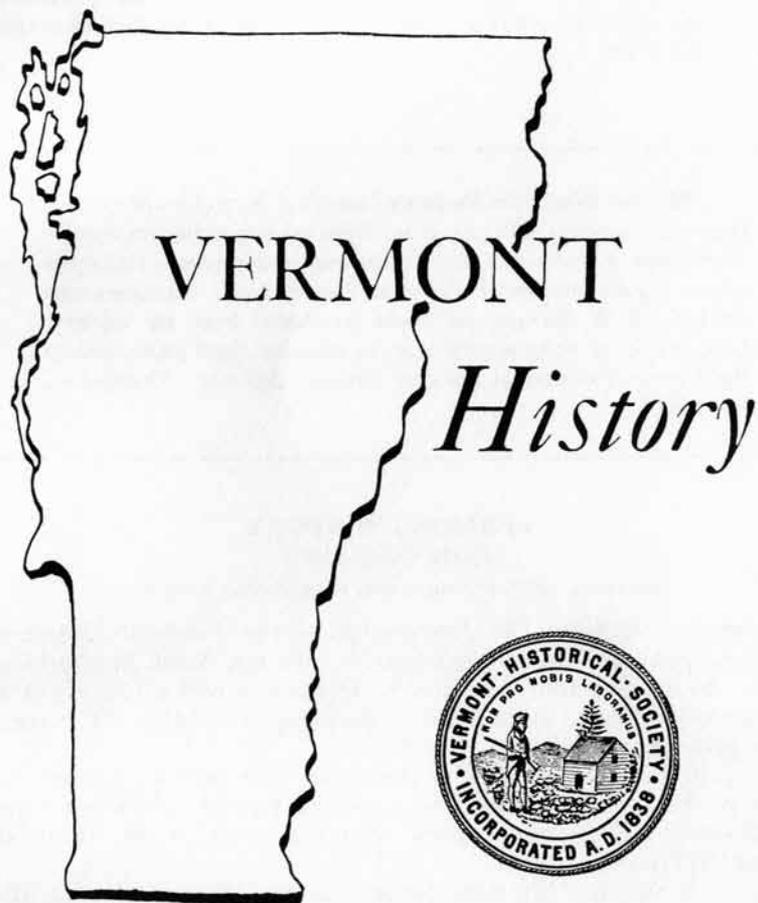


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"Illness provided a constant, unwonted companion to the soldier," and "just as slow death through disease stalked the camp, so did sudden death through accident."

"They Also Serve. . .": The Diary of Benjamin Franklin Hackett, 12th Vermont Volunteers

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Most accounts of the military history of the Civil War discuss the battles in which long lines of heroic Southerners charge across fields to engage equally brave blue-clad Union troops or where the North carried the fight to the Confederates. Each side's flags snap, their bugles pierce the clatter of battle, and the confusion and glory of war emerge with equal impact. Yet for most soldiers much of the time, and for all soldiers some of the time, the real war instead presented a daily struggle against the elements, illness and disease, and boredom. The diary of Benjamin F. Hackett clearly illustrates the common soldier's tedious existence, much different than portrayals of the Civil War as a succession of battles.¹

Benjamin Franklin Hackett was a Vermont native. Born in Windsor County on November 6, 1826, he survived the war to live to the ripe age of seventy-nine. In 1859 Hackett married Mary Emerson Morton, and she and Benjamin had two children. Although Benjamin wrote his wife continuously during his short military service, they lived apart after the war, at least for a few years. But between 1868 and 1876 they reunited, and the family moved to Troy, Iowa. Benjamin evidently expected to die in Troy, for he purchased a cemetery plot there. He was quite alive when the family moved again, this time to Moravia, Iowa, in 1896, where he remained until his death in 1905.² Besides his affiliations with the Grand Army of the Republic, Hackett was a member of a Masonic lodge. He received honors and medals from four different chapters, as well as personal correspon-

dence from the "Supreme Chancellor," who was visiting Jerusalem. Hackett represented the Iowa delegation at the 23d Annual Encampment of the GAR.³

