



The Man with Four Names

Although it is common knowledge that men enlisted several times in the Union forces under different names, there aren't many documented cases. Here is the case of one who did so four times. He insisted for the rest of his life that he had served the "three years or the duration" he had promised to—just in different units. In 1921 Congress agreed with him.

By GRANT REYNOLDS

Private William Grace, 10th Vermont Infantry; William Grey, Union Navy Landsman and Coal Heaver; and Private John Riley, 48th New York Infantry. Yes, these are all the same man, probably named Benjamin Hall. His history is strange, though perhaps not too unusual during the Civil War. He probably took liberties with the truth for his whole life. What we think we know about him is largely based on his own words, or on what others say he told them. It's hard to know exactly what his story really is. Here is the best I can figure out, based on his very extensive pension file.

In my database of Tinmouth's Civil War soldiers, William Grace was originally listed as a probable fraud. He couldn't be found anywhere around Tinmouth or in Vermont in the 1860 census, though there was a William H. Grace in Brooklyn, N.Y. He deserted while the 10th Vermont Infantry was passing through Brooklyn on September 7, 1862, only a week after being mustered into U.S. service. Until I found his pension file in the National Archives, his trail stopped there.

Hall, as I will refer to him, says in his pension application that he was

.....
GRANT REYNOLDS is a retired lawyer and local historian in Tinmouth, Vermont.

Vermont History Vol. 80, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 57–64.

© 2012 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; on-line ISSN: 1544-3043

.....

“living with a farmer in Tinmouth” when he enlisted in Company C of the newly forming 10th Vermont Infantry on July 29, 1862. The company was partly raised by John Andrus Salsbury of Tinmouth and came mostly from the adjacent towns of Middletown,¹ Tinmouth, and Danby. Hall’s birth date was given as December 22, 1841, in Galway, Ireland. The regiment gathered in Brattleboro and was mustered into federal service on September 1, 1862, each man receiving a federal enlistment bounty of \$25. That was the first payment on the \$100 he would receive in installments for satisfactory service. On that day the Confederate Army was already in Maryland, heading for the little town of Sharpsburg, on Antietam Creek. Every regiment available was needed.

The 10th immediately left by train for New London, Connecticut, to take a steamboat to New York City. Hall says that he was “abused with a sword” by a major in the 10th Connecticut, which was travelling on the same steamer. Fearing punishment, he “dropped over the side” when the boat arrived at the Jones Woods section of Brooklyn on September 7, 1862. To the 10th Vermont, he was simply missing, a probable deserter.

On September 8, “William H. Grey”² enlisted in the Navy at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as a “Landsman” for one year.³ He claimed to be twenty-two years old, born in Waterford, New York. Grey’s record says he was 5’11½,” hazel eyes, brown hair, light complexion, occupation “moulder.” He signed his name with his mark (i.e., he couldn’t write). According to Navy records he served on the *North Carolina*, the *Memphis*, and the *Princeton*. The *Memphis* was assigned to blockade Charleston, South Carolina. Hall says he and other sailors from the *Memphis* were in a group—we’d call them commandos or Special Forces today—that made small-boat attacks at night in the harbor. Of course, that’s what he says. His veracity can be tested by the following: He also says that he was a replacement crewman on the “steamship *Monitor*.” The celebrated iron-clad *Monitor* never made it to Charleston, going down at sea off Cape Hatteras on December 30, 1862, while under tow. Sixteen of the sixty-two crewmen died. After the war, in 1866, Grey received \$40 “prize money.”⁴ It would be interesting to learn where the Navy sent it.

Grey served his full year and was discharged in New York on September 17 or October 2, 1863 (different records give different dates). On November 23, 1863, William H. Grey re-enlisted in the Navy at Philadelphia for another year. He claimed he was born in Saratoga County, N.Y., age twenty-three, 5’11¾”, hazel eyes, brown hair, “sal-low” complexion. He served as a “coal heaver”⁵ (Navy records) on the *Memphis*, the *State of Georgia*, and the *Vermont*. According to Hall, he

.....

was granted a thirty-day leave to see his mother in Troy in September 1864. It seems unlikely that the Navy would turn a lowly coal heaver loose with less than two months to serve, but that is Hall's story. He returned a few days after his leave ran out, he says, to find that his ship had left without him. The Navy regarded him as a deserter as of October 2, 1864. He claimed that he only had a few days left in his enlistment anyway, so it was meaningless to report back to the Navy. If he was supposed to have returned by the time the ship left on October 2, he still had fifty-two days to serve.

