Chapter 5-- Iowa in the Civil War, from A New History of Iowa

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Chapter Five
Iowa in the Civil War

Iowans of all backgrounds helped the Union win the Civil War. The state provided 46 infantry regiments, nine regiments of cavalry, and four artillery companies during the conflict. Black Iowans, and runaway slaves from Missouri, made up an additional regiment of African-American troops. More than 76,000 men served in the Union army; 13,001 died during their service. Iowa units took part in key battles and campaigns, fighting from Missouri to Georgia. They were with Grant’s army at the bloody battle of Shiloh, helped pacify Missouri, served in the long campaign to capture Vicksburg, as well as Sherman’s famous March to the Sea. In Iowa, families left behind labored to continue farm production in the absence of husbands and sons. Women became farm managers, aided by their children, neighbors, or other kin. Iowans such as Alexander Clark led the struggle for civil rights in the state, while Annie Wittenmyer organized and delivered aid to Iowa soldiers. In 1868 white voters in Iowa gave black men the right to vote in a statewide referendum—two years before the fifteenth amendment to the United States did so. In that same year, Iowa’s Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of schools in the state was illegal. By the end of the 1860s, the Union had been restored and Iowa had made surprising progress toward racial equality.\footnote{1}{LeLand L. Sage, A History of Iowa (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 153-154; Donald C. Elder III, editor, A Damned Iowa Greyhound: The Civil War Letters of William Henry Harrison Clayton (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), vii.}

On April 15, 1861, three days after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln asked for volunteers to subdue the rebellion. Iowa Governor Samuel Kirkwood received a telegram from the Secretary of War asking the state to provide one regiment for immediate service. Iowa Congressman William Vandever took the message to Kirkwood from Davenport, which was the end of a telegraph line. After reading it the governor replied, “The President wants a whole regiment of men! Do you suppose, Mr. Vandever, I can raise that many?” No one in Iowa City even knew how many men were in a regiment. The state had few weapons to outfit its men and no regular army soldiers in its borders. But the call for volunteers went out, with Keokuk set as the rendezvous point for the first regiment. Thousands of men volunteered. They were to appear by May 20. Before that date Lincoln issued a call for 82,000 more troops and the War Department ordered the state to provide two more regiments. These were the First, Second, and Third Iowa Infantry Regiments. The government extended the service of those in these last two units from ninety days to three years. There were no protests. By early June all three units were assembling in Keokuk. Most had no weapons or government uniforms. Soldiers trained using wooden sticks in the place of rifles.\footnote{2}{Ted Hinckley, “Davenport in the Civil War,” Annals of Iowa 34:6 (October, 1958), 402-403; Mildred Throne, editor, “The Civil War Diary of John Mackley,” Iowa Journal of History 48:2 (April, 1950), 141-142; Kenneth L. Lyfolt, From Blue Mills to Columbia: Cedar Falls and the Civil War (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 18-21, 25; Thomas R. Baker, The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa in the Civil War (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 63, 71; Cyrenus Cole, Iowa Through The Years (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1940), 277.}

While Iowa’s men were organizing to fight for the Union, Missouri’s commitment was in doubt. Missouri was a slave state, but did not secede. Its governor refused to heed Lincoln’s call for troops and tried to maneuver the state into the Confederacy. In response, Northern troops moved into Missouri to secure St. Louis and defeat pro-Southern militia. The situation rapidly
deteriorated and the state fell into its own civil war. By July all three Iowa regiments had been sent to Missouri, often equipped with weapons from the Mexican War. More than one dozen Iowa regiments would be stationed in Missouri by the end of the year. Regiments from Iowa and other Northern states spent years protecting railroads, operating as a police force, and battling guerillas. Small units, often thirty to ninety men, fought irregular forces in a dangerous countryside. It was an ugly war, with few prisoners surviving capture. On July 13, 1861 John Mackley and about fifteen soldiers from the 2nd Iowa exchanged gunfire with rebels trying to burn a bridge near St. Joseph, Missouri. They drove off the guerillas and saved the bridge. Such skirmishes continued throughout the war. Union forces gained strategic control of the state by the spring 1862, guarding the western flank of the Northern invasion of Tennessee. The counter-insurgency work of Iowa’s soldiers played a key role in this success.3

