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Who Fought for the North in the Civil War? Concord, Massachusetts, Enlistments

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By the end of the Civil War, more than two million northerners had served in the Union army. In many respects that force mirrored the society from which it was drawn. It could hardly be otherwise, considering the size of the army, the use of conscription, widespread popular support for the cause, and the length of the war. It has long been asserted that the army's occupational distribution, geographical representation, and ethnicity were similar to that of the northern population. In only one respect was the Union army clearly not representative. It was disproportionately young, with three-quarters of the soldiers under age thirty and one-quarter under twenty. Since armies traditionally have attracted the young, the age structure of the Union army has drawn little attention, and this military force has been deemed representative of the North. That conclusion, however, is undermined when occupational data are controlled for age or when enlistments are examined closely in terms of ethnicity or property holding. In other words, military participation measured by ethnicity, property holding, age, and occupation as interrelated variables reveals striking variations in rates of participation according to different socioeconomic traits.¹

Military service records for the Civil War record name, age, occupation, and locale. While the information is straightforward, it suffers from certain deficiencies. First, it was self-reported, and bounty jumpers, deserters, and those seeking to avoid

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¹ Benjamin Apthorp Gould, *Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers* (New York, 1869), [numbers] 13, 14, 212, [ages] 35, 38, 60, 64; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982), [numbers] 181, [occupations] 359. For socioeconomic profiles of small units, see Earl J. Hess, "The 12th Missouri Infantry: A Socio-Military Profile of a Union Regiment," *Missouri Historical Review*, 76 (Oct. 1981), 53-77; and David F. Riggs, "Sailors of the U.S.S. *Cairo*: Anatomy of a Gunboat Crew," *Civil War History*, 28 (Sept. 1982), 266-73. Ages, occupations, and biographies of the 154th New York Regiment are in Mark H. Dunkelman and Michael J. Winey, *The Hardtack Regiment* (Rutherford, N.J., 1981). The starting point for this sort of research is C. E. Dombusch, comp., *Military Bibliography of the Civil War* (3 vols., New York, 1961-1972). For a fine review essay, see Marvin R. Cain, "A 'Face of Battle' Needed: An Assessment of Motives and Men in Civil War Historiography," *Civil War History*, 28 (March 1982), 5-27.

Table 1
Concord, Massachusetts, Male Population by Age and Occupation for Total Male Population, Irish,
and with Irish Excluded, with Percentage Enlisted

	16-20			21-29			30-39			40-49			16-49 Total					
	Total Male Population		Irish Excluded	Total Male Population		Irish Excluded	Total Male Population		Irish Excluded	Total Male Population		Irish Excluded	Total Male Population		Irish Excluded			
	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E		
chants,	1	0	1	0	5	0	5	0	8	0	8	0	8	12	22	5	22	5
professionals	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
ill Shop-	5	40	5	40	23	35	23	35	10	10	9	11	10	0	48	23	1	0
keepers,	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
clerks	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
led	12	33	11	36	26	31	4	25	22	32	42	26	5	40	37	24	20	15
Workers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Unskilled,	11	73	3	33	8	88	27	19	18	17	9	22	28	4	21	5	17	6
Inskilled	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
gricultural	29	24	6	17	23	26	70	21	20	10	50	26	53	13	9	11	44	14
Occupation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
tion	11	55	2	50	9	56	18	6	4	0	14	7	13	0	3	0	10	0
ents	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
dentists	19	21	3	0	16	25	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	88	35	15	20	73	38	169	22	46	12	123	25	154	13	40	8	114	15
	106	8	28	11	78	6	517	19	129	12	388	21						

JRCES: Concord, Mass., *The Soldiers and Sailors of Concord* (Concord, Mass., 1908); Mass., Adjutant-General's Office, *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War* (8 vols., Concord, Mass., 1931); Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Massachusetts.

detection by relatives often invented names. Second, to avoid the required parental consent, many a youth under eighteen simply lied about his age. Third, the enlistee's locale could be his birthplace, residence, or place of enlistment. Some of the problems with the military records can be overcome by linking those records to information for the same individuals from the manuscript census for 1860. For each male aged sixteen or older, the census listed name, age, birthplace, occupation, and the value of property owned.²