The Civil War diary of Benjamin Hackett begins on September 25, 1862, and ends on May 6, 1863. Filled to the last page, the diary suggests that Hackett simply ran out of paper, or he would have continued. His service in the 12th Vermont Volunteer militia commenced upon that regiment's muster call on September 11 and with his letter of appointment as Third Sergeant of Company F (known as the New England Guards) from Colonel Asa P. Blunt of St. Johnsbury, Vermont. Hackett was among a group of volunteers who responded to the state quota calls issued on August 12, 1862, by Governor Frederick Holbrook. Vermont's quota of 4,898 required the state to raise 30 new companies. Hackett lived in Rochester, and he joined his company at West Randolph. The company mustered in Brattleboro on September 25, and Blunt signed Hackett's appointment five days later, although he dated it from September 17, 1862.⁴

Ten companies formed the 12th Vermont—Captain Darius Thomas led Hackett's F Company — and while the men lacked experience, the officers all had seen action. Blunt, for example, already had served with the Sixth Vermont Regiment since December of 1861. The 12th and four other "nine months regiments," as they were called, were brigaded together with the 25th and 27th New Jersey regiments attached to Major General Silas Casey's division of Reserve Army Corps for the purpose of defending Washington. The other four "nine months" units included the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th Vermont regiments. Of those five units, the 12th and the 15th served guard duty along railroad lines during the battle of Gettysburg, while the other regiments fought. Those in the 12th who thirsted for war would be bitterly disappointed, for on July 4, 1863, the 12th's enlistment term expired. The unit had similarly guarded the rails at Warrenton Junction as the Battle of Chancellorsville raged twenty miles to the south. Consequently, counting the eight transitional officers and men who joined the regiment after its formation, the regiment lost only sixty-two men and officers of a complement of just over one thousand men, and virtually all of those died of disease or accidents. Another seventy-three resigned or were sent home disabled, and six others were transferred or deserted.⁵

Hackett proved an adept chronicler of the aspects of camp life of the 12th Vermont. He maintained constant weather reports, kept a record of illnesses, and detailed the diet foisted on the enlisted men. He described his muster in the following way:

*Benjamin Franklin Hackett,
Courtesy of editors.*



Thursday Camp Lincoln Brattleboro Vt Sept 25th 1862

Went from Rochester in the morning to join my compa[ny] at West Randolph as they came along from Northfield to this place. We had a very pleasant day & were saluted the entire length of the road between stations. . . . [We] arrived here about 5 o'clock PM & paraded in the depot yard & marched to Camp the distance of one mile.

He did not entirely enjoy his first night with the Company and the "novelty of going in to a Barracks to sleep for the first time to the great part of the company & it was rather noisy the first night. The boys could not sleep & consequently they were up to all manner of fun which was very irksome to [me] being very tired & [I] wished to sleep though I rested very well."

Hackett and his men started to work immediately. On the 26th Hackett "was detailed with 20 men made up by 4 from each company in the 12th Vt, most carpenters to work on the Hospital & [we] worked very hard." He reported the next day that "fixing up barracks to make it comfortable . . . was nearly all that I done this day worth mention[ing]." And on the 28th Hackett was "detailed . . . to dig ditch to lay lead pipe to bring water to camp. . . ."6

Officially mustered into the United States Army on October 3, 1862, the 12th Vermont immediately received orders to leave for Washington, D.C. The regiment left on the 7th. Hackett recorded the confusion in the pleasant morning as "the whole of the 12th was in commotion preparing to leave for Washington D.C. Slung knapsacks and got into line about 11 o/c A.M. & marched to the village then down the R.R. distance of about 6 miles & [it was] a hard march that [we made] with our knapsacks for the firs[t][time]."

As the regiment carried out the somewhat routine task of boarding the train there, Hackett witnesses one of the accidents which punctuated camp life.

[W]hile we were waiting for the train," he noted in the diary, "Lewis N. George was hurt by running a bayonette into his limb just above the [kneecap] & went to the bone & wounded him badly & we were obliged to leave him in the hospital. A very heedless fellow did not stack his piece as he was ordered but laid it down with the muzzle on his knapsack which raised the bayonette."

After the soldiers boarded the train and started for Washington, they experienced another misfortune. The train "went only a few rods" and ran off the track. Two of the cars derailed "but no one [was] seriously injured." Nevertheless it "took 2 1/2 hours to get it . . . back on the track then we started slow & we were almost suffocated but the atmosphere began to change soon & relieved us." During their first night in Washington "many of these [men] that slept outside had their caps, boots, & clothing stolen."⁷

The following day Hackett got up early to go into the city. He went to the "Capitol & looked the statues over." However, he "couldn't get in[side] for there were a great many sick & wounded soldiers there & they were repairing [*sic*] it & workmen could not work [because of the] spectators so they set guard[s] at the doors. Went upon all sides of it & it [is] a beautiful building but very dirty in & about it at the present time & the grounds are very nice when in order. But the city generally is very filthy. [There are Negroes in] quantity & cattle running in any part of the city."