Samuel H. M. Byers was the first man to join the Fifth Iowa Infantry, he proudly recalled in his memoirs. He volunteered at the age of 22, joining the regiment in July 1861. Byers survived four years of combat and imprisonment, finishing the war on General William T. Sherman’s staff. His regiment lost 775 men from disease, death, and wounds during the war. It lost so many men that it was disbanded. In 1861, it was sent to Missouri, like many Iowa units. He wrote that they tramped along railroads at night, chasing guerillas all over that “unhappy” state. “Missouri was neither North nor South; she was simply hell,” as neighbors killed each other and burned homes. “Irregular and roaming bands of villains rode everywhere” and “nothing seemed too awful or too cruel,” he wrote. The Fifth Infantry fought in Tennessee at the bloody battle of Iuka, losing almost half of its men to wounds or death. Byers also took part in the campaign to capture Vicksburg.4

More than 19,000 Iowans had joined the Union army by the start of 1862 and many served with General Ulysses S. Grant. After capturing two Confederate forts guarding the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, Grant’s army moved south toward the state of Mississippi. On Sunday, April 6, an unexpected attack by 40,000 southern troops took him by surprise. The battle that developed over the next two days—named Shiloh—involved eleven Iowa regiments. Many of the men were new to the army and some had never fired their weapons. The Union line was pushed back, with its center resting on an abandoned road. Five Iowa regiments joined other Northern units in this natural fortification. It became known as the “Hornet’s Nest.” Erastus B. Soper of the 12th Infantry recalled that the position allowed them to fire “volley after volley into the advancing foe with murderous effect.” The battle, he wrote, “made a constant roar, rising and swelling and falling like the roar of some mighty tempest, interspersed with the reports of more than 100 cannon fired in rapid and constant succession. The noise was such that there could be no talking. The men could not hear one anothers’ words.”5


The Union line on either side of the Hornet’s Nest was pushed back, leaving the men in it surrounded. Soper’s unit fell back, under attack from all sides. “Destructive fire caused the men to fall in every direction,” he wrote. They shot back as they retreated. The area was “one vast slaughter pen,” Soper recalled. “One could walk all over that hill on dead bodies some places two deep. Some of the wounded were praying, some cursing and others screaming with pain. It was an awful sight; once seen never to be forgotten.” Surrounded and threatened with destruction the men in the Hornet’s Nest surrendered. Their stubborn defense was the “salvation of Grant’s army,” wrote William Preston Johnston, the son of the Confederate commander in the battle. Grant’s army survived the first day of battle and went on the offensive on the second. The Union army drove their opponents from the field. Shiloh was a bloodbath, with more than 10,000 Union soldiers killed or wounded. More Americans died at Shiloh from combat wounds than had died in battle in the entire Mexican War. Iowa units suffered badly, with 1,234 killed or wounded and 1,147 captured.

Victory at Shiloh, as well as the capture of New Orleans in April 1862, left the Union with control of much of the Mississippi River. After blunting a Confederate counterattack in Kentucky, Northern armies moved south to try and capture Vicksburg, the most important remaining Southern fortress on the Mississippi River. Thirty Iowa regiments and artillery batteries took part in the long campaign. It took six months of hard fighting for Grant to finally surround and besiege the city. The heat, rain, and mosquitoes left Northern soldiers miserable. “Water was scarce; food scarcer,’ recalled Samuel H. M. Byers. On May 16, 1863, he fought at the Battle of Champion’s Hill with his unit. His regiment advanced, then paused, about one hundred yards from their opponents. “There was no charging further by our line. We halted, stood still, and for over an hour we loaded our guns and killed each other as fast as we could.” He fired his musket forty times. Shot through the hand, he remembered, “the wound did not hurt; I was too excited for that.” Gunpowder colored men’s faces black. He continued shooting through smoke at an enemy that he could not see. “I wonder that a man on either side was left alive.” Once the battle ended, he realized that Magnolia trees were in bloom, “their beautiful blossoms contrasting with the horrible scene of battle.”

John Myers, a member of the 28th Infantry Regiment, took part in the fighting around Vicksburg from April to July 1863. On May 16 he was also wounded at Champion’s Hill, a Confederate defeat that forced their army to retreat to Vicksburg. He wrote, “our Company lost


nearly half” in the battle. He told his wife Ceceila, who lived in Toledo, “we hav got them surroundet so that they cant get away.” Samuel Byers wrote that the town was bombarded “day and night for weeks.” Shells fell like comets at night over Vicksburg. He recalled that Union mortar rounds tore holes big enough for a house in the ground. “Whenever a man shows himself he gets the balls sent after him like hale,” Myers wrote. In early June deserters began to give themselves up. Civilians and soldiers ate mule meat, as well as cats and dogs. By the end of June half of the Southern army was sick, some with scurvy. By July troops were beginning to starve. On July 4, 1863, Vicksburg surrendered. In the east, Northern troops defeated Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg. John Myers lived to see the victory, but he died of typhoid on August 14. Byers survived the war to return home to Oskaloosa.

