

Washington Kelley - Civil War

Washington W. Kelley moved to Wells after the Civil War

By CHUCK HUNT
Register Editor

Their plan seemed relatively simple, but it turned out to be a bit more difficult than they had first thought.

A group called the Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) wanted to have a special marker on the grave of the last Civil War Union soldier to die and be buried in each one of Minnesota's 87 counties.

Figuring out who that person was, and where he was buried, turned into a lot of research. However, they have made a serious dent in their search and have now done a ceremony in more than half of Minnesota's counties.

There were a lot of Union soldiers from Minnesota. That is because there were many men who signed up to fight with the 1st Minnesota Infantry.

That group was known as one of the main reasons for victory at the battle of Gettysburg.

The other reason is that a lot of Union soldiers moved to Minnesota after the war, looking for cheap land and a new start in life.

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"By the time we reached Chambersburg it was a smoking mass of ruins."
~ Washington Kelley





Washington Kelley posed for a photo in Wells, above. At right, Kelley with his wife, Mary, in their front yard in Wells.



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When it came to Faribault County, the group determined that the last Union soldier to die here was Washington W. Kelley. He actually lived to be 92 and died in 1940.

Kelley was one of those who went into the Union army in Pennsylvania and after he got out, in 1864, he left a year later and ended up in Minnesota.

Kelley is buried in Rosehill Cemetery in Wells, and that is where a special ceremony was held on Oct. 19 to honor him and dedicate a memorial and a gravestone.

Members of the Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War - William Colvill Camp 56 of Minneapolis/St. Paul conducted the ceremony. Commander Gary Carlberg presided over the ceremony, aided by Chaplain Chuck Lursen, Bryce Stenzel as Abe Lincoln, an honor guard

in Union Civil War uniforms, Wells Area Honor Guard composed of area veterans and some other folks.

One special guest was Pamela Wollum, of St.

Paul, who is Washington Kelley's great-granddaughter.

"My grandmother was Washington and Mary's youngest daughter, Alice, who died in 1970," Wollum says. "And my mother is Alice's youngest child."

Wollum feels a real connection to her great-grandfather from having known his daughter Alice, her grandmother, so well and learning

a lot about Washington Kelley.

So just who was Washington Wayne Kelley? The answer can be found in the following biography that was written by Julie Schrader, formerly of Wells.

"The Johnnies had got here ahead of us and got in their deadly work doing what we had been ordered to prevent."

— Washington Kelley

Washington Wayne Kelley

Washington Wayne Kelley, the son of Joseph and Permelia (Haight) Kelley, was born May 26, 1848, at Clarion County, Pennsylvania. At the age of 16, he enlisted with the Union, becoming a member of Company F, 4th Battalion Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment (also known as Stewart's Infantry).

Washington enlisted with his brother David when a recruiting officer was at Corsica, Pennsylvania just a few miles from their home farm.

They were sent at once to Pittsburg for their uniforms with the bright brass buttons and then on to Harrisburg for their arms. The first order was to march to Chambersburg, to ward off an expected raid. "The Cavalry led the way and we fellows followed on double quick. By the time we reached Chambersburg, it was a smoking mass of ruins, only a few scattered homes remaining, the Johnnies had got here ahead of us and got in their

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deadly work doing what we had been ordered to prevent," Kelley told a Wells Mirror newspaper reporter in 1925.

"From there we were sent to Cove Gap in the Blue Ridge mountains, where we stayed most of the time blockading the roads and building breastworks. Finally with 12 others, I was sent to Harrisburg,

"We scattered it (gun powder) along in twin rows and struck a match to it finally. That was fun for us boys."

— Washington Kelley

on detached duty to guard the arsenal. Part of our work was to sort cartridges. Those that were poor we tore the paper off of, saved the lead, loaded up the powder injured by dampness, and carried it out in wheelbarrows. This was fun for us boys. We scattered it along in twin rows and struck a match to it

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These were the last four living Civil War veterans living in Faribault County. The four are shown on the Main Street of Wells, where they were known to go for coffee and reminiscing. From left to right they are W. R. Haskins, Washington Kelley, William Melchor, and the last man is unidentified.