I chose Concord, Massachusetts, for a case study because that town had published a list of its residents who had served in the Civil War. That list, compiled from service records as well as from other sources, gave only names, but it was possible to find additional data in Massachusetts's published military records and in the manuscript census. Of the men on the Concord list, 106 clearly were from Concord but missing from the census; another 97 were both on the military list and in the manuscript census. A comparison of the military records for the two groups in terms of age and occupation showed that they were reasonably similar, and all further analysis was made with the group for which there were census data. Not only did the census more accurately report age and birthplace and include information on property, but it also allows an examination of those who did not serve. The comparison of those who served and those who did not made it possible to calculate enlistment rates for men with different socioeconomic characteristics.³

There were significant differences in enlistment rates when age and occupation were considered together. Careful examination of the data also showed that those born in Ireland or of Irish parentage had patterns of enlistment different from those of the rest of the Concord population. (See table 1.) Irish enlistment may have been affected by poverty, lukewarm support for the war, lack of family support networks, or weak community ties. It should be noted that immigrants who had not taken the first formal steps toward citizenship were exempt from the draft. Nevertheless, throughout the North between one-fifth and one-quarter of the soldiers were immigrants. Although Irish enlistments, as well as those for other immigrants, especially Germans, need to be studied in detail, such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴

² Among enlistees from Concord were "John Nones," "Julius Keiser" (a German), and "A. B. Clinton Douglas." Mass., Adjutant-General's Office, *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War* (8 vols., Norwood, Mass., 1931). For other examples see *Regimental Descriptive Rosters* (Navy and Old Army Branch, National Archives). These records are by regiment. Although regiments were organized roughly by state, many soldiers served in units other than those from their home states. Unless one knows the regiment in which a man served, it is difficult to locate him in the records. Thus linking a list of names from a given locale to these records is burdensome. Although several states have published lists of soldiers from the manuscript regimental rosters, only Massachusetts included age, occupation, and place of enrollment. In many cases those items are necessary to make positive identification. On the census, see Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Massachusetts.

³ Concord, Mass., *The Soldiers and Sailors of Concord* (Concord, Mass., 1908); Mass., Adjutant-General's Office, *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War*; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Massachusetts. Occupational classification is based on Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 343-48.

⁴ The Irish were not numerous enough in Concord, Massachusetts, to be studied in detail. For a graphic descrip-

Table 2
 Concord, Massachusetts, Male Population by Age and Occupation (Irish Excluded) for Those with Property and Those without Property, with Percentage Enlisted

	16-20		21-29		30-39		40-49		16-49 Total												
	<i>With</i>	<i>Without</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>Without</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>Without</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>Without</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>Without</i>											
	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>	<i>Property</i>											
	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E	N	%E									
Merchants, Professionals	—	—	1	0	2	0	3	0	8	0	—	—	6	0	2	50	16	0	6	17	
Small Shopkeepers, Clerks	—	—	5	40	6	33	17	35	7	0	2	50	9	0	1	0	22	9	25	36	
Skilled Workers	—	—	11	36	3	33	19	32	20	25	17	24	14	14	4	0	37	22	51	27	
Semiskilled, Unskilled	—	—	8	88	—	—	9	22	—	—	6	17	—	—	4	0	—	—	—	27	37
Agricultural	1	0	22	27	11	9	39	31	25	12	19	16	25	8	10	0	62	10	90	23	
No Occupation	—	—	9	33	3	0	11	9	1	0	9	0	2	0	1	0	6	0	30	13	
Students	1	0	15	40	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	0	15	40	
<i>Total</i>	2	0	71	39	25	16	98	28	61	13	53	17	56	7	22	5	142	11	244	27	

SOURCES: Concord, Mass., *The Soldiers and Sailors of Concord* (Concord, Mass., 1908); Mass., Adjutant-General's Office, *Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War* (8 vols., Norwood, Mass., 1931); Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Massachusetts.

NOTE: The prime military group is indicated by boldface type.