The capture of Vicksburg was a great victory, but soldiers alone did not win the war. Iowa soldiers enlisted because thousands of farmwives enabled them to. Women operated farms with the aid of their children, neighbors, or hired men—if such laborers were available. Sometimes they left their home and rented out their property. Martha Turner Searle rented her home after her husband enlisted. She found a teaching position to support herself and her child. Many moved to live with their families or in-laws. Those who stayed at home became farm managers and made significant decisions on their own. Mary Alice Vermilion confidently wrote to her husband, “I am willing to raise corn, to pay taxes, to help sustain the government, and to carry on the war.” Women exchanged letters with their husbands and made choices about debts, tenants, crops, and other tasks together. They usually avoided heavy physical labor, but completed all sorts of new tasks. Most shouldered additional burdens beyond those they normally completed. They were “forced to dredge up every ounce of their ingenuity in order to deal with the wartime economy,” wrote historian Glenda Riley. Some increased the size of their livestock herds or sold chickens to help pay bills. One woman decided to sell corn still in the field to avoid the cost of harvesting. Another purchased nine milk cows to produce butter. In Guthrie County, a woman tended to a nine-acre cornfield. This then provided an income for her family. Others paid debts or arranged for plowing, planting, and harvesting.

Helen Maria Sharp managed the family farm and cared for four children under the age of twelve after her husband John enlisted in 1861. He served for a year before returning home. A younger sister helped with childcare and neighboring men assisted with cutting wood and field labor. Other farm wives nearby gave her food. She found herself able to successfully run the farm, with the help of friends and money from John. Helen sometimes struggled to make ends meet though, especially when money sent from her husband was lost in the mail. She spent much of her time caring for livestock; church meetings helped her cope with loneliness. But Helen worried about going into debt. She planted a garden and earned money by doing washing for other women. But she struggled to hold on to hope in the face of brutal winters and a shortage of wood. “I have frosted one of my feet” while chopping wood, she wrote. She

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considered returning to live with her parents in Indiana. John Sharp returned home from the war and both he and Helen lived into the twentieth century.\(^\text{10}\)

Marjorie Ann Rogers was left to care for her family after her husband, Dr. Samuel C. Rogers, left home. Early in the war he helped recruit and equip volunteers; he also served as a surgeon for the Union army. With her husband absent, “the whole responsibility rested with myself and the children; they were my only assistance and companions” she wrote. After Samuel joined the army, Rogers rented out the family farm and moved to the town of Toledo with her four children. They sold their livestock and lived with friends in town. Rogers hauled surplus produce from the family farm to market, renting a wagon from a skeptical man who questioned her driving abilities. Marjorie took a full load to sell. “I was not going to be laughed at because I was a woman—I would take the same as a man.” When she reached town, men who were surprised by a woman driving a wagon offered to help her off. “I declined their kindness and said I would get down the same as a man if I could do a man’s work.” In April 1865, she was mistakenly notified of the death of her husband; nine days later she received a letter from her husband telling of his escape from a Confederate ambush.\(^\text{11}\)

The Northern economy boomed during the war. The North grew more wheat in 1862 and 1863 than the whole country had before the war, despite secession and the enlistment of 500,000 men in the army. It also produced more coal and iron by 1864 than the entire United States had in peacetime. Mechanization and increased employment of women played a role. Iowa gained 180,000 new people during the war, who began new farms and added to the state’s farm output. Agricultural production increased in western states, with more corn, wheat, and oats being produced for most of the war. Food exports even increased during the conflict, as bad harvests in Europe led to increased demand for American agricultural products. Hog, cattle, and sheep raising flourished in states such as Iowa, as well. “Women by and large kept the farms, family businesses, families, and schools functioning while a major portion of male population was involved in war operations,” wrote Glenda Riley.\(^\text{12}\)