A few days before that, on September 24, 1864, "John Riley" enlisted in the 48th New York Infantry Regiment in Jamaica, N.Y., for one year, as a substitute. In the National Park Service system he is listed as a "musician." This was Hall's latest name. Jamaica was paying a bounty of \$400 or \$500 at the time, plus a federal bonus of \$100. The person he was substituting for may have paid him an additional fee. He claimed to have been born in Ireland, age twenty-three, hazel eyes, brown hair, dark complexion, and occupation "sailor." He signed his name "Riley." He served until the regiment was discharged on July 27 or August 16, 1865, without causing any recorded trouble. The regiment was involved in the assault on Fort Fisher, North Carolina, in December, 1864, and then remained in North Carolina until it was discharged in Raleigh in the summer of 1865. From Hall's non-legal perspective, he had given the government the three years or duration of the war that he had promised to back in 1862 in Tinmouth, though in an irregular way.⁶

After the war, Hall claimed he worked as a "moulder" or as a farm laborer in a number of places, including Granville, Greenwich, Galway and East Galway, Ballston Spa, Schaghticoke, Lyons, Troy, and Cambridge, New York; Reading, Pennsylvania; Tinmouth, and perhaps Middletown Springs, Vermont. In the long history of his bureaucratic warfare with the Pension Bureau, he claimed all of the above at least once. He received a pension for chronic rheumatism and bronchitis on January 9, 1893, as John Riley of the 48th New York. He presumably realized that seeking credit for his service under three names might cause problems, as it eventually did. The pension was revoked as of August 4, 1895, for "earning his living by manual labor."

Until 1906, invalid pensions were limited to men unable to support themselves by manual labor. So would a one-armed lawyer be able to work at his desk and in court and still receive a pension? Probing this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, because Hall was a manual laborer. His pension was reinstated on June 17, 1896, when the examining surgeons decided he really was unable to work. In seeking an increase on July 18, 1901, he swore that he had not served in the armed

.....

forces prior to September 24, 1864—a fib sufficient by itself to cost him his pension. But it continued until a local bureaucrat saw something peculiar.

Hall finally married in September 1895—or was it May 4, 1898? Either way, Julia Dawley was marrying an elderly man, and probably a sick one. While he could fool the world about his name, the physicians were looking for more objective matters. After 1896, they consistently found him to be disabled. The pension file has no further mention of Julia, or of any children. She did not apply for a widow's pension when Hall died in 1925.

Tracing his residences after the Civil War through the census proved essentially impossible. It's not too surprising. He had no property and lived from job to job, moving frequently to stay employed. Of course, it's hard to know what name to look for, and what his real age was. Some of the possible sightings:

- 1870 census: A Benjamin Hall was living on Don Baxter's farm on North East Road, Tinmouth, as a "domestic servant." His age is given as nineteen, but census ages aren't necessarily very accurate. If it were a mistake by the census taker for twenty-nine (born 1841) it would be consistent with most of Hall's claimed birth dates. If correct, it's a different Hall, because Hall/Grace couldn't have enlisted at eleven. Recent research into George Hall, who enlisted from Tinmouth in the 2nd Vermont in 1864 at the age of seventeen (claimed eighteen), shows that he had a younger brother, Benjamin J. Hall. Both boys were born in Kingsbury, N.Y. While Mr. Baxter's "servant" might be the elusive Hall/Grace, it's more likely he was the younger brother of George Hall, at fifteen in 1865 too young to serve in the Army.
- 1880 census: Benjamin Hall, age thirty-four (born 1846, sixteen in 1862), farm laborer on Ephraim Edwards' farm in Schaghticoke, N.Y. "Riley's" pension was increased to \$12 in 1901 while he was in Schaghticoke, though he is not listed in the 1900 census there. For what it's worth, his age this time supports his claim that he was underage when he enlisted in the 10th Vermont (sixteen in 1862)—if this Hall is "William Grace."
- 1880 census (a really interesting one, though probably not our man): Also in Schaghticoke, John Riley, age thirty-eight (born about 1842, age nineteen or twenty in 1862), wife Julia (as in Julia Dawley?), both born in Ireland, four children born in Ireland and two in New York. The four children born in Ireland make this Riley very unlikely to be Benjamin Hall.

.....

