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Alonzo A. Peasley Diaries

1861-1863

2 diaries (0.25 linear feet)

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Born in Dorchester, Mass., Alonzo A. Peasley enlisted in the 1st Massachusetts Infantry in May 1861, only weeks after the outbreak of the Civil War. Sent almost immediately southward, Peasley's regiment was deployed in the Battles of Glendale and First Bull Run in July, and served with the Army of the Potomac throughout the Peninsular Campaign, Frederickburg, and Chancellorsville. As part of the 2nd Division, 3rd Army Corps on July 2, 1863, the 1st Massachusetts suffered a 40% casualty rate during fierce fighting along the Emmitsburg Road in Gettysburg, with Peasley sustaining serious wounds. Hospitalized for several months, he was transferred to the Veterans Reserve Corps to serve out his enlistment. In later life, Peasley worked as a letter carrier in Boston.

Exceptionally well-written, observant, and above all active, Peasley's diaries offer a fine account of a private's life in the Civil War. The two volumes include detailed descriptions of life in the 1st Massachusetts Infantry covering the entire period from the day the regiment left the state in June 1861 until the time of Peasley's wounding at Gettysburg in July 1863. Among the highlights are a minutely detailed, thoroughly extended account of Peasley's first major engagements (Blackburn's Ford and First Bull Run), excellent account for the Peninsular Campaign, and a stunning account of the Second Battle of Bull Run.

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Civil War

Massachusetts (East)

Background on Alonzo A. Peasley

Alonzo Allen Peasley was born in Dorchester, Mass., on March 30, 1839, the eldest of at least four children born to a mechanic, Harrison Peasley, and his wife Eliza. Working as a pianoforte maker when the first shots of the Civil War were fired, and just 21 years old, Peasley became one of the first young men in Boston to join the union cause, enlisting in Co. F of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry, on May 24, 1861.

Organized in Boston and mustered quickly into the federal service, Peasley's regiment left the state in June for duty in northern Virginia, taking the experience as something of a lark. As they neared the seat of war by train, Peasley wrote:

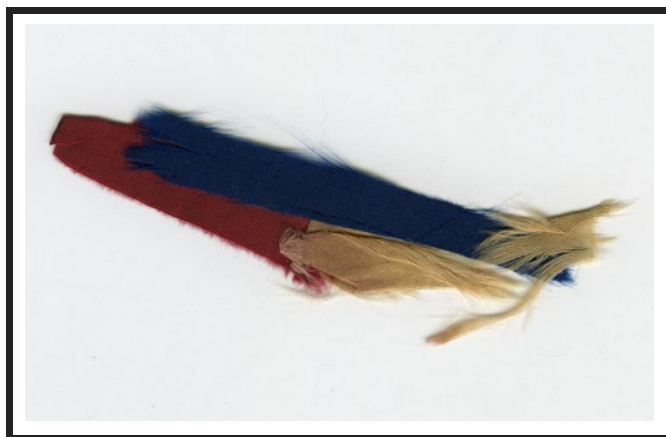
"All along the route the boys were firing at pigs, cows, horses, &c. the pigs were running wild through the woods. When we arrived at Annapolis Junction we had to stop some time for woods and water, there were 2 negroes at work in a field about 300 yards from the track. The boys began to fire at them when they took to their heels and left, the bullets striking all around them. The ground was dry and the bullets would make the dust fly and show the distance..."

Attached initially to McDowell's Army of Northeast Virginia, the regiment was briefly assigned to the defenses of Washington, D.C., but were called out to take part in the advance on Manassas in mid-July and after a slow build-up, saw their first action at Blackburn's Ford on July 18. As he formed into the line of battle for the first time, he wrote:

"I shall never forget the sensation I felt at this point and several other times of the day. We filed down round the hill back of the home and barn, our Col. on horseback all this time and in his shirtsleeves. It was an awful hot day the air was stifled and as we could get no fresh water and our water in our canteens was quite hot, we were almost dead. We kept on rounding the hill our skirmishers were crossing into the woods when suddenly we heard our skirmishers firing. We were drawn up in line in front of the woods. Co. G the right Co. was ordered in to support the skirmishers the bullets were whistling past us quite fast and thick..."