Iowa women also played an important role in aiding Union soldiers, who faced horrific living conditions in the army. Volunteer women sewed uniforms for departing soldiers and provided food, clothing, and blankets when the government could not. Open latrines, trash, and horse manure polluted army camps; inadequate clothing, equipment, and tents made soldiers’ lives miserable. They often went hungry. Rations, when available, could be almost inedible. “At best soldiers would get salt pork, hardtack, bread and beans,” wrote Noah Zaring. Malnourishment and exhaustion encouraged disease, from dysentery and typhoid to measles and mumps. Medical care was atrocious.\(^\text{13}\)


Women banded together to provide for Union troops, joining a variety of aid societies and sanitary commissions. In Iowa there were at least forty such organizations across the state. They made clothing and bandages, prepared food, and packed boxes full of material for Iowa soldiers. Women also sent pillows, sheets, and dried fruit. Marjorie Rogers helped collect beans, dried beef, butter, pickles, and sauerkraut. Some grew food for troops. They also held charity bazaars, selling items that they had produced to raise money. The Cedar Rapids Ladies Soldiers’ Aid Society provided assistance to the army throughout the war, sending clothing, food and medical supplies. This group raised more than $10,000 to assist men in the Union army. Mehitable Woods, a sanitary commission agent, took 37 tons of supplies to Northern soldiers on one trip in 1864. Keokuk, at the southeastern corner of Iowa, became a departure point for soldiers and supplies. In that town lived Annie Turner Wittenmyer, a divorced woman who dedicated herself to improving the lives of soldiers during the war.14

Wittenmyer had moved to Keokuk in 1850 with her husband, William, who was a merchant. Three of their four children died before the war. She also divorced her husband. Despite these personal trials, she was dedicated to charitable activities, helping to establish a free school for poor children. When the war broke out three of her brothers enlisted in the Union army, so it was no surprise that she devoted herself to aiding the Northern cause. No organization such as the Red Cross existed to meet humanitarian emergencies. Wittenmyer and other women in Keokuk organized the Ladies Soldiers’ Aid Society of Keokuk. In April 1861, Annie visited Iowa troops and reported shortages of everything from bandages and pillows to healthy food. Aid societies outside Keokuk began to send packages for her to forward to Iowa regiments. She then began to coordinate aid campaigns across the state, even as she visited hospitals full of wounded Iowa soldiers. In January 1862 she found her sixteen-year old brother, David, in a miserable ward, with a drunken medical director. “It was an inside view of the hospitals that made me hate war as I had never known how to hate it before,” she wrote in her autobiography. The food provided to her brother was repugnant—greasy bacon and a slice of bread—and she committed herself to improving the diet of Union soldiers.15

David Turner and many other soldiers benefitted from the efforts of Wittenmyer and the women of Iowa’s home front. In September 1862 the Iowa legislature made her one of the Sanitary Agents for the state. In this role she “labored tirelessly to see that medical and other supplies were provided where most needed,” wrote Robert F. Martin. She traveled widely, visiting troops from Arkansas to Chattanooga and advocating on their behalf. She was on a hospital boat at the Battle of Shiloh with two other women. “Oh, the sights and scenes I witnessed that day!” she wrote. They provided food and medical care to wounded men and prayed with the dying. In Memphis she demanded that a general send four steamboats to remove

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sick men from Helena, Arkansas, threatening to inform Northern newspapers if the aid was not sent. In May 1864 she resigned as State Sanitary Agent to work for the U. S. Christian Commission. She was responsible for dietary kitchens in army hospitals. At least fifty diet kitchens were established by the end of the war, providing milk, fruit, vegetables, chicken, and beef to injured soldiers. She proudly wrote in her autobiography, “during the last eighteen months of the war, over two million rations were issued monthly.” Praising her efforts, General Ulysses S. Grant said, “No soldier on the firing line gave more heroic service than she rendered.” Wittenmyer also helped organize institutions to care for the orphans of deceased soldiers and was active in reform movements after the war.16

Samuel Kirkwood served as governor for most of the war, leaving office in January 1864 after four years. He took part in the founding of the Republican Party in Iowa, deserting the Democrats. A successful businessman and farmer with “homespun manners of talk and dress, he was the ideal candidate in frontier politics,” wrote Leland Sage. He defeated Democrat Augustus Caesar Dodge in the gubernatorial race of 1859, showing up for a debate in a lumber wagon. Dodge came in an expensive coach. Kirkwood effectively managed Iowa during wartime, recruiting troops and keeping order. The governor and a few friends provided credit to help equip some of Iowa’s first regiments. He also supported the enlistment of African-American troops, albeit only to help save the lives of white soldiers. He declined a third term as governor in 1863 and was replaced by William Milo Stone, who had been wounded at Vicksburg. Kirkwood served one more term as governor in the late 1870s and as Secretary of the Interior from 1881-1882. He died in Iowa City in 1894.17