- The 1890 census was destroyed in a fire.
- 1900 census: No plausible entries for either Hall or Riley.
- 1910 census: John Riley, National Soldiers' home, Knoxville, Tennessee, age sixty-six (born 1846), born in Canada (English), parents born in Ireland (English), emigrated 1861. This address is accurate; the pension file confirms it. The other information may not be, or it may be a rare ration of truth from Hall. If he was born in 1846, his claim of being underage in 1862 would be correct—he would have been sixteen. He lived at the Soldiers' Home from January 14, 1902, to November 25, 1910—after the 1910 census was taken. He was discharged “to return to New York.” But there is also a Benjamin Hall, age seventy-one, born in Kentucky, in the same home! It's not likely that the Kentucky-born Hall is our man. Only “Riley” would have been eligible for the soldier's home. “Hall” never served in the Union Army or Navy, and “Grace” and “Grey” both deserted.

Diligent searching for both Benjamin Hall and John Riley found no one of that name that matched in age, place of residence, or spouse's name in any other census. As an itinerant farm worker and, eventually, indigent, it was easy for the census to miss him.

The documents in his pension file do provide a fairly accurate idea of where he was when each was created.

1895—Ballston Spa, N.Y.
1896—South Granville, N.Y.
1901—Schaghticoke, N.Y.
1902–1910—Soldiers Home, Knoxville, Tennessee
1910—Galway, N.Y.
1912—Cambridge, N.Y.
1917—Middletown Springs, Vermont
1918—East Galway, N.Y.
1920—Granville, N.Y.
1924—Ballston Spa, N.Y.
Died December 30, 1925, Greenwich, N.Y.

All of these places except Middletown Springs are in a half circle of less than thirty miles radius, with Granville on the north, Schaghticoke on the south, and Ballston Spa on the west. The Vermont border cuts the circle in half. Middletown Springs is about fifteen miles northeast of Granville, N.Y.

Mr. John Lynch, postmaster at Middletown Springs, Vermont ended Hall's fabrications—but not until 1917, when Hall was at least

.....

seventy-six years old and had been collecting a pension as "Riley" for over twenty-three years. Although Hall may still have been living in New York, he was receiving his mail at Middletown Springs. Postmaster Lynch became suspicious when the "John Riley" who called for pension checks asked for mail addressed to William H. Grace. Lynch did some investigating, and then wrote the assistant postmaster general in Washington on December 4, 1917, asking for direction. He noted that the man in question had been identified by a local resident as Riley.⁷ He had formerly picked up his pension checks in East Galway, N.Y. He had enlisted in a Vermont regiment, deserted, then enlisted in a New York regiment as Riley and served the whole war. He was generally known as "William Grace" in Middletown Springs, but Lynch had learned that he was known as Benjamin Hall in Greenwich, N.Y.⁸ The assistant postmaster general authorized Lynch to notify the Pension Bureau, and directed him to obtain proper identification should "William Grace" seek John Riley's mail in the future.

The Pension Bureau was energized by this report. Using the two names, Grace and Riley, they determined that he was a deserter from the 10th Vermont, owing the government all but a month of his three years service. In enlisting in the 48th New York as a substitute he had received a \$400 or \$500 bonus from the town of Jamaica. This he was not allowed to receive until he had worked off his initial \$100 U.S. government bonus by serving three years in the 10th Vermont. In responding to the Bureau, Hall reported his naval service, hoping, no doubt, to be excused for the irregularities in the manner of his service. Of course, that turned up the fact that the Navy also regarded him as a deserter. His pension was revoked on December 28, 1917. Hall was at least seventy-one years old, and might have been seventy-seven. He was unable to use his hands, destitute, and reliant on others.

Why did Hall enlist under the first assumed name, William H. Grace? That, he says, was because he was underage and needed his mother's permission to enlist, which she would not give. Army records show him as twenty-one when he enlisted. While he offered several dates of birth over the years, all were in 1839, 1840, or 1841—relatively consistent with age twenty-one in July of 1862. Only his age given to the census taker at the Soldier's Home supports the claim that he was underage. So there could have been some other reason for lying at his first enlistment, and it is hard to believe that it was innocent. Since he admitted to no other names than Grace, Grey, and Riley, and claimed no service as Benjamin Hall, we will probably never know the real reason for the pseudonym. The other three enlistments under different assumed names are easier to understand: He was a deserter. Had he continued to use

.....

