

# Common Valor

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 schoolhouses 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 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.



*Sgt. Charles Housel before enlisting*

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 Pompeii 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.



*19 Yr Old Joseph Housel Academy Tract about 1862.*

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.

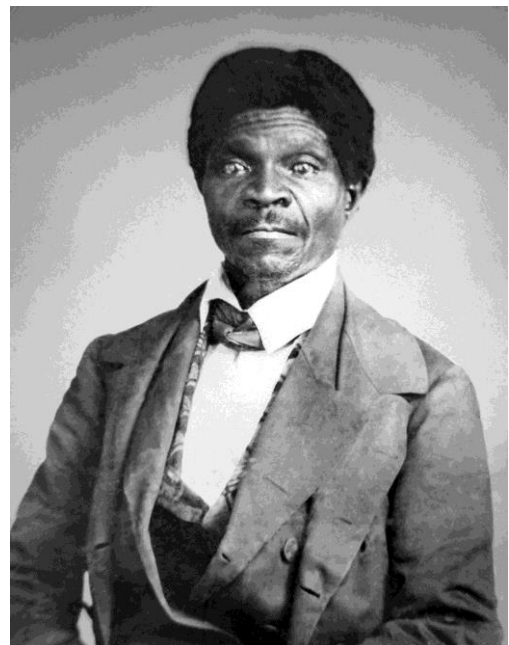
Approximately 300,000 Union Soldiers died to restore the Union and crush slavery. Nearly all of them died far from home of disease or a horrific bullet wound earned in a savage battle. After 1863 African American Soldiers contributed their bodies and lives to the carnage “Colored Troops,” as they were 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 undue 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 4<sup>th</sup>, 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 as 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.

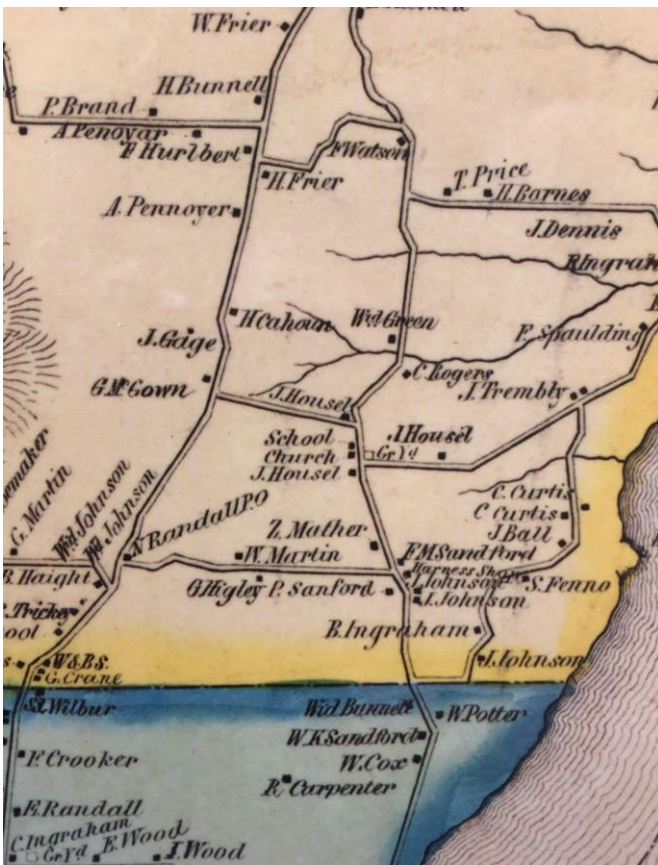


*Dred Scott. Human property according to the Supreme Court of the United States.*

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?



1852 map showing 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.

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 to try 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 Veterans 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 148<sup>th</sup> NY Volunteer Infantry.



*This company of northern soldiers poses for one of more rare unit photos showing troops preparing to march.*

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*).

