



The Railsplitter

The Newsletter of the Department of Illinois

Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War



The Railsplitter

Fall 2025.

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COMMANDER'S CORNER

Dear Brothers,

Brothers, for my article in the fall newsletter I thought you might enjoy reading the composite report which I sent to the CnC - including some late additions - covering my second three months as your commander. I am pleased to report that the Department of Illinois is doing an exemplary job when it comes to doing the work of the Order.



Eight Fourth of July parades were presented, and I participated in two of them. Four camps sent representatives to an informative Civil War Show in Wheaton. Five Eagle Scouts completed cemetery work weekend projects that brought out family members and volunteers to help. These projects, along with other cemetery work days, resulted in 38 new headstones placed and 252 cleaned, with many stones raised to their proper positions. Our southernmost camp participated in a rededication ceremony in Missouri. We presented six grade school and high school presentations about the Civil War. At seven living history events we featured recruiting tables to attract new members - netting nine new

brothers so far. A camp picnic and a barbecue also helped attract new members, and I was happy to welcome one of our sister groups to join in fraternity. We presented them with a custom-crafted plaque commemorating their tent's local Civil War hero, which bears his name.

Personally, I attended six camp meetings and two events at the GAR Hall and Military Museum in Aurora. I acted as Master of Ceremonies at two cemetery ceremonies and two choral concerts at a local community college. I also represented the Order at three pioneer cemetery meetings, three commissioner meetings at the GAR Hall in Aurora, and three living history events. With the help of two men, I raised a stone that had been lying face down for over twenty years.

We held our successful Mid-term Encampment on October 25, 2025, at the McLean Old Courthouse Museum. Twenty-five Brothers and three Sisters registered to attend, though a few were unable to attend due to illness and family matters. I wish returning good health to those members and hope to see them and many others at the 143rd Department of Illinois Encampment, which will be held at the GAR Hall and Military Museum on May 2, 2026, with free lunch and the meeting to follow. More details to come.

In Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty,
Michael Zafran, Department of Illinois Commander



CHAPLAIN'S CORNER



Chaplain
Jerry's
column will
return in an
upcoming
Railsplitter.



PATRIOTIC INSTRUCTION



On Nov. 11, the nation will recognize all Veterans, living and dead, on Veterans Day. Many people know the holiday originated as Armistice Day on Nov. 11, 1919. That was because of a letter by President Woodrow Wilson recognizing the one-year anniversary of the signing of the Armistice ending World War I. However, this year, 2025, will only be the 71st official Veterans Day. What many may think has been an official annual event ever since the letter in 1919, wasn't.

On June 4, 1927, President Calvin Coolidge adopted a resolution by Congress issuing a proclamation calling for the observance of Nov. 11 with "appropriate ceremonies." This included displaying the U.S. Flag on all government buildings and inviting the people to observe the day in schools and churches. Not until 1938 did Congress pass a bill that each Nov. 11 "shall be dedicated to the cause of world peace and ...hereafter celebrated and known as Armistice Day." That same year President Franklin Roosevelt signed a bill making the day a legal

holiday in the District of Columbia.

In 1945, World War II, the deadliest conflict in world history so far, was coming to an end. More than 16 million Americans served during the conflict, and World War II U.S. Navy Veteran Raymond Weeks from Birmingham, Alabama, had the idea of a national holiday that would honor all war Veterans, living and dead, to be celebrated on Armistice Day. Weeks led a delegation to General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower, who supported the idea of a National Veterans Day.

Weeks led the first national celebration in 1947 in Alabama. The celebration included General Omar Bradley as speaker at the World Peace Dinner and the Veterans Day Parade featuring flags of the United Nations carried by native sons of member countries or Boy Scouts. Weeks would continue hosting this celebration annually.

On May 26, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill into law establishing Veterans Day as Nov. 11 each year. At that time, there were still Veterans living from every conflict since the Civil War. However, in two years, Albert Henry Woolson, the last known surviving member of the Union Army who served in the American Civil War, passed away on Aug. 2, 1956, at the age of 106. He was also the last surviving Civil War Veteran on either side whose status is undisputed. He served as a drummer boy in the 1st Minnesota Heavy Artillery.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan honored Raymond Weeks at the White House with the Presidential Citizenship Medal as the driving force for the national holiday. Elizabeth Dole, who was director of the office of public liaison at the time, prepared the briefing for President Reagan, and through it, established that Weeks was the "Father of Veterans Day."