While most Iowans supported the Union war effort, some did not. These were usually antiwar Democrats, often called Copperheads, who gained this name in reference to the venomous snake. Union veteran Samuel H. M. Byers harshly described them in his book Iowa in War Times as “the great Peace Party, made up of all the bad elements of society, the haters of human liberty.” Meetings and resolutions of opposition to the war occurred regularly; some loudly voiced their opposition to the war and the federal government. Southern Iowa suffered the worst disorder and violence due to its proximity to Missouri. A provost marshal was killed near Sidney, in southwest Iowa on October 30, 1863. The courthouse in the town was blown up, too. In September 1864 two lawmen searching for deserters were murdered on the way to Oskaloosa. A month later a band of men from Missouri wearing Union blue rode through Davis County, killing men and looting their farms. They killed a Union officer, kidnapped others, and

terrorized the countryside. This group of raiders escaped pursuit, riding into the chaos of Missouri. But the state mostly escaped the horrific violence that plagued its southern neighbor.\(^\text{18}\)

Near the start of the war, Lincoln had suspended the writ of habeas corpus. This change, asserted in the wartime crisis, allowed the federal government to arrest and detain individuals indefinitely. George W. Jones, a former U.S. Senator from Iowa, was arrested in New York City in 1861 for treasonable conduct. Jones had written a letter to his lifelong friend Jefferson Davis, who had become Confederate President, explaining his hostility to the Lincoln Administration and sympathy for the Southern cause. He spent 64 days in prison, but was eventually released without a trial. The editor of the Dubuque Herald, D. A. Mahony, was also arrested in August 1862. He spent almost three months in jail without being charged with any crime. Those who considered Copperhead views treasonous sometimes attacked their businesses—irate soldiers threw the equipment of a Keokuk paper into the Mississippi River.\(^\text{19}\)

The greatest threat to Iowa’s support for the Union war effort—and a minor one at that—came during the “Tally War.” It was also referred to as the “Skunk River War.” This grandly named incident occurred in early August 1863 and resulted in only one death, but great concern in the state. On August 1, Southern sympathizers, led by Rev. George C. Tally, drove through a Republican rally in the strongly Unionist town of South English. Both sides were armed. A gun went off. Tally, with a revolver in hand, was killed and one other man wounded in an exchange of gunfire. Tally’s friends and allies swore revenge. Hundreds of armed men—the Skunk River Army—from nearby counties headed for South English. But many returned home in a day or two. Notified of the alleged threat, Governor Kirkwood sent troops and went to the area himself to deter any possible violence. Tally’s death eliminated a charismatic critic of the war effort, even if it did not end all opposition in Iowa.\(^\text{20}\)

Iowa recruited a regiment of men over the age of 45 called the “graybeards,” officially known as the 37th Iowa Infantry Regiment. They served from October 1862 until May 1865. The average age was 57, with more than 100 of the men in their sixties. It was a unique unit, with no other like it in the Union army. The Secretary of War gave permission for their enlistment, requiring that they serve only in guard and garrison duty. Many of these men were veterans of the Mexican War or other conflicts, but were too old for the rigors of combat and long marches. About 1,300 of their sons and grandsons served in the Union army. One of its members was Charles King, who was 81 years old in 1863. He claimed to be the father of 21 children. Stephen Shellady was a private and a sergeant-major—he was 61 years old and a former Speaker of the Iowa House of Representatives. This unit completed guard duty in


locations such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, Memphis, and Rock Island. They also protected trains carrying supplies to Mississippi. In Tennessee rebel guerillas attacked the one they were guarding. “Undaunted, the old frontiersmen returned shot for shot,” wrote Edith Wasson McElroy. Two men were killed in this incident. Less than ten of the graybeards died or were wounded during the war; between 134 to 145 died from disease.21