Under command of Israel B. Richardson, the union attempted to cross Bull Run, but were taken unaware by a Confederate brigade led by James Longstreet and were routed, led by the panicked retreat of the 12th New York: "Sat. 20th. This morn about 1 o'clock sharp picket firing, the Picket came running in and the rest of the 12th NY jumped up took their guns and ran, leaving us standing and cursing them. We stood up a few minutes then laid down again with orders if there was any more firing to charge and take the Rebel battery. We did not have another alarm." On the next day, as the Battle of Bull Run played out, Peasley wrote "The story is that we are to open the fight at this point, but I had rather be excused as my patriotism died on the 18th about half past 7 a.m." While covering the union retreat, Peasley wrote that he took time to break into the house of a Confederate sympathizer, stole an axe, and smashed a pianoforte "and left the Boys at work destroying the furniture."

In September, the 1st Massachusetts was reassigned to Hooker's Division, 3rd Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, where they took part in the Peninsular Campaign on 1862. Peasley experienced the thick of the fight at Yorktown and Williamsburg, Fair Oaks, Savage Station, Glendale, and Malvern Hill, and his regiment was engaged at Bristow Station and Second Bull Run in August before being called to duty in the defense of the capitol. Away from the front, Peasley appears to have fallen prey to the low morale affecting the battered union army. As the 3rd Corps prepared for the Battle of Fredericksburg in late November, Peasley appears to have taken off without leave, recording in his diary simply, "started for home, walked to Alexandria from Fairfax." Held under guard for six weeks after rejoining his regiment on Feb. 20, he returned to the ranks for the Battle of Chancellorsville, "the heaviest battle I ever was in," where under the command of Daniel Sickles, his already-depleted Corps bore the brunt of Stonewall Jackson's flanking maneuver.



Fragments of the regimental flag

The 3rd Corps was again at the center of the cauldron when they faced off on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Situated on the left of the Union lines, Sickles left a strong position along Cemetery Ridge to move forward into nearly untenable position in the Peach Orchard, where he was attacked by his old nemesis James Longstreet. The 1st Massachusetts were decimated. Deployed in a skirmish line along the Emmitsburg Road, the regiment sustained over 100 casualties from the 384 effectives that day, including Peasley.

The injuries sustained at Gettysburg kept Peasley in hospital for months, after which he was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, Veteran Reserve Corps to serve out his enlistment. After the war, he returned to Boston, married, and raised two children, Mildred (b. 1877) and Frank (b. 1881) while working as a letter carrier and postal clerk. Alonzo Peasley died in Dorchester of myocarditis and hepatitis on April 5, 1910, followed by his wife Mary in 1922.

Scope of collection

Exceptionally well-written, observant, and above all active, Peasley's diaries offer a fine account of a private's life in the Civil War. The two volumes include detailed descriptions of life in the 1st Massachusetts Infantry covering the entire period from the day the regiment left the state in June 1861 until the time of Peasley's wounding at Gettysburg in July 1863. Among the highlights are a minutely detailed, thoroughly extended account of Peasley's first major engagements (Blackburn's Ford and First Bull Run), excellent account for the Peninsular Campaign, and a stunning account of the Second Battle of Bull Run.

The volumes overlap in coverage and probably represent a later, slightly emended transcription of events of the first year and a half in service (vol. 1) paired with the diary actually carried in the field (vol. 2): Peasley has signed the free front endpaper of volume and dated it Nov. 4, 1867. Taken together, these volumes are filled with details of Civil War life, ranging from combat experience to accounts of covering for escaping slaves as they ran off from their master, taking over secesh homes, to uncovering a buried cache of rebel weapons. Volume 2 contains a noteworthy gap beginning in November 1862 when Peasley appears to have gone a.w.o.l., but on balance, Peasley appears to have been an avid and highly skilled soldier. His entries display a remarkably cool-headed young man and are filled with valuable detail, both on military matters and the emotional impact of the war on individual soldiers. Two examples stand for many. In the trenches before Yorktown, April 27, 1862, he wrote:

"Our sharp shooters were in the trenches with us and kept up a steady fire all day. They used to make some good shots. They were armed with Telescopic Rifles. We had a good chance to see the Rebs and their works. Some of the Boys would put their hat and caps on top of the breastworks and the Rebs would immediately put a bullet through them. I took a walk out to the end of the Parallel to get a good sight of the Rebs. I crawled up behind a small bush and immediately a bullet came whistling past cutting off a twig of the bush I was behind six inches from my nose. The Boys cried out 'look out Peasley' so Peasley got down. I took a shovel and went to work digging." (Vol. 1)