Upon his return to the regiment "the N. Y. 133 came out of a barrack aposit [*sic*] to where we were & formed into line & the head file front man had a short & small piece that attracted my attention." Hackett questioned the soldier in charge of the unique gun and

ascertained [*sic*] that the Lieutenant Colonel was uncle to Colonel Elmer Ellsworth of the N. Y. Zouaves & the piece was the identical one carried by him & was kept with them as a relict [*sic*]. . . . It was an ordinary mounted gun sort of carbine a breech loader & carried a [1] oz ball. I[t] was a very singular looking piece & very curiously sighted & was calculated to attract attention & one of the very best carrying pieces in the world. It is said to kill [up to] a mile yet very short barrel not more than 20 inch[es] long]. On the whole [it was] a singular looking piece.⁸

Overall, Hackett's company performed well, even with its activity confined to the drilling field. After inspecting F company on October 15, Major General Silas Casey "recommended several other Regt[s] to come over & take [a] pattern from us & the rest of our Regt to take pattern

after Company F. in keeping our bunks in good order & clean." Five months later, Hackett's company "went to target practices [I] fired 3 times a distance of 35 rods. We were required to fire off hand the first shot. . . . I hit the target about 1/2 inch below the Bulls eye & the next two shots I hit the board about 12 inches from the eye. [T]hey were 3 [of] the first shot[s] made during the day & the first shot was the best made by the company." By the next week, Hackett reported hitting the target "4 times in succession."⁹

Without combat, the regiment resorted to other types of activity. On New Year's day, Hackett "spent the afternoon in fixing up my clothes such as sewing on buttons & rips in [my] Blouse & over coat & pants . . . [and] all in [other] tent[s] joined me." Hackett also passed "the time in writing . . . & Smoking. . ." (with the familiar conclusion, "Nothing more of interest"). Colder weather meant increased opportunities for entertainment. The regiment took snowbaths in February, and on another occasion the "Col & Staff took part in the snowballing" started by the enlisted men.¹⁰

Excitement often arrived unannounced. On April 10 Hackett reported, "Last night about 10 P M there was an alarm given by a woman crying murder & calling for help & the guard began to fire & the Regt was turned out & in line in less than no time." While the company stood guard at Warrenton Junction, during the battle of Chancellorsville, Hackett recorded:

3 contrabands came in & one of them said he took a musket from a Reb yesterday & they asked him how he got it & he said that he was taken by two & was being taken before some of the confederates & that they were agoing to shoot him as they thought he had betrayed some of the movements of their commissary & he had been captured & they were agoing to shoot him for it & they stoped to a house to get some dinner & one went in & left the one with the musket outside to guard him & when he went in he laid his revolver near the window & then sent the one outside to the well after water & the contraband says to him to let him have a drink before he droped the bucket & when he started he reached into the window & took the revolver without being noticed & went down & shot him dead & then grabed the musket & clubed it & when the other came out of his house & came down to him he knocked him down & was agoing to kill him but his wife came & got over him & beged of him to spare him & he told him to go

Most unusual events appeared in Hackett's diary as addendums, as on October 24 when he noted that a "tent burned & a coat [too]."¹¹

Illness provided a constant, unwanted companion to the soldier, and Hackett, himself, was far from a picture of health. No sooner had he reached Camp Casey than he "took a very severe cold & [was] very lame with head ache." By December, Hackett "was not very well. [I am]

troubled with Jaundice & it is ragin[g] through Camp." A week later Hackett visited the Surgeon, Benjamin Ketchum of Manchester, who gave him "calomel & castor oil." Despite the surgeon's potions, Hackett remained "yellow as a buff envelope with what we call the yellows in Vt." Less than a month later Hackett was "lame in the hips," and to stand his duty Hackett "took powders [that] made me vomit." Occasionally the food accounted for Hackett's illness. On February 2, he "had burned beans for dinner & they made me sick." Healthy throughout the rest of February, except for his arthritis, Hackett came down sick again on March 4 with an unusual reason: "Took cold by having hair cut then by wearing my equipments."¹²