Iowa provided a regiment of African-American volunteers for the Union. When the war started black Iowans could not vote, attend public schools, serve in the militia, or even legally settle in the state. However, by 1865 “unprecedented steps to black equality were under way,” wrote historian David Brodnax, Sr., spurred, in part, by the participation of black men in the Northern army. The African-American population of Iowa was small, but it grew during the conflict. Some whites in the state helped runaway slaves find housing and work. Wartime chaos also provided the opportunity for escape for others. Jeff Logan fled Missouri, leading wagons carrying twelve other slaves to Iowa. In Des Moines he worked at a farm and a hotel before starting his own business. Jason Green, a free black man, reached Newton Iowa with four other runaways in 1862 or 1863. Milton Howard escaped from slavery in Alabama and made his way to Davenport. His family had been kidnapped in Muscatine and sold into slavery in 1852. All of these men joined Iowa’s black regiment. In 1862, Alexander Clark, the state’s most well-known black leader, wrote to Governor Kirkwood and offered to raise companies of black soldiers.22

Clark had arrived in Muscatine in May 1842, when he was seventeen years old. Born to emancipated slaves in Pennsylvania, he learned the barbering trade from an uncle in Ohio, who also sent him to elementary school. He married Catherine Griffin and started a family, pursuing a variety of business opportunities. Clark, of course, was a barber. But he also bought timberland and sold wood to steamboats. He invested in property and helped organize Muscatine’s African Methodist Episcopal Church. Clark was also a conductor on the underground railroad. He fought to overturn the law that did not allow blacks to legally enter Iowa and agitated for black suffrage. Resistance to black soldiers fell after the Emancipation Proclamation and after the courageous service of other African-American units. Governor Kirkwood contrasted the sacrifice of black soldiers with the disloyalty of Copperheads, asking “which is the most decent man?” Once they were allowed to muster into Union service Alexander Clark helped recruit 1,153 black soldiers from Iowa and Missouri.23

Eleven companies made up the First Iowa Volunteers (African Descent), which was renamed the 60th Colored Infantry in March 1864. They finished training near St. Louis and went south to Helena, Arkansas in December 1863. The regiment spent most of the next 15 months near the town in garrison duty, occasionally battling guerillas and rebel troops. Helena

22 David Brodnax, Sr., “‘Will They Fight? Ask the Enemy:’ Iowa’s African-American Regiment in the Civil War,” The Annals of Iowa 66: 3, 4 (Summer/Fall 2007), 266-278, 291.
was a rainy, wet, and malarial place. More than 300 soldiers from the regiment died from disease. On July 26, 1864 two companies from the regiment, along with other white and black troops, fought a much larger Confederate force at the Battle of Wallace’s Ferry. The Union soldiers were on a reconnaissance mission when 1,500 Southerners attacked them. Greatly outnumbered they retreated, alternately skirmishing and marching while carrying their wounded. The column dispersed a force blocking the route to Helena and the Confederate troops withdrew. An artillery officer praised Iowa’s black troops writing, “the colored men stood up to their duty like veterans.” His report continued, “They marched eighteen miles at once, fought five hours, against three to one, and were as eager at the end as at the beginning for the fight. Never did men, under such circumstances, show greater pluck or daring.” Many learned to read and write as soldiers. The 709 survivors mustered out of the army in October, 1865.24

Thousands of Iowa soldiers were captured during the war and ended up in Southern prisons. Confederates often killed African-American soldiers taken prisoner. For those who were captured the conditions in prisons could be appalling. They were usually drastically overcrowded, with poor food, lousy sanitation, and widespread disease. Thousands of prisoners died from wounds, dysentery, pneumonia, and starvation. Men from Iowa’s 12th Infantry Regiment were captured at the Battle of Shiloh. Charles Sumbardo spent time in a prison near Macon, Georgia. “It was not uncommon for ten or twelve deaths to occur in twenty-four hours, he wrote.” Sumbardo and others were released after six months. Seth Crowhurst, also captured at Shiloh, wrote that the men he was imprisoned with suffered from scurvy and were infested with vermin. J. Warren Coates was interred at Andersonville, the infamous Confederate prison. He recalled that language was powerless to explain its horrors. At one point he wrote that 33,000 men were held without shelter or fresh water and had little food. Men had nothing to do, wrote John H. Stibbs, “but to stand around waiting for death” at Andersonville. In August 1864, 2,992 men died at Andersonville. Thousands more died in other months. The commander of the prison, Henry Wirz, was executed after the war. John Stibbs, an officer from the 12th Iowa, was a member of the court that found Wirz guilty.25