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Some photos from the special ceremony for Washington Kelley that was held on Oct. 19 at Rosehill Cemetery in Wells are shown here. The picture at left shows the unveiling of the medal recognizing that Kelley was the last living Civil War Veteran to be buried in Faribault County. The medal is shown in closeup detail above.

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Washington Kelley's great-granddaughter, Pam Wollum, of St. Paul, holds a portrait of Washington Kelley next to his new gravestone in Rosehill Cemetery in Wells. She was at the special ceremony held in honor of her great-grandfather in Wells on Oct. 19.

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finally."

Kelley served his country until he received an honorable discharge on Nov. 14, 1864, at Pitt, Pennsylvania.

"I came to Easton by team in 1866 and took a homestead four miles west of Wells. The next year the grasshoppers came and ate me out." Two years later, on November 1, 1868, he married Mary Catherine Schermerhorn at Minnesota Lake. In 1873 they quit farming and moved to Wells "where I've lived ever since, doing any kind of work to earn an honest living. Uncle Sam has been generous with us old fellows and the pension I now draw keeps the wolf from the door."

Washington and Mary had 12 children; six sons: Elmer (1870-1954), Winfield (1872-1881), George (1874-1955), William (1880-1949), Phillip (1888-1954) Howard (1893-1965) and six daughters: Grace "Mabel" (Kephart) (1876-1963), Loretta (Marchael) (1878-1960), Blanche (Williams) (1882-?), Etta (Callender) (1884-1950), Maude (Van Gorder) (1886-1943), and Alice (Peterson) (1891-1970).

Washington Kelley was a charter member of Ransom Post #163 G.A.R. and for many years had been the only G.A.R. veteran living in Wells. He was also an honorary member of Troška Post, American Legion.

Washington Kelley died October 27, 1940, in Wells at the age of 92 years and is buried in Rosehill Cemetery in Wells, Faribault County, Minnesota. His obituary stated that "through his advanced years, Mr. Kelley maintained a youthful outlook on life, was active almost to the last, coming downtown almost weekly for a visit to the barber shop and chat with friends. He was an avid sports fan and never missed a baseball game if he was able to get there."

Researched and written by
Julie A. Schrader, 2024

As for the Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW), the work they do is continuing.

According to Gary Carlberg, who led the ceremony in Wells, they have completed the research and conducted "Last Union Veteran" ceremonies in 59 of the state's 87 counties (67 percent) in a record three years. There were 23 of these done in 2023 and 23 more so far in 2024.

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"In two years we have loaded 5,502 names into the SUVCW National Database, which now has 12,611 soldiers interred in Minnesota and 843,945 in total," Carlberg says.

In 2023, the group honored Civil War veterans and their families when they requested 27 headstones from the Veterans Administration and in 2024 ordered another 217 headstones for placement in cemeteries in 21 counties in Minnesota.

"If anyone is aware of a Civil War veteran who is in an unmarked grave, or their headstone is broken or illegible, contact their local VFW or American Legion and ask them to partner with me to request a new one from the VA," Carlberg says. "In addition, we are searching for the numerous Civil War veterans who allegedly were buried on the family farm or not in a current cemetery."

Carlberg's phone number is 651-214-7086.



Honoring Our Heroes

Adherence to duty, selfless service, honor, and sacrifice; attributes inherited through the generations of those who have secured a legacy of freedom for our Nation, impacting all Americans. To our veterans, today and every day, we thank you and we salute you.

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Our staff salutes all veterans . . .
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Ellen Skaden, Administrative Assistant

Jenna Schmidtke

Ellen Skaden

Faribault County *Register*

This issue of Our Heroes was a lot of work, but totally worth the effort

By Chuck Hunt - Editor | Nov 17, 2024

It is always a good feeling when we get the annual Our Heroes magazine done and sent off to the printing plant.