At the ceremony, the President described Weeks as a person who, "...devoted his life to serving others, his community, the American Veteran, and his nation." He added, "So let us go forth from here, having learned the lessons of history, confident in the strength of our system, and anxious to pursue every avenue toward peace. And on this Veterans Day, we will remember and be firm in our commitment to peace, and those who died in defense of our freedom will not have died in vain."

After nearly 40 years hosting the celebration as Armistice and then Veterans Day, Raymond Weeks, "Father of Veterans Day," died in 1985.

By Gerald Sonnenberg
Hecker Camp #443 Secretary/Editor
Dept Patriotic Instructor



SUVCW NATIONAL ENCAMPMENT, Houston TX, August 7-10



Appreciation is extended to Br Nick Kaup for submitting this photo of the four Brothers who attended this year's national encampment. From left to right in the picture above are PNC Jerry Kowalski, PDC Nick Kaup, National Commander Kevin Tucker, PDC Jim Lyon, and DJVC Jeff Kaup.



On the left is a photo DC Michael Zafran at the McClean County Court house. On the immediate right is a photo of the DC functioning as MC for a July 27 patriotic concert at the Moraine Valley Community College (MVCC). In the far right photo Br Michael is MC-ing at a July 27 program at the MVCC college.



Dept of Illinois Mid-term Encampment, Bloomington, IL, October 25, 2025

Names left to right, PDC Nick Kaup, DJV Jeff Kaup, PDC Stuart Stefany, DS Chris Hayward, DT Lee Lasseigne, PDC Joe Hutchison, Br Owen Doak, DC Michael Zafran, PDC Gary Gunderson, Br Tim Marcus, Br Andy Partak, Br Larry Werline, Carol Dyer, Br Don Sherman, PDC Bobby Welch, Jennifer Mickelson, Br Bill Johnson, Br Andrew Hare. Appreciation is extended to Br Zafran for submitting the photo and identifying those pictured.

Camp News

“Preserving the history and legacy of the heroes who fought to save the Union during the Civil War”.

Custer Camp #1 Wilmette by Br Nick Kaup

Memorial Day began on Sunday for the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War as it has since 1881. For us here in the Chicago area it started with preparation. Cleaning headstones with four work party sessions. Also for planting flowers around monuments in both Union Ridge Cemetery and Rosehill Cemetery. We devoted multiple hours planning both programs honoring all Americans in uniform who gave their last full measure to secure our lasting freedoms.

Outfits from Scout units, American Legion, VFW and community members participated and supported our efforts. We had a record amount of support from both communities and new SUVCW members who were also in attendance. There are very few patriotic and veteran organizations that generate the attention and passion that our organization does.

Our tradition stems from the very first group of veteran Americans...the Grand Army of the Republic, the forerunner who assisted in the establishment of our American Legion in 1919, grounded in the four pillars, our patriotic principles and values. If our Federal Government had failed in 1861 to 1865, we would have lost our democracy and identity to a divided country...one free and one enslaved. In part then, that is what we, The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War did on the day established by the Grand Army of the Republic...MEMORIAL DAY 2025. Please enjoy the photos below

“... to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers to honor their sacrifice during the Civil War”.

Fraternity
Charity



Loyalty
Patriotic Education



Sheridan Camp #2 Aurora

The photos below are from an October 11, 2025 memorial dedication ceremony for three Union Civil War soldiers from St. John United Church of Christ Palatine, Il. Camps represented include Camp 1863, Camp 2, and Camp 1.



From left to right in the photo above are Bros Nick Kaup, David Marshall, Mike Gregory, Don Sherman, Michael Zafran, Gary Gunderson, Unknown, Steve Westlake, Jim Arnold, Stewart Stefany, and Chris Hayward. Thanks to Br Steven Westlake for helping identify those pictured.



In the photo on the left PDC Map presents DC Zafran with the original Dept of Illinois camp charter at the Mid-term encampment. The picture above is of PDC Westlake and PDC Gunderson presenting the colors for the Elmhurst Chorale Union Concert on August 30, 2025.

Bryner Camp #67 Peoria

Camp 67 has installed a sign at Root Cemetery (AKA: North Hampton Cemetery) to remember the veterans interred there. This cemetery is near Chillicothe on a dead end dirt road. It has been abandoned for decades and was turned over to the State of Illinois years ago. The State had designated it a 'Refuge' meaning it gets no care at all and is virtually unable to be visited currently due to head high weeds and brambles. The 'prairie' used to be burned periodically, but hasn't for several years. See photo in the upper right hand corner of page 7. Submitted by Br Joe Hutchinson, Camp #67.