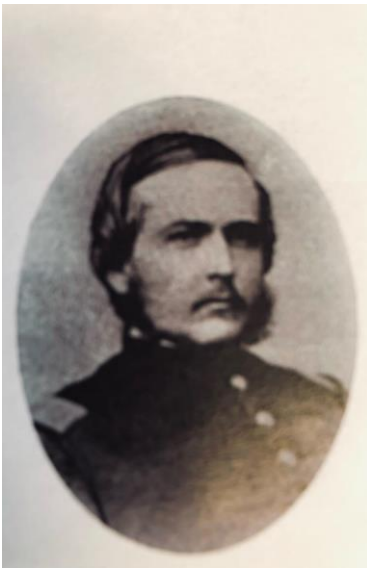
From the stampede after the first battle of Bull Run, to the battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Sanford watched as the Union tightened the noose, but the Confederates emerged victorious from many of the big battles. To a young man in the hills of Canandaigua this must have been maddening as he itched to get into the fight. Chas. Sanford was 19 and was most likely untouched by the harsh reality of war.

This family was patriotic, as so many post-colonial families were. Grandfather Jasper was already nearing middle age when he had served in The War of 1812. Certainly, stories of the Revolution and the War of 1812 were told in the fields while taking lunch under the nooning tree and at the hearth in the evening. In school children were educated in the deeds of their recent ancestors in founding and guarding a new nation. Chas. Sanford, Joseph Housel Jr., and brother Charles, surely understood in their minds that it was their duty to preserve the Union of States that their grandfathers had protected, and to end the tyranny of slavery.

The first two young men headed off to war with somewhat different missions. Sanford’s battery of artillerymen were assigned to gigantic cannon’s defending Washington D.C.

In 1864 as the defense of Washington became irrelevant with Lee on the defensive, the regiment was called away from their guns and were assigned duty as infantry, though they kept their name of “Heavy Artillery”. The Canandaigua men were assigned to Company “H” of the 2,400-man regiment.

Apparently, the new duty was not relished, but the men transitioned well and became proficient in their new trade. The regiment were fighters and they served in many battles in the final year of war, earning recognition for their stubborn contributions in combat.



*Capt. Augustus Brown Co.  
“H”, 4th NY Heavy Artillery.*

At nearly the same time that Chas Sanford was enlisting in the 4<sup>th</sup> New York Heavy Artillery, Charles Housel’s regiment – the 148<sup>th</sup> NY Volunteer Infantry was raised in Ontario, Yates, and Seneca Counties. Charles was in Company G., which was comprised of men from Canandaigua, Naples, and Geneva. Charles enlistment location is given as North Bristol (Bristol Center). Before the Regiment left Geneva and just days after the battle of Antietam, 22-year-old Charles Housel was promoted to Sergeant. No doubt much to his disappointment, the regiment spent most of its first year on garrison duty in and around Washington, D.C. In 1864 his regiment, like the 4th New York Heavy Artillery was sent south to help grind Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia into submission. It is possible the cousins met there in Washington in their spare time before tramping south in March of 1864.

Charles Housel’s younger brother, Joseph Housel, Jr., joined his brother and cousin in the Union Army, enlisting in January of 1864. He caught up to them in time to go to battle. Joseph joined Chas. Sanford

in the 4<sup>th</sup> New York Heavy Artillery. His enlistment coincided with the regiment's conversion to infantry duty. His placement in company "H" was not an accident or chance. Replacements were constantly being sent to the front from the pool of eligible young men back home. No doubt Joseph chose to serve with his older cousin. Joseph was just 19.

In May of 1864 the Union Army of the Potomac, under the overall command of Lieutenant General U. S. Grant had taken the offensive, trying to drive Lee's Army back- cutting it off from Richmond, the Confederate Capital and forcing a surrender or annihilating it as a viable fighting force if necessary. This led to a series of battles meant to deny Lee a chance to regroup, escape or take the offensive. It worked, but the casualties were staggering. The second battle of the Wilderness became a stumbling fight that spilled southward to Spotsylvania Courthouse, Virginia. The engagements were particularly vicious. The terrain and temperaments of the Armies lead to ferocious combats. The month from early May through Early June was actually a continuous series of unrelenting battles. Union Soldiers were determined to give back all that they had suffered in the early years of The War. Joseph was new to The War, he had been subsisting on hardtack crackers, salt beef and strong black coffee for just under four months but he had his older more seasoned cousin to lean on as they doggedly marched in pursuit of Lee.