Camp conditions contributed to the spread of illness. At the camp near Wolf Run Shoals, Virginia, Hackett's men "were not able to get any cedar bough's to sleep on . . . we just slept on bare poles except [they were] covered with our coats and blankets." At Washington they were "crowded . . . 5 in a tent." Illness hit others besides Hackett, for on April 3 he wrote, "We are not any of us feeling very well & don't feel able to move & the Capt excused us in the morning [from drill]." Additionally, major diseases swept through the camp: "A member of company G by the name Sayles died in the hospital with the diptheria & on Wednesday with Typoid & Pnumonia in Comp E." Hackett's bunkmate, E. J. Wing, took "sick with the colic & [was] rather hard up." A lieutenant also contracted typhoid fever and "was thought . . . to be in a doubtful state of health." Captain [Charles L.] Savage of "Co A has been very sick for several days with fever & this morning He left his tent (his watcher [was] supposed to [have been] asleep) in a deranged state of mind & went away & succeeded in getting outside our lines. . . . [He] was gone about 1-1/2 hours. . . . [T]he whole copany & Regt. was in commotion for a short time but soon got quieted. . . . [A]¹¹ denounced the fellow that watched with him."

On another occasion Hackett reported a bunkmate "sick with a sort of Cholera Morbus," but Hackett did not clarify if this bunkie was E. J. Wing. Because of the diseases, Hackett reported in February that "we have only 63 men at this duty out of 101 fit for duty the balance dead wounded & discharged & there are 4 applications sent to war department now for discharges." Clearly some of the blame rested with the state of medicine. Once Hackett "went to the Surgeons & got cough Syrp & mustard paste & applied it in the evening & could keep it on only about 30 minuits & then took it off" (he did not reveal where the paste was applied).¹³

Just as slow death through disease stalked the camp, so did sudden death through accident. While Hackett fixed up his shelf in the "shanty,"

"a tree was fell[ed] on the top of a tent in Comp D. 13th Regt & killed a man instantly." Three days before, "one of the Negro waiters at the battery got into the Occoquan [River] & was drown[ed]." ¹⁴

Hackett demonstrated great pleasure in eating. Virtually every entry in his diary contains a reference to food. It seems he was surprised by the decreasing quantity and variety of food he encountered as he moved south from Vermont. On October 1 he had "Water Mellon & apples" in Vermont. When the regiment reached Philadelphia "we were marched to the Cooper Shop Saloon for supper. had bacon & bread & coffee sliced tongue, sausage, cheese, mustard, vinegar, pickled beet, & finally every thing else that a soldier could wish for." The regiment then moved to Baltimore, where "we had bacon bread & coffee & cheese but not as good as we got at Philadelphia." By the time the regiment reached Annapolis, it was "marched to the Soldiers Retreat there we found bacon bread & coffee as usual except an inferior quality than what we had found at either of the other places." Near Washington, D.C., Hackett and his companion "got a loaf of bread & a piece of raw pork" but neither man could stomach eating the pork. Once the regiment finally settled into Camp Vermont (in Virginia), rations improved. Hackett had "rice & sugar for dinner" and "it relished very well." Occasionally the men got "boiled potatoes and broil[e]d pork for dinner," but cooking did not seem to fit in the company's collective skills: "[Privates] Copeland & Wing have been for 2 or 3 days past trying to make some fried cakes & griddle cakes but have not been very successful yet but they improve." The Northerners also adapted gradually to the Southern diet, for by April, after several months in Virginia, Hackett recorded having "homine [sp] & milk for dinner." ¹⁵

Fate and command decisions denied any of the members of the 12th Vermont a place in the Battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. They did, however, come in contact with the enemy. In late October they "passed directly by the Rebel Gen [Robert E.] Lee's House & out into his large & once beautiful plantation." While doing guard duty near the Bull Run battlefield in December, "there was a Cavalry dash by the Rebels & capture 11 Union picket[s] & 16 horses." Several false alarms throughout the month finally ended with actual combat. Companies B and G moved to the front of a line near Fairfax in response to an alarm. According to Hackett, "they had not been out long before they were charged upon by a party of Cavalry & fired upon & we returned the fire & killed 1 horse & we think kill[ed] 2 or 3."

