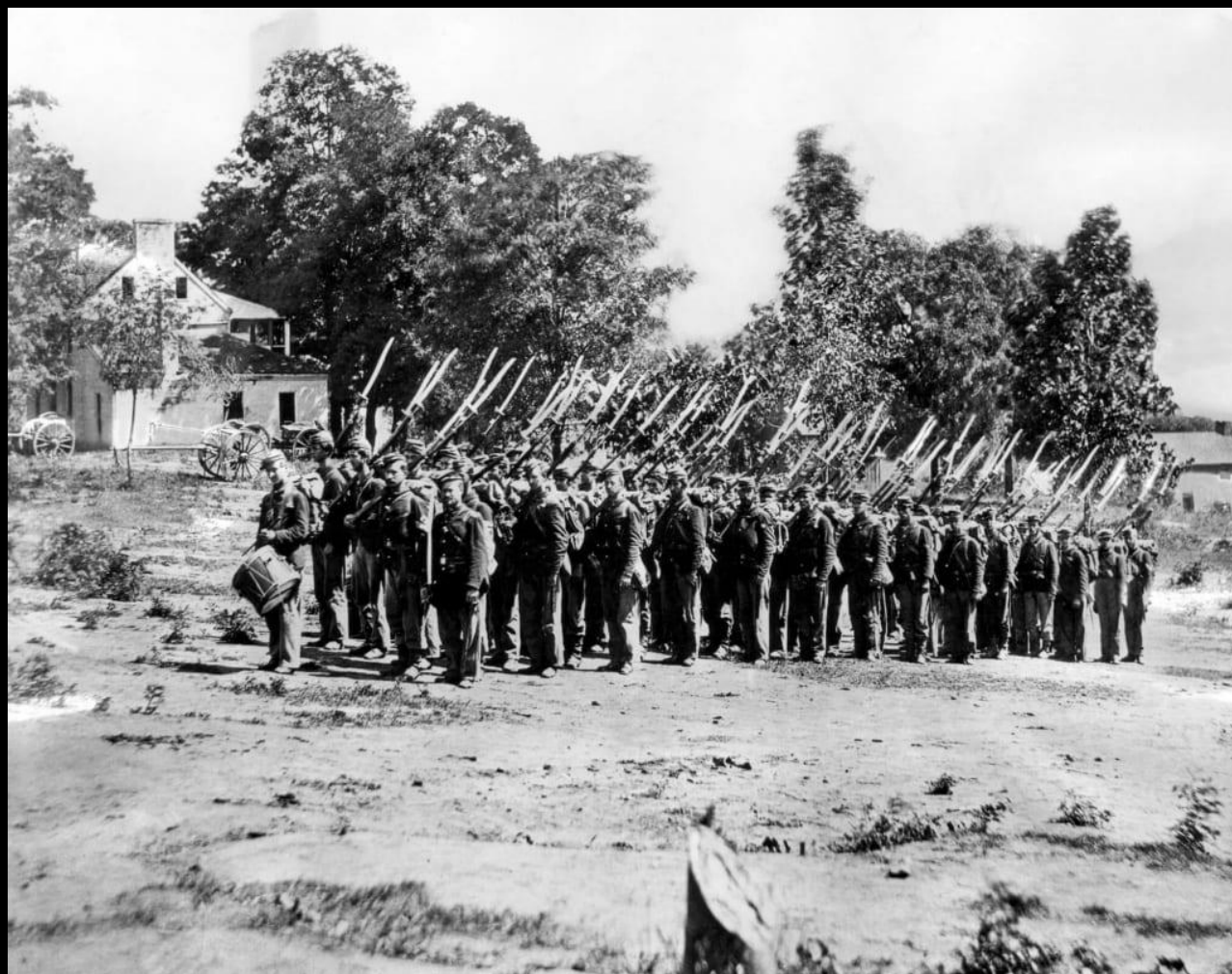
Joseph would be the youngest of the three members of the Housel/Sanford families to serve. Joseph joined his older cousin, Charles Sanford in the 4th NY Heavy Artillery. They would add their service to the weight of the Union Army fighting to restore the Union and end slavery.



The enslaved man Dred Scott challenged his own enslavement in the courts. Having left a slave state he challenged the law claiming his freedom based upon his residence with his "owner" in a free territory. He lost his case in a 7-2 decision against him by the US Supreme Court. This case set the stage for the showdown of the Civil War.



This 1852 map shows the southern portion of the town of Canandaigua known as the Academy Tract. The lands around the intersection of County Road 16 and Seneca Point Road were the location of the Housel farm where Joseph Jr. and Charles grew up and went to school.



For 3 years men from over two dozen states clamored to join the army. This company of northern soldiers poses for one of more rare unit photos showing troops preparing to march. Typically images show units on parade or are of individuals and small groups. Men from throughout Canandaigua and Ontario County served in regiments nearly identical to the company pictured here.

In part two of "Common Valor," Canandaigua Town Historian Leif HerrGesell will detail the battles the Housel and Sanford men fought and how the hamlet of Academy contributed to the end of slavery and the Confederacy.