“William Grace,” even the primitive record keeping of the Union Army would eventually have caught up with him.

An experienced fraud like Hall is hard to embarrass. And he was destitute and unable to do much to support himself. So he pled with the Pension Bureau on a number of occasions over the next eight years to restore his pension. He had served nearly three years, and been discharged with his regiment. So wasn’t that what he was supposed to do —serve until the war was over? The Pension Bureau was unmoved by his pleas or those of Melford D. Whedon, a lawyer in Granville, N.Y. Mr. Whedon wrote to the Bureau on August 6, 1919.

The soldier [Hall] served well, although his record shows that at one time he left the service because of a wrong done him, but a day or two later he joined the Navy. He is an object of charity. His house burned down and he was severely burned. He is out of the hospital but still suffers from it.

The Pension Bureau was not moved.

But another lawyer in Granville proved to be more effective. On May 10, 1921, attorney Clarence Parker wrote a “Dear James” letter to the local congressman, James Parker—a relative, apparently his brother, and plainly a Republican. “During the first Wilson Administration a zealous [Democratic] postmaster reported the circumstances and Mr. Hall’s pension was stopped.” He pointed out that Hall was being supported by the county, so reducing county taxes may well have been his motive in writing. Hall had served his country for three years; only “youthful impetuosity” on three occasions kept his record from being clear. Couldn’t the congressman do something for him (and, implicitly, the county)?

Congressman Parker was clearly a Republican moved by the perfidy of the Democratic postmaster. The result was private bill #110, passed September 18, 1922. It decreed a pension of \$50 a month for Hall. Of course, Hall couldn’t leave well enough alone. He bombarded the Pension Bureau with applications to increase his pension. None worked. The Pension Bureau kept writing back to him that since his pension was granted by Congress, the bureau had no authority to change it. He finally died at Greenwich, N.Y., on December 30, 1925, aged at least seventy-nine years old—worn out with rheumatism and other debilitations of a long life, unable to use his hands, and dependent for support on the congressional pension granted over the objection of the able but unfeeling servants of the Pension Bureau.

Hall is known in Vermont’s official Civil War record, the 1892 Revised Roster, only as Grace the deserter. However, the database in vermontcivilwar.org, which is taken from the Revised Roster, has been

.....

corrected to show that “William Grace” also served in the Navy as William Grey and in the 48th New York Regiment as John Riley. Was he really Benjamin Hall? And why did he lie when he enlisted in Tinmouth? Didn’t people there know him as Hall? Or had he come to Tinmouth in 1860 as Grace, not Hall? Of course, we’ll never know.

NOTES

¹Middletown Springs since 1884.

²It was observed by a listener to this tale that William Grey (so spelled) was a Middletown industrialist who made, among other machines, horse treadmills. This might suggest that Hall lived in Middletown before the war.

³The Navy classified recruits by their previous experience at sea. A “landsman” had none. The Navy had already learned not to trust Grace, for he claimed to be a “mariner.”

⁴Until the late nineteenth century, captured enemy vessels were “prizes.” An admiralty court determined whether the prize had been lawfully captured. If the government kept the ship, as it did with blockade runners during the Civil War, the court determined its value. If the government had no use for it, the ship would be sold at auction. Either way, the proceeds were divided among the officers and crew by a formula determined by Navy regulations.

⁵In the early days of steam-powered ships, coal was added to the fireboxes with shovels wielded by “coal-heavers.” It may have made the infantry look appealing.

⁶Hall served 999 or 1,019 days, about two years and nine months. His opinion has to be based on the interpretation of “duration of the war.”

⁷It may have been Araunah Leffingwell of Middletown Springs. In an affidavit of May 5, 1920, he stated under oath that he became acquainted with Hall under the name of William H. Grace on August 1, 1862 (when the company gathered at Rutland to go to Brattleboro). “Other members of the company said he deserted because of trouble with an officer. Soon after the close of the war he saw Hall or Grace at Middletown Springs, Vermont. Some years later Hall asked him not to reveal his name.” Does this mean that Hall maintained some ties to Middletown? (Leffingwell enlisted the same day as Hall/Grace, but was discharged December 8, 1862, when the regiment was at Offutt’s Crossroads, Maryland—now called Potomac—and suffering a severe rate of death and disability from disease.)

⁸Why the deception at that point? Some local veterans of the 10th Vermont, though not Leffingwell, probably knew him only by that name.