Sometimes the Rebels did not cooperate. After the small skirmish, Hackett recorded: "We stood in the [rifle] pits about 7 hours." J.E.B. Stuart's Black Horse Confederate Cavalry harassed the 2nd Brigade continuously. On March 9, "the news came to camp that Gen

Stoughton [Colonel E.H. Stoughton of the 4th Vermont] had been taken prisoner by a squad of Stewarts [*sic*] cavalry [along with] Col Windams [Percy Wyndham of the 1st New Jersey] staff & all of his dispatches [and] 110 horses & equip[ment].” A quartermaster, Lt. Colonel Johnson of the 5th New York, “escaped in his night clothes & one or two others [escaped with him] in a nude state.” The actual raid was carried out by the Grey Ghost, Col. John Mosby. By May, Mosby had become a constant irritation. “Some of our boys were out straggling & came in contact with a detachment of Mosby’s cavalry & were taken prisoners. The Reb’s about 100 in number made a dash on our cavalry & captured a few & one of Comp N boys was taken & he watched his opportunity & mounted a horse that was riderless & made good his escape. The cavalry had a considerable skirmish [and] they are sure of getting the worst of it.”

Later, Mosby’s cavalry drew up in a line “not more than 3/4 mile & some of the butternuts have been within 100 rods of our camp. The Rebs got the worst of it. There was a cavalryman that came in that said [there were] 15 Rebels that were killed & wounded & he was a Capt. There proved to be something more than 100 of them instead of 40 as first reported. In a report from Warrenton Junction, Hackett heard that “there were 10 or so of our men wounded & only 1 killed & he was shot with his own revolver after he had surrendered & given up his arm[. T]he Reb that took him turned his revolver on him & shot him dead.”¹⁶

Hackett’s diary contains neither impeccable grammar nor interesting stories. Its value lies in Hackett’s ability to describe the events and emotions of a unit not destined for glory. In so doing, Hackett’s diary leaves a record of camp life common to both sides and highly typical of units when not engaged in battle. While the hardship of daily life emerges from his diary, one can also sense in Hackett an excitement whenever battle nears and a desire to take part. One can only guess about his feelings at missing the pivotal battle of the war.

NOTES

¹Elna Rae Zeilinger (formerly Elna Rae Simpson) received the diary, along with personal effects, from Ruby E. Laird (her mother) and Edna Viola Hackett (her grandmother). Edna was William Hackett’s daughter and Benjamin’s granddaughter. Henceforth, diary citations will be noted only by date. In order to keep the flavor of Hackett’s writing, spelling and punctuation changes have been kept to a minimum and appear only when necessary to comprehension.

²Biographical information appears in the family Bible, in the authors’ possession. Other documents in the authors’ possession include a letter from William Morgan Hackett to his father, Benjamin, dated September 2, 1868, and a receipt for a cemetery plot dated August 14, 1889, Troy, Iowa.

³Henry Coleman to Benjamin Hackett, July 26, 1880; and four medals, one dated 1893, two dated 1897, and one with no date, are in the family's possession as is Hackett's Masonic apron.

⁴Document of appointment in the authors' possession; and G.G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War* (2 vols., Burlington: Free Press Association, 1886-88).

⁵Benedict, *Civil War*, II, pp. 402, 416-42, and 490.

⁶September 25-28, 1862. For Hackett's weather reports, see November 8, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 28, 29; December 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 22, 23, 1862; January 7, 12, 13, 16, 20, 28, 29; February 9, 11, 19, 22, 27; and March 1, 3, 6, 7, 10, 18, 21, 22, 23, April 5. Hackett was quite good at details. On March 24 he spotted a "large flock of wild geese . . . numbering 81 & they seemed to have lost their point of compass."

⁷October 3, 1862; October 7, 1862; and October 9, 1862.

⁸October 10, 1862.

⁹October 15, 1862; and March 5, 11, 1863. On February 11, 1863 however, he reported "many wild shots . . . we are in need of a great deal of practice."

¹⁰January 1, 1863; January 4, February 24. Hackett also mentions the men playing ball (see, for example, March 30, 1863).

¹¹May 4, 1863, October 24.

¹²October 16, 17, 18, 1862; December 1, 3, 8, 1862; and January 14, 15, February 2, March 4, 1863.

¹³April 4, 1863; October 11, 23, 24, 27, 1862; November 12, 13, 1862; March 28, 1863; April 3, 1863 and February 2, 6, 1863.

¹⁴February 20, 23, 1863.

¹⁵October 1, November 2, 4, 1862; and January 3, February 24, April 16, 1863.

¹⁶October 30, December 18, 29, 1862; and March 9, May 3, 1863.