Three Iowans managed to escape from a Confederate prison in Tyler, Texas and trekked 700 miles to Union lines at Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Major Augustus Hamilton and two other officers, Allen Miller and John Lambert, escaped in July 1864. They had been captured at a battle in Arkansas in April. The three men made their way east toward Northern posts, eating only green corn and traveling at night. They hid during the day and suffered for weeks in wet clothes. When their boots wore out, they made moccasins out of them. After 33 days, they reached Pine Bluff. Hamilton returned to his unit as a lieutenant colonel. Miller died a month after reaching safety; Lambert died in January 1865. Augustus Hamilton survived until 1918, working as a lawyer and as the editor of a paper in Ottumwa.26

24 David Brodnax, Sr., 278-288.
Despite Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg the war continued until April 1865. Iowa regiments were part of an incredible victory on November 25, 1863, charging uphill to take fortified ridges outside Chattanooga from the Confederates. Alonzo Abernethy was at the base of Lookout Mountain, which towered over Chattanooga. “We were ordered to advance. A more appropriate order would have been to ascend,” Abernethy wrote. “The intoxication of battle carried our line steadily forward.” The Union attack took the hills above the city—the Confederate line was shattered and their army pushed back into Georgia. Samuel H. M. Byers was taken prisoner during the battle, his regiment outflanked and overwhelmed. By the spring of 1864 Sherman’s campaign to take Atlanta had begun. In Virginia, Grant moved south against Robert E. Lee’s troops. After a summer of fighting and maneuver, Sherman took Atlanta on September 1. This victory helped Abraham Lincoln win re-election in November 1864. Two and a half months later Sherman’s army began their famous 300-mile march toward Savannah, Georgia. Fifteen Iowa regiments were part of his army.

William S. Fulz and Alexander G. Downing were both sergeants in the Eleventh Iowa and participated in this famous campaign. Much equipment was left behind, as “the privates were to be their own pack mules,” wrote Fulz. The army foraged for food and mostly ate sweet potatoes, pork, beef, chicken, and turkey. “It is good country for foraging. We found plenty of fresh pork and all the sweet potatoes we could carry,” noted Downing. Fulz recalled that his regiment replaced tired mules with those from nearby plantations. They took any cattle they found with them, as well. The long-distance campaign was hard on clothing and shoes, wrote Downing. “My right foot is worn through on the bottom, and my toes are wet with blood every day.” Union troops destroyed railroads whenever they found them, heating rails and winding them around trees or telegraph poles so they could not be used again. They found little resistance. Sherman’s army left a trail of destruction behind that did immense damage to the state and the Southern war effort. On December 20, the army captured Savannah and cut the remaining Confederacy in half. By the end of 1864, the South had lost the war, even if its leaders did not want to accept the fact.

Samuel Byers spent fifteen months in Southern prisons, or trying to escape from them. He survived seven months in a prison in Richmond, Virginia, before being sent to Macon, Georgia. Byers acquired a confederate uniform by trading tobacco for it, one piece at a time. He walked out the front gate, escaped his pursuers, and hopped on a freight train. He ended up in Atlanta; Sherman’s army was outside the city. He slept in barns and spent days wandering about the city, gathering information on rebel positions. He was captured a mile from Union lines, arrested as a spy. Documents that might have led to his execution were lost and he was taken to Columbia, South Carolina. He was held in an open field in the woods with other captured soldiers. They had no shelter. “Our food was wretched, we had almost no clothing, and the weather was very bad nearly all the time,” he wrote. Those trying to escape, and there were many, were shot. Byers and another officer lived in a hole they dug for shelter. He escaped with another man while foraging for wood. They survived in the woods, receiving help from slaves.

They were finally caught by a patrol searching for deserters and sent to a prison in Charleston. He escaped again as Sherman’s army approached the city. Slaves fed him until the Union army took Charleston in February 1865. He joined Sherman’s staff for the last couple months of the war. Samuel Byers was the only survivor of his entire company and only one of sixteen from his regiment who lived through the conflict. After the war he wrote histories and memoirs of the Civil War and served as U.S. consul to Switzerland for fifteen years. His “Song of Iowa” became the state’s official song in 1911. Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers died in 1933 in Los Angeles.

While the war ended in April 1865, its consequences for Iowa did not. The Emancipation Proclamation helped make the Civil War a struggle to abolish slavery. The North’s victory in the war brought “astonishing advances in the rights of Northern blacks,” wrote historian Eric Foner. Postwar amendments to the Constitution, other federal laws, and state legislation voided laws that kept blacks from testifying in court, voting, or entering Northern states. African-Americans gained access to public education in some Northern states. Iowa also experienced radical changes that no one would have predicted a decade before.