On May 19<sup>th</sup> Canandaigua suffered a staggering blow as the 4<sup>th</sup> New York Heavy Artillery battled a Confederate force under General Richard "Baldy" Ewell. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Union Corps – to which the Canandaigua boys battalion was loaned, was extended to the right of their position. Company "H" 4<sup>th</sup> New York Heavy Artillery and its sister "Heavy" regiments were to face their first true trial by fire. Captain Augustus Brown, a young Geneseo law student from West Bloomfield commanded the large, 180-man company. Captain Brown personally posted his men.

The fighting was fierce at Harris's Farm, 400 miles dead south of Academy and company 'H' was heavily engaged in the late afternoon, battling against the North Carolinians of General Stephen Ramsuers Confederate brigade. The Union men were stretched thin and faced overwhelming numbers but doggedly held their position – some were fortified up in abandoned farm houses and others lay prone behind stumps and trees delivering shots as fast as they could load their Springfield muskets. The Rebels return fire was heavy and Brown was worried that his men would not be able to hold the position. We won't know for sure, but it is likely that Joseph and Chas. were shoulder to shoulder that sickening moment.

Joseph was shot near the heart and died shortly after being carried to the rear and Chas. was mortally wounded by a Minié bullet round that severely wounded him in the arm. Whether they were hit in the same volley of rifle fire or were struck minutes apart we will never know. Chas. was taken to the rear, to the Harris house yard or directly into the Harris house itself which had become a gory field hospital. The

tragedy in the Sanford/Housel homes was now cavernous but the hamlet on the south side of Canandaigua was to suffer more gut wrenching sadness that May day.

Private Gould Benedict, 28 years old who had probably traveled and enlisted with Chas. in August of



*Harris Farm House Circa 1900.*

1862, a friend and neighbor from Academy, was shot in the head and died instantly. The pretty white Virginia farm house built circa 1785 was pressed into service as an emergency aid station for the Union wounded. According to Captain Brown it took on the appearance of a cemetery as the men like Gould and boys like Joseph were buried with their overcoats over their faces and a wooden board for a marker so that their families could retrieve their remains later. Captain Augustus Brown noted that some boys, probably smaller men, were even given a rifle crate for a coffin- provided from the Union supply train just behind the farmhouse on the Fredericksburg Road. Laid in the rough

wooden boxes on their side or back with their legs bent, they would be tenderly buried by their friends. Brown searched hastily dug graves for one of his missing men and wept over the body of a Confederate boy he thought to be 18 who was shot in the head in the fighting. His men dug an unmarked grave for the rebel.

Company "H" lost 4 men killed that day, 11 wounded and 3 missing in that five-hour battle. The butcher's bill would go up when wounded men Like Chas. Sanford died later. Sanford perished of his wounds or perhaps from a subsequent infection at a hospital in Washington on June 3rd- just two weeks after his younger cousin.

Sergeant Judson A. Smith who also joined the regiment in Canandaigua in 1862 was shot in the leg and died the following day. The grave of Sgt. Judson Smith, of parts unknown, is a mystery. No doubt he too was medically attended to in the Harris house. The War wasn't done with the Housel family or the little Hamlet by the South Bristol town line.

The price of ending our national shame was steep and some families suffered more than others. From May 8 to May 21 the Union lost 18,000 men killed and wounded.

The Union Army continued to try get between Lee and Richmond, chances were lost and advantage regained throughout June of 1864 as Lee pivoted and Union men bled to end slavery once and for all by wearing down the Confederate forces. In mid-June the Petersburg, Virginia battlefield was being prepared by both armies. A trench war was coming and Charles Housel in the 148<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry was headed into the meat grinder as were the Colored Regiments who would fight valorously in the Battle of the Crater in late July.



It is hard to know when Charles learned of the death of his brother and cousin. His unit was assigned to another army under the command of Major General Benjamin Butler who was not at the Wilderness battles. Butler's job was to threaten Richmond from the James River Peninsula. The unsuccessful campaign resulted in a series of bloody battles that only accomplished tying up Rebel forces. Charles would have experienced oppressive heat, mosquitoes carrying malaria, mud, constant danger from enemy troops and chances are he received mail sporadically during that time. Whenever he learned of their deaths, what a blow it must have been. A brother, a cousin and a neighbor all lost in a moment of violent combat.