A FORGOTTEN SOLDIER

by Br Darrell F. Clevidence, Camp #67

From Mt. Carroll, Illinois Pvt. John T. Clevidence enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1862. He served in the 92nd Illinois Mounted Infantry and was armed with the state-of-the-art Spencer repeating rifle. He rode with Wilder's Brigade and was with General Sherman's forces on the March to the Sea. He was wounded in action on February 11, 1865 in Aiken, South Carolina.

Pvt. Clevidence is my great-great-grandfather. In doing family research in the 2010's, I could not find any record of his burial. Knowing that he had migrated to Oacoma, South Dakota in the 1890's, I focused my attention there. Finally, a local historian notified me of an abandoned cemetery on hilly farmland several miles above the Missouri River and about 500 feet west of an unpaved county road. Moeller Cemetery was active from 1890-1903. Only three bodies remain buried at this abandoned site, one of whom is my grandfather.



There is no tombstone for this Civil War veteran. I spent many months in 2014-2016 preparing for the placing of a headstone at this site. I had great help and cooperation from the Veterans Affairs Officer of the area and from the Hickey Funeral Home. The cemetery is on private property and though the owner refused to allow for a headstone, she did allow access to the site.

Fortunately, I was contacted by Karen Kott from Chamberlain, SD, who informed me of a project at the new South Dakota Veterans Memorial Park. She advised me of the possibility of providing a memorial bench at that site. I agreed and provided the service details to be included on the memorial. Here is a photo of the bench:



On Memorial Day weekend, 2018, I was able to arrange a dedication ceremony at that site. Participating were members of the American Legion and VFW posts of Chamberlain, SD. Also participating was another descendent of John T. Clevidence, Nancy (Clevidence) Hillman of Modesto, CA. At the end of the event, taps were played.

The opening prayer was derived by Nancy (Clevidence) Hillman

“Heavenly Father, we stand here today at this beautiful place, thankful and in awe. Lord, Your blessings are new each day and You, Mighty God, bless us much more than we deserve. On this Memorial Day, let us remember and honor those who have given their lives for us, so that we can be here today enjoying our God-given freedoms. We ask that You bless our time together Lord, and that Your Light will shine in us and through us to all.

Every military conflict that our country has ever endured is represented in this beautiful park, created to honor all veterans. We are thankful for our men and women who have served and are currently serving our country. We are so thankful for their unwavering service to our country.

We look to You for guidance Lord, at times of happiness and times of grief, at times of rejoicing and times of mourning. You God are with us through it all. What comfort we receive from Your presence! What hope we receive from our Savior! At this moment in time, let us all reflect on the great God that we serve, the great nation in which we are privileged to live, and the brave South Dakotans and all our veterans who are represented here.

In Your Name we pray. Amen

EULOGY FOR JOHN THOMAS CLEVIDENCE

Delivered at Chamberlain, SD, May 27, 2018 by Darrell F. Clevidence

Several miles northwest of here, in an abandoned unmarked lonely cemetery, lie the remains of a forgotten soldier, Pvt. John Thomas Clevidence. We are gathered here today to honor his memory and to reflect on his service to the United States of America.

We are a great distance from Sharpsburg, MD, where John, a son of Daniel and Elizabeth Clevidence, entered this world in 1833, when Andrew Jackson was President of the United States. The irony of his birth is that the Clevidence home was only a few miles from Antietam Creek, and about 25 miles from a city in Pennsylvania named Gettysburg.

We are a great distance from Mt. Carroll, IL, to where the family migrated during John's teenage years. In those rolling hills of northern Illinois, John met the love of his life, Sarah Ellen Smith, whom he married in 1856. She was 16.

When the call of duty sounded in 1862, John enlisted for a 3-year term in the United States Army, leaving Sarah and two young boys behind. He was assigned to Company C of the 92nd Illinois Regiment. In early 1863 the 92nd was converted to a mounted infantry, armed with Spencer repeating rifles, and assigned to Col. John T. Wilder's famous "Lightning Brigade."

Miles and miles they rode and fought. The men of the 92nd shed blood at Chickamauga and Chattanooga and they fought and died in the Battle of Atlanta and at Jonesboro, GA. They marched under General William Tecumseh Sherman's command to Savannah and onward into the Carolinas.

Fate would not allow Pvt. Clevidence to endure the war unscathed. After burning the city of Barnwell, under the leadership of General Hugh Kilpatrick, on February 11 several hundred troopers of the 92nd Illinois rode into Aiken, SC on a mission to destroy the city and the cotton mills along the Savannah River. It was to be John Clevidence's final battle. Confederate cavalry of several thousand troopers, led by General Joe Wheeler, sprung a deadly trap surrounding the Federals and engaging in bloody hand-to-hand combat. Grandpa John Clevidence was in the middle of it all and suffered a serious gunshot wound to his right hand. He and most troopers were able to escape eastward to Kilpatrick's encampment. But five men from Company C remain buried in unmarked graves in the center of Aiken, where they fell on that fateful February day.