That happened this past Monday, Nov. 11, Veterans Day.

I know, we used to shoot for Our Heroes magazine to come out on Veterans Day. But, the last couple of years, we have delayed it one week, mainly because we are doing so many other projects, such as the Holiday Gift Guide magazine, Community Focus magazine, Car Care and Home Improvement sections that we don't have lots of time to work on Our Heroes.

And, it takes a lot of time to create Our Heroes. Way more time than any other project we do.

Why? Well, just finding story ideas takes a bit of work. We are trying to find interesting stories about veterans serving in wars and conflicts. Sure, all veterans are heroes, but we try to find the ones who have an interesting story about their time in the service.

Then, of course, we have to find someone who will share that story with us.

We try and have a variety of stories, from the Civil War to the Gulf War and other current military conflicts. And we try to find stories about veterans from all around Faribault County.

Of course, many of our veterans from the Civil War to the Vietnam War, have passed away. Some were killed in combat, while others have died in the years following the war they were in.

After we find some names, we check them out. The next step is research. That is especially true for those vets who have died.

Sometimes we can find documentation about their service. Sometimes family members have a lot of information, but sometimes they just say "*Dad didn't talk much about his time in the Army.*"

The problem, often, is finding photos of the veterans we are trying to do a story on. Especially if they passed away many years ago and there are not many family members left.

This year, for instance, we had three names we were thinking of writing about, and all three had to be abandoned for one reason or another.

There was a fourth one that we probably should have abandoned, but I went on with it anyway. Call me stubborn.

All I had was a very short newspaper clipping from 1945 about a Blue Earth man, Glen Johnson. And I had a whole lot of information about the ship he was on. The story about the ship was an absolutely amazing saga of heroism, but I had very little information about Glen Johnson himself.

I searched and searched and came up with a Glenn Johnson who fit the time period. But it turned out to be a different Glenn Johnson from Blue Earth, not the one who served in the Navy on the USS Newcomb.

The Glen Johnson I was looking for could not be found.

I felt the story was such an interesting one that I went ahead and wrote it anyway.

I suspect that if there are some family members who see this edition of the Our Heroes magazine, they will shoot me an email or call me on the phone.

I hope they do. If I find out anything interesting, I will certainly share it with our readers.

This year's Our Heroes, the 22nd one we have done, is a bit different in several ways.

First off, we have not one, but two stories about Civil War veterans from Faribault County. We even have some photos of the two men, something not easily found.

Secondly, in one of the stories, I was even able to have authentic quotes from the Civil War veteran, not an easy task to get quotes from a vet who has been dead for over 80 years.

Luckily Washington Kelley was interviewed and quoted in a story in the Wells Mirror, many years ago. Even luckier, Julie Schrader, formerly of Wells, did a lot of research on Kelley and was very happy to share it with us for this story.

She is among many folks we need to thank for their assistance on these stories this year.

Julie did research and wrote a biography of Washington Kelley because he was going to be honored as the last living Civil War Union soldier in Faribault County at the time of his death.

Kelley's great-granddaughter was also a big help with this story and getting photos for it.

For the other Civil War veteran story on Jacob Shirk, his great-great-grandson, Steve Shirk, and other family members, were very helpful.

For the story about World War II veteran Albert Sonnek, his family members were also of great assistance in providing background and photos.

Of course, I cannot say enough about local history buff A.B. Russ, who helps out every year with some names and some background info. The information was helpful with the stories on Jacob Shirk, Norman Midthun and Glen Johnson.

Of course, the information A.B. had on Glen Johnson was minimal. And, me finding more about him was even less productive.

So, if you know anything about him, feel free to let me know. Yes, it is too late to get it into the story in the Heroes magazine, but still, it will be good to know what happened to him.

I hope you all enjoy this year's Our Heroes magazine as much as we enjoy bringing it to you.

OUR HEROES

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Honoring those who
defend our freedom

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