

Review of “The Confederate Soldiers of Rockbridge County,” by Robert J. Driver, Jr.

Retired Marine Lt. Colonel Robert "Bob" Driver, Rockbridge Historical Society member of more than three decades and former member of its Board, has been passionate about history for most of his eighty plus years. Since 1979, he and his wife Edna have resided in Brownsburg, an historic village outside Lexington--an appropriate place for Driver to write his history books. In his latest work, “The Confederate Soldiers of Rockbridge County, Virginia,” Driver has assembled a magnificent roster of some 4,600 men, every Civil War soldier (not strictly only Confederates) he could identify as having served in connection to Rockbridge County. With the valuable assistance and collections shared by RHS Trustee Seth McCormick-Goodhart, Driver has also provided hundreds of accompanying photographs from both private and public collections.

The result is a rich resource not only for students of military history, who can mine the thousands of synopsised service records for information, but also for social historians, who, for instance, might be interested in the average age of death for Rockbridge veterans or the post-war occupations these veterans engaged in.

But as an important resource for those with Rockbridge County genealogical interests, this compilation provides even more. The men are alphabetically listed, and familial relationships between those of the same surname are often noted, offering researchers additional leads. An added benefit is that in these lists researchers seeking information about Rockbridge Civil War veterans will find both vital data and tantalizing personal details: Pvt. George Hostetter could crow "perfectly" like a cock, and often did so during the heat of battle with interesting results; his manner of death is shocking and ironic. And the curious will be prompted to seek further information elsewhere about such soldiers as 1st Lt. James E. A. Gibbs, who invented the revolutionary Wilcox & Gibbs sewing machine (memorably, Gibbs named the Rockbridge town of Raphine after the Greek word meaning "to sew"; for more, see Paul Wilson's book, also reviewed in this issue). And what about Pvt. John M. Henkle and his wife (ancestry.com lists her as Margaret Shafer), who died in Richmond the same day and hour in 1930? Henkle died in the Old Soldier's home. Where did Margaret die? Surely there's a story there.

Perhaps in time, historians to come will assemble "rosters" of as many as can be identified of the mid-nineteenth century Rockbridge women married to veterans, as well as free and enslaved blacks who worked for veterans either before or after the Civil War. This would make a more complete history of the men and their times. Admittedly, this research would be extremely difficult. Even with the great research advantage provided by the men's service records, Driver's roster of Rockbridge Civil War soldiers required more than twenty years of research and writing. Asked why he took on the challenge, Bob Driver refers to his own military training: No one, Marines are taught, is to be left behind. And he explains that he also meant to create a memorial. If it is true that remembrance is the best monument, then he has indeed done just that.