From Sharpsburg, to Aiken, to Oacoma, Br Darrell's personal and touching story reminds us of the varied Civil War stories that all of our ancestors handed down to us, and for which we continue to memorialize. It was easy to relate to the twists and turns that Darrell had to overcome as he traced the whereabouts of Pvt John Clevidence's gravesite. Especially touching was how much support he received for the forgotten story of his gggrandpa during the May 27, 2018 ceremonies at Chamberlain SD. Courtesy Br Chuck Murphy



Unmarked graves of some Union soldiers killed in Battle of Aiken

Aiken, SC is a great distance from Mt. Carroll, IL. John returned home in June, 1865, and rejoined Sarah. Post-war life was not easy for the family. Born to Sarah and John were two additional children who were to live beyond childhood. But, sadly, also buried in a small cemetery north of Mt. Carroll are the remains of nine young children who survived only briefly. The last to die was Roy, living only a few days, the twin brother of Robert who survived and reached adulthood in Oacoma, SD. Sarah passed away in January, 1878, due to complications of the birth of the twins. She was 38.

In 1896 John moved to Oacoma to share his remaining years with his sister and brother-in-law, Lewis and Mary Church, and with his youngest son Robert. In 1901 he “crossed over the river.” He was buried in Moeller Cemetery.

Private John Thomas Clevidence, my great-great grandfather, is no longer a forgotten soldier. May he rest in peace.

Hecker Camp #443, Belleville

By Gerald Sonnenberg, Camp #443 Secretary/Editor

A legacy renewed: Bi-state Hecker projects bring U.S., international guests together

A SIX-YEAR, BI-STATE PROJECT TO CELEBRATE THE LIFE OF COL. FRIEDRICH K. HECKER CONCLUDED WITH TWO EVENTS. THE FIRST EVENT WAS A CEREMONY ON SEPT. 8 IN THE SUMMERFIELD, ILLINOIS CEMETERY WHERE HE IS BURIED. HECKER LIVED AND FARMED NEARBY THE SMALL TOWN. THE SECOND EVENT WAS THE REDEDICATION OF THE RESTORED HECKER OBELISK IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI'S BENTON PARK.

The ceremonies included a three-volley salute at Summerfield and presentation of colors at both events involving members of the Col. Hecker Camp in Illinois and U.S. Grant Camp #68 in Missouri, along with other SUVCW members, as well as others who graciously volunteered.

These celebrations were timed to coincide with the tour of a delegation of 30 people from Hecker's birth town in Angelbachtal, Germany, including its current Mayor Frank Werner. Two authors of books on Hecker – Sabine Freitag and Steven N. Fuller – were also part of the delegation. The group arrived Sept. 7. During their weeklong visit, the group participated in the events on Sept. 8 and 9 to include sites in St. Louis and in Illinois like the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum in Springfield. They then headed for Cincinnati, Ohio Sept. 10 where another statue honoring Col. Hecker is located in Washington Park.

Approximately 80 people attended each ceremony in St. Louis and Summerfield. This includes former Missouri Congressman Russ Carnahan who attended the Benton Park event. The Benton Park event included a Proclamation from the City of St. Louis Mayor Kara Spencer in recognition of Col. Hecker, and one of Hecker's great-great-great-granddaughters, Caroline Hecker, who is a reporter with local television station KMOV, participated in the unveiling of the restored obelisk along with her cousin Dr. Caroline Hecker. Hecker's TV station covered the event. A link to the report is here <https://www.firstalert4.com/2025/09/09/historic-monument-benton-park-restored-german-delegation-travels-st-louis-rededication-ceremony/>.

Col. Hecker is considered by many to be one of the most influential 19th Century German-Americans. Before he was a colonel, he was a leader in his homeland of Baden, Germany during the 1848 Revolution. After emigrating to the United States, he first served in the Union Army as an enlisted man. He was quickly appointed an officer, leading two regiments to help defend and reunite his adopted country during the American Civil War.

"We were deeply moved by the ceremony at the cemetery, especially when your Team fired the rifle salute volleys. It gave us 'Gänsehaut' - goosebumps." --Mayor Frank Werner

The Projects

The projects were completed under the leadership and support of the German-American Heritage Society of St. Louis, a group of organizations and individuals began the project in 2019 to include many of Col. Hecker's descendants who live in and around St. Louis and elsewhere.