In 1868 a referendum to allow black men to vote was approved by Iowa voters. This amendment to the Iowa Constitution modified voting rights by removing the word white from relevant sections of the state constitution. Only a few states in New England, as well as Minnesota, allowed black male suffrage. The Iowa Republican Party had supported the idea since 1865, with Governor William Stone stressing the role of African-American troops in the war. Legislation to allow black men to vote—and to reform laws regulating census, apportionment, and militia service—passed both the state house and senate. A convention of black delegates met in Des Moines in February 1868 to press for adoption of black male suffrage. Alexander Clark gave a rousing address reminding Iowans that “he who can be trusted with an army musket” could also “be intrusted with that boon of American liberty, the ballot.” In 1868 the amendment passed with a 24,000-vote majority. The other amendments passed as well.

Postwar efforts at racial equality were not limited to referendums though. Before the Civil War, black children could not legally attend public schools in Iowa. Many African-Americans did go to school with white children, but some school boards established separate schools for black students. The town of Muscatine had a segregated school, which was located outside of town. It did not have supplies or competent teachers. Schools for white children were built in the city and were well-funded, with good teachers. On September 10, 1867, Susan Clark, Alexander Clark’s daughter, was refused admittance at a grammar school in Muscatine. Clark promptly sued the school board of Muscatine, arguing that his daughter had been refused admission solely based on her race. A judge in the county ordered the school’s board of directors to admit her in October 1867. The board appealed the judge’s ruling to the state supreme court. The Iowa Supreme Court ruled that the school board could not require students

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30 Eric Foner, A Short History of Reconstruction (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 204-205.
to attend separate schools. Their opinion asserted Susan Clark’s right to an education, citing the 1857 Constitution’s requirement that all children—regardless of religion, color, or nationality—would be provided an education. This ruling occurred more than eight decades before the United States Supreme Court struck down school segregation in the Brown vs. Board of Education case. Other rulings by the state supreme court in the next decade supported this decision. In 1870 the legislature eliminated the words “white male” from the laws concerning legal practice. Alexander Clark, Jr., was the first black student to enroll in the law school at the state university in Iowa City. He received his law degree in 1879. His father also earned a law degree four years later.32

Iowa made a significant contribution, and a great sacrifice in human life, to Union victory. One of every four men killed at the Battle of Shiloh was from Iowa, for example. Forty-nine percent of Iowa’s white military-age population joined the Northern army or navy during the war. Only four other Northern states sent a larger proportion of their military-age men to the Union forces. Its population was far smaller than that of New York, Ohio, or Pennsylvania—which contributed more than one million troops combined. But more Iowa soldiers died as a percentage of those who served than any other loyal state—13,001 of 76,242 in the Union ranks. “The men and boys of Iowa regiments died from disease in a proportion unequalled by troops from any other northern state,” wrote historian Robert R. Dykstra. Slightly more than 17% of Iowa soldiers died during the war. Only troops who fought for the Union from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee had higher mortality rates.33

“Iowa had two armies serving the nation—the great column, 78,000 strong, of boys in blue at the front, and that other army of men and women who furnished the muscles of war here at home,” wrote Samuel H. M. Byers in Iowa in War Times. These people labored in the fields and gave their time and toil in non-military service, he proudly noted. “Nations are not saved by muskets alone,” Byers wrote in 1888, “but in the loyal duty that lies nearest, and without visible reward.”34

Iowans eagerly responded to Lincoln’s call for volunteers to subdue the rebellion and Iowa regiments fought across the South. The state’s African-American regiment demonstrated its valor in Arkansas. At home, women and children ensured that family farms survived and that agricultural production kept up with wartime demands. Thousands of women in Iowa, led by the indomitable Annie Wittenmyer, provided aid to Northern soldiers. Opponents of the war were a troublesome minority, but the greatest Copperhead danger, the Skunk River War, collapsed quickly. In the 1860s Iowa made great progress toward legal racial equality, but the promise of equal opportunity remained distant. The decades after the war brought a series of crises for


34 S.H.M. Byers, Iowa in War Times, 454. Byers over-estimates the number of Iowa troops by 2,000.
farmers, as well as new immigrants and increasing industrialization and urbanization. Postwar decades were usually less dramatic than the Civil War, but their story was no less important.