With the Irish excluded, differences in enlistment between those who held property and those who did not can be considered. (See table 2.) As the data suggest, property was an important variable. Of 244 men without property, 65 served; of 142 with property, only 16 did. Furthermore, a propertyless youth or young man whose father owned property was about as likely to enlist as the son of a propertyless man. Actual possession of wealth, rather than some expectation of inheritance, was what counted. Enlistment bounties and the purchase of substitutes may have been considerations. Since the enlistees and the propertyless were both young, it is useful to control for age. Of the 169 men under thirty without property, 55 served; of the 27 with property, only 4 did. Above age thirty, property was not related to service, and occupation played a more important role. Controlling for age and occupation allows a prime military group to be identified. Enlistees were disproportionately propertyless youths and young men from all occupations except the mercantile and professional elite; propertied small shopkeepers, clerks, and skilled workers in their twenties; and skilled workers in their thirties. (See table 2.) Of 200 men in this prime military group, 33 percent enlisted; of 186 other men, only 8 percent did. The prime group comprised 52 percent of the males in the census and 81 percent of the enlistees.⁵

What explains the prime group's high enlistment rate? No problem is posed by the propertyless unskilled or unemployed youths and young men, since throughout history they have constituted the bulk of the world's armies. Such workers are the most mobile segment of the population, susceptible to bounties, and the least likely to have steady work. What is intriguing is the heavy enlistment of clerks, farm laborers, and skilled workers. How can their enlistments be explained? The answer, I would suggest, lies in a combination of economic frustration and social malaise. Some ideas worthy of further investigation can be sketched here. The economic fact is that those groups were precisely the ones most adversely affected by the rise of a market economy in late antebellum America. By the 1850s entrepreneurial activity had spread throughout most of the country, subsistence farming had given way to commercial agriculture, and craftsmanship had been replaced by factory production. Although the new economic arrangements benefited many merchants, profes-

tion of Irish soldiers, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, 1955), 12-14. The standard account is Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Rouge, 1951), esp. 441-44.

⁵ Concord appears to be typical of other rural northern locales. Using a complicated probability scheme that did not employ the linkage of actual names, I obtained similar results using the federal manuscript census and regimental rosters for Peoria County, Illinois (Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Illinois, Peoria County; 7th Illinois Regiment and 8th Illinois Regiment, Regimental Descriptive Rosters [Navy and Old Army Branch, National Archives]); for rural Middlesex County, Massachusetts (Eighth Census . . . Massachusetts, Middlesex County; 12th Massachusetts Regiment, Regimental Descriptive Rosters); for Cayuga County, New York (Eighth Census . . . New York, Cayuga County; 54th New York Regiment, Regimental Descriptive Rosters); and for Columbia County, New York (Eighth Census . . . New York, Columbia County; 75th New York Regiment, Regimental Descriptive Rosters). A definitive study would require an extensive use of the manuscript regimental rosters. Such a study would have a large enough data base to examine geographical variations, including East versus West, urban versus rural, and small town versus city, as well as detailed ethnic variations.

sionals, southern planters, northern farm owners, and master mechanics, not everyone had prospered.⁶

Clerks who worked for wealthy merchants or manufacturers were caught up in the spirit of commercial optimism, but they usually lacked the cash or credit necessary to succeed on their own. What sorts of things might a clerk do to overcome frustrated commercial ambition? Agricultural laborers found it difficult to buy farms, which were either remote or expensive. By 1860 in Concord, for example, 18 of 42 farmers in their forties did not own land; these men no longer had much prospect for having their own farms. Although most of the landless farmers were Irish immigrants, their presence must have given young farm laborers much anxiety. Skilled workers also found it difficult to go into business for themselves, and in many trades real wages had been falling for two generations. Apprentices discovered that they were not taught trades but shamefully exploited by being turned into poorly paid machine tenders. Such conditions left both apprentices and journeymen with a sense of worthlessness, as the market relentlessly destroyed the world of artisan tradition. How do such workers respond when their traditions are destroyed?⁷

I am trying to suggest (although I cannot prove) that blocked aspirations or economic decline produced a kind of social malaise, especially among clerks, farm laborers, and skilled workers. During the 1850s that malaise had first expressed itself through antiliquor campaigns and nativist hysteria. When the spotlight in search of a scapegoat had shifted from Demon Rum to Irish Catholics and then to southern slaveholders, the Republican party had been born. The new party's use of the Slave Power symbol provided a way both to "explain" economic failure and to overcome malaise through the organization of a new political movement. Wide Awakes marching in the streets gave visible proof of a countervailing power designed to thwart evil. The new attitude was expressed in one apprentice's poem:

⁶ The classic study of the market is George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York, 1951).