With the cooperation of the Summerfield Cemetery Association, Hecker Camp #443 members installed the directional sign to his grave, as well as a graphic sign with images of Hecker and an overview of his life in 2024. A duplicate informational sign was installed at Benton Park.

The Hecker Obelisk rededication in St. Louis' Benton Park included a substantial number of individuals who worked to help bring the dilapidated monument back to life, as well as the delegation from Germany and Hecker descendants.

The monument's restoration was accomplished with the cooperation of the City of St. Louis Parks Department and the City of St. Louis Board of Public Service.

A major goal of the monument's restoration was to recreate original bronze elements which were stolen many years ago when the obelisk was vandalized. The north side of the monument featured a rondel with a bronze bas-relief portrait of Hecker, while the south side featured a bronze oakleaf wreath. The present-day recreations by Vlad Zhitomirsky were cast in resin with a bronze patina.

According to newspaper accounts of the time, Hecker was so renowned in the St. Louis area that the original 1882 dedication of this obelisk attracted some 15,000 people. That ceremony was preceded by a parade of so many groups that the procession itself stretched for one-half mile. People also lined the streets and watched from buildings along the parade route.

At the original dedication, Hecker's granddaughter unveiled the obelisk. This time, two of Hecker's great-great-great-granddaughters participated in the rededication.

Who was Friedrich Hecker?

Friedrich Karl Franz Hecker was born Sept. 28, 1811, in Baden, Germany. There, he became a lawyer, politician and revolutionary. He revered the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights and was one of the most popular speakers and protagonists of the 1848 Revolution where he worked to make Germany a Republic. When his and other's efforts failed, he emigrated, along with many other "Forty-Eighters," to the U.S. where he bought a farm and settled in Summerfield, Illinois about 18 miles east of Belleville.

Like most Forty-Eighters, his attention became increasingly focused on domestic political issues in the United States. He remained active intellectually and politically, gave lectures, supported the Turnverein (gymnastics clubs for physical fitness), played a role in the founding of the Republican Party and in the election of Abraham Lincoln and was strongly committed to the cause of abolition.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, he volunteered for the Union Army and first served as a private under General Franz Sigel, another Forty-Eighter from Baden. Hecker was subsequently appointed colonel and commanded the 24th Illinois Infantry regiment. He was then commissioned to recruit the 82nd Illinois Infantry Regiment, using his own funds in part for the purpose. He was severely wounded leading the 82nd at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863. He missed the Battle of Gettysburg in July because of his wounds, but the 82nd went on to distinguish itself there. He later returned to command in the fall after his recovery until being granted an honorable release in March 1864.

After the war, Hecker mostly lived on his Illinois farm but became more involved in the German-language press and in lecture tours. During his lifetime he was recognized as an influential national figure, and his ties to St. Louis and Missouri included his writings for the *Westliche Post*, a premier German-American newspaper published in St. Louis.

On March 24, 1881, at the age of 69, he passed away at his farm. For his contributions, Hecker will be inducted into the virtual German American Hall of Fame <http://gamhof.org> in November.



In the photo above are members of the German delegation from Angelbachtal, Germany pose in front of the Hecker Obelisk. Their Mayor Frank Werner is center and holding the St. Louis City Proclamation. (Photo courtesy of Adam Heck.)



In the photo on the left a three-volley salute and presentation of the colors is conducted at the Summerfield, Illinois cemetery event by a combined group of members of the Col. Hecker Camp in Illinois and U.S. Grant Camp #68 of Missouri, along with other SUVCW members who graciously volunteered. The flag bearers are Bob Eversgerd (U.S. flag) and Joe Langenhorst. (Photo by Sheila Wildermuth)



Posing in front of the restored monument after the ceremony is the color guard. (Left to right, standing) Brother Gerald Sonnenberg, Hecker Camp; Past Department Commander (PDC) for Missouri Glenn Alsop, PDC Walt Busch, PDC Bob Arnsler, PDC Sumner Hunnewell, PDC Bob Aubuchon, Brother Greg Wolk, PDC Randy Baehr, Brother Richard Piper, Hecker Camp. Kneeling is Hecker Camp Past Camp Commander Greg Zelinske. (Photo courtesy of Adam

The photo on the left is of the restored Hecker obelisk.



SPECIAL NOTICE

Br Chuck Murphy is retiring from the Railsplitter. If you are interested in being considered to take on the job of compiling, editing and producing the Department's quarterly newsletter, please contact DSVIC Wayne Wehrheim by calling 309.373.7562, or emailing him at stingray53766@gmail.com.

Happy Thanksgiving