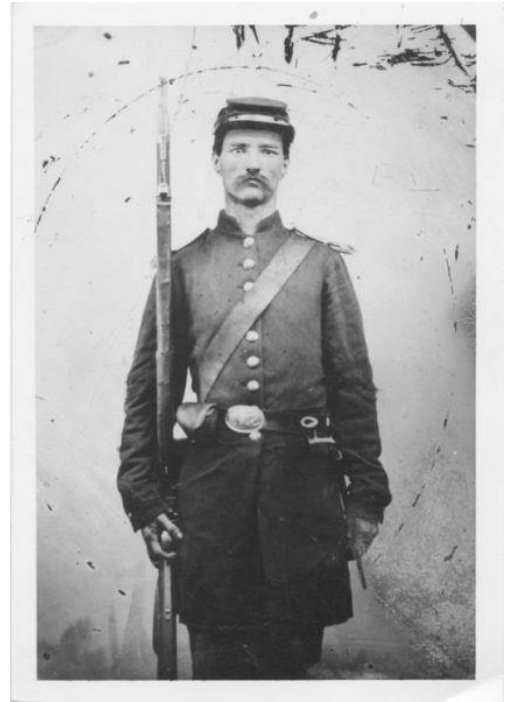
General Butler was not a tactician, but his seniority and political clout had earned him the opportunity to lead this diversionary mission. His failures became evident to all as the Confederates met his attacks and stopped him cold. By the fall of 1864 it was clear that his efforts would do little or nothing to hasten the end of the war. As Lincoln said to Grant on the subject of Butler's poor contribution.

*"As we say out west, if a man can't skin he must hold a leg while somebody else does."*

On October 27<sup>th</sup> the 148<sup>th</sup> New York along with the 89<sup>th</sup> New York and the 19<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin charged across 800 yards of open ground at Fair Oaks, Virginia to dislodge Confederates in a redoubt fortification commanding the approaches to the Williamsburg Road. The regiment began taking cannon fire immediately, they picked up the pace, moving at the double: quick. At four hundred yards the accuracy of artillery and rifle fire began to tell heavily, over the next 20 seconds they sprinted forward with their regimental and American flags streaming proudly.

Holes began to appear in their ranks as entire squads fell wounded. At 150 yards, the rifle and cannon fire hit them like a wall and the three regiments were so disorganized that they went to ground, laying prone to avoid the withering fire. Six men of the colors (flag) guard were wounded. At last, as night came on, the 148<sup>th</sup> was able to safely remove their wounded and withdraw to the main Union line. Among the wounded was Charles W. Housel. Charles would be taken to hospital at Fortress Monroe, near Newport News. It is highly likely that he also succumbed to the trauma of surgery and/or secondary infection. There he died on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1864, on a date that would, in a few generations become known as Armistice Day and fittingly become Veteran's Day.

The little hamlet at the southern tip of our town paid an awful price to end slavery and homes like those of the Housel and Sanford families bore the brunt of the national tragedy. The mournful journey to bring



*A Private of the 4th NY Heavy Artillery*

home another son must have been unbearable. Imagine the sadness as trains full of parents chugged southward in stunned silence to bring home the cold form of a once warm and loving son or brother.

Great battles were fought and hundreds of thousands of men died in the cause of freedom and Union but Gould, Chas., Charles W. and Joseph are touchable. They are the human cost of a war. Before we criticize the past for not doing enough, we should pause and remember them. They never aged to become fathers or grandfathers, they never told their story and none can doubt they did enough. That they died is a fact...what they died for is a truth. The truth that: "...all men are created equal..."

*"I believe this Government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided."*

Abraham Lincoln--June 16, 1858

Gould Benedict, Charles and Joseph Housel, are all buried in the Academy Cemetery. Charles Sanford is buried in the Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira, New York. In total, 8 young men from the Academy hamlet died in the Civil War.



*Town Historian Leif HerrGesell looks over the Spotsylvania Battlefield at Harris Farm.*