⁷ On the change in consciousness, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1978). Clerks await investigation, although some shrewd insights are in Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978), esp. 95-115. For an Ohio-born clerk whose economic failure led him to enlist in Alabama, see Edmund DeWitt Patterson, *Yankee Rebel: The Civil War Journal of Edmund DeWitt Patterson*, ed. John G. Barrett (Chapel Hill, 1966), vi-vii. Agriculture is considered in Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York, 1984); and Randolph Anthony Roth, "Whence Came This Strange Fire? Religious and Reform Movements in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1843" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1981). Concord data are from Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manuscript Population schedule, Massachusetts. For an example of a rural enlistee, see Rice C. Bull, *Soldiering: The Civil War Diary of Rice C. Bull, 133rd New York Volunteer Infantry*, ed. K. Jack Bauer (San Rafael, 1977), viii, 1. On skilled workers, see, for example, Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York, 1985); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Coboes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, 1978); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984). For a journeyman who enlisted, see Julian Wisner Hinkley, *A Narrative of Service with the Third Wisconsin Infantry* (Madison, 1912), ix. On apprentices, see W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986), 131-75. For apprentices who enlisted, see Isaac Jackson, "Some of the Boys . . .": *The Civil War Letters of Isaac Jackson, 1862-1865*, ed. Joseph O. Jackson (Carbondale, 1960), vii; and Alfred Bellard, *Gone for a Soldier: The Civil War Memoirs of Private Alfred Bellard: From the Alec Thomas Archives*, ed. David Herbert Donald (Boston, 1975), vii, 3.

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Despite these gloomy shadowings of fate
 And the poor crew who hold the helm of state,
 The *working classes* through this wide spread land
 Could, if they wished, with their resistless hand,
 Rescue our banner from its foul disgrace,
 And guide our nation safely on its race.

In 1861, when the Civil War broke out and so many youthful northerners, much to the surprise of southern planters, rushed to enlist, patriotic sentiment was no doubt paramount. But northern patriotism was based, in part, on a dark belief that southern domination of the federal government had hindered northern and western development. It is not unreasonable that clerks, farm laborers, and skilled workers enlisted in large numbers because they saw the solution to their problems in the preservation of the Union under new, vigorous northern leadership—their own.⁸

As the Concord enlistment data suggest, rates of enlistment varied dramatically along socioeconomic lines. What is most interesting is that for more than a century the "fact" of widespread participation has been accepted so uncritically. Historians would do well to reexamine not only the war but also the antebellum society whence it came and to examine more critically the role of the market in the antebellum economy, its interaction with various aspects of preindustrial culture, and the destructive aspect of that interaction. To the extent that Americans of the 1850s lived in a country that was stripped of traditional values, disorganized, chaotic, bewildering, and frustrating, then those cultural aspects need to be taken into account to explain both the growing hysteria of the 1850s and the resultant political crisis at the end of the decade that led directly to the war. One comes away from the enlistment data with the impression that there is much to learn about cultural milieus, about the way people live within them, about the dynamics of creation and destruction, and about the consequences for the stability of society.

⁸ On temperance, see Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, 1979). Nativism needs study, but see Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980), 61-66, 130-31, 147-59. On Republicans, see Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Stephen E. Maizlish, *The Triumph of Sectionalism: The Transformation of Ohio Politics, 1844-1856* (Kent, Ohio, 1983); and William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1986). See also Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1971). Herbert Gleason's poem is in Samuel S. Spear, *An Address Delivered before the Mechanic Apprentices' Library Association* (Boston, 1855), 27.