Peasley's description of the Battle of Glendale (Seven Days) gives a sense of the confusion and danger:

"Mon. 30 [June 1862]. Started again this morn marched 2 miles and laid at a place called Nelson's Farm or Glendale. Here they kept up a heavy artillery fire till we were ordered to the front as the infantry now became engaged. We were a support to the 16th Mass. who were on top of a hill. The rebels were in the ravine the fire at this time was pretty hot, the colors flag staff of the 16th at this Point was shot in half and the Reg'mt came running over us. Gen Hooker stood close to me behind his horse he cried out Mass. 1st stand firm. One of our Sargt's said we will, we are the Mass. 1st. Says he I know you will. They went up in a body and rallied round the Color Sargt who had staid there all the time waving the flag. The reg'mt formed a line again the order came for our reg'mt to charge over the 16th and we went over them, drove the rebels from their entrenchments and drove them through the woods about 3/4 of a mile when we came all of a sudden on top of a hill. As soon as we were on top the rebels came across in brigade line, Gen. Grover ordered us to fall back which the reg'mt did. I staid and fired 4 shots after the Reg'mt left and was the last one off the field. I fell back on the edge of the woods the reg'mt were scattered. We formed line, Col. Cowding was very much excited (he thinking we fell back without orders. Gen Grover said if there ever was anything said about it he would be responsible for it as he ordered us out). He fainted and had to be carried off the field. We staid till about dark when we were ordered down by the church..." (Vol. 2)

Pease's final entries are brief, but telling:

"Wed 1st. Started again marched through Emmitsburg about 1/2 a mile beyond and encamped. It has been quite showery all day. Started again about noon for Gettysburg. We got on the rong road and got in the rebs rear before we were aware of it. We arrived on the Battle Field after some slow marching at half past one at night quite fatigued. Thurs 2d send out on Picket about 9 a.m."

The few subsequent entries are brief, written in a shaky hand, and record his removal from the battlefield to hospital in New York. In the first volume of his diary, Peasley lists several souvenirs he collected, two of which survive: two small fragments of cloth from "our First Reg. Flag presented to us by the city of Boston, June 15, 1861" and carried by the regiment through the Second Battle of Bull Run; and a fragment of wood that he notes was taken "from the original Tomb of Washington at Mount Vernon, Va.," on May 1876. Folded up in vol. 2 is a typescript copy of a letter from James Longstreet to Daniel Sickles, Sept. 19,

1902, in which Longstreet concedes "that the advanced position at the Peach Orchard, taken by your corps and under your orders saved that battlefield to the Union cause."

Inventory

Peasley, Alonzo A.: Diary, vol. 1

1861 June 15-1862 Aug. 6

Diary (possibly rewritten or re-transcribed in 1867) beginning with 1st Massachusetts Infantry mobilizing to Virginia, regiment's move on Manassas, the Battle of Blackburn's Ford, First Bull Run, winter of 1861-1862, move to the Peninsula (lengthy accounts of Yorktown and Williamsburg, Seven Days).

Peasley, Alonzo A.: Diary, vol. 2

1862 May 13-1863 Nov. 21

Diary of Civil War experiences in the 1st Massachusetts Infantry, including the Peninsular Campaign, the fall and winter of 1862-1863 (including Peasley's period absent without leave), Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. The end of the volumes includes lists of the regiment's battles, other notes, and doodles.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of William A. Carroll, June 2009.

Bibliography

History of the First Regiment (Massachusetts Infantry), from the 25th of May, 1861, to the 25th of May, 1864; including brief references to the operations of the Army of the Potomac. Boston: Walker, Fuller, and Co., 1866.

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Peninsular Campaign, 1862

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United States. Army. Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, 1st (1861-1864)

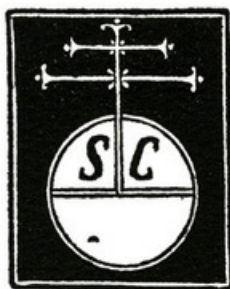
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