

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

### **Wells Goodwin and the Memory of War**

I have long been haunted by Wells Goodwin. I confess I do not know much about Mr. Goodwin of Newbury except that the Vermont general assembly honored him on the occasion of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on November 9, 1894. According to the resolution (No. 350, Laws of Vermont, 1894), Mr. Goodwin was the last surviving veteran of the War of 1812 living in Vermont. I stumbled upon the resolution several years ago when looking for something else. I made a note of it since I found it to be poignant.

According to the resolution Mr. Goodwin had served until wounded at the Battle of Niagara (also known as the Battle of Lundy's Lane) in Ontario on July 25, 1814. It was one of the bloodiest battles fought on Canadian soil, with both sides suffering about 900 casualties. Wells Goodwin was one of the 572 wounded among the U.S. troops serving under Generals Winfield Scott and Jacob Brown.

Half a century later, during the Civil War, the aged General Scott still remembered the valor of the Vermonters at Lundy's Lane and reportedly said, "I want your Vermont regiments, all of them. I have not forgotten the Vermont men on the Niagara frontier."

It is the Civil War that stirs my empathy for Wells Goodwin. The last veteran of the War of 1812 living in Vermont had no one left to share living memories of that service. By 1894 that war was cast in the shadow of Vermont's great Civil War sacrifices and in Newbury, and across the state, veterans of that conflict received our attention and honor. In one battle, the Wilderness (May 5-6, 1864), Vermont troops alone suffered more casualties than the entire U.S. force at Lundy's Lane. Who wanted to listen to Mr. Goodwin's recollections of his long ago war when the horrors of the Wilderness, the Seven Days, or Gettysburg were so fresh?

Of course, time constantly shuffles the deck and Gilbert C. Lucier of Jay eventually assumed Wells Goodwin's role. When Mr. Lucier died on September 22, 1944, he was the last Civil War soldier residing in Vermont, surrounded by veterans of World War I and in the midst of a global conflict against which even the Civil War paled in terms of human tragedy. When Harriet H. Holmes of Northfield, a Civil War nurse, died on August 5, 1945, Vermont's last direct link to that conflict was gone. By then Vermont's WWII veterans held our attention and respect.

And now the veterans of World War II are fading from the scene. There are reportedly less than 4 million WWII veterans left nationally (figure from 2004) and they are passing at a rate of a 1,000 a day. A glance at the obituary pages confirms that terrible attrition. There are fewer than 6,000 WWII veterans currently living in Vermont.

Sadly, each generation produces new veterans of military conflict; there are currently, according to the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, 54,531 veterans living in the state. The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will add to that total even as time does its relentless subtractions from earlier veterans.

In many cases the passing of those generations of veterans appears to go unremarked. In the quick research I did for this column I could not readily find reference to the last Mexican War or Spanish-American War veterans living in Vermont. We are even uncertain about who was the last World War I veteran living in Vermont. It is believed that honor went to the late Rollin Jack Grace, who in 2002 became the first recipient of Vermont's Veteran Medal.

This Veterans Day we should give pause and reflect on all those Vermonters who have served in our country's wars, whether in time shrouded conflicts or during the current war.

## Resources for Veterans

The Vermont Office of Veterans Affairs has discharge records for most Vermont veterans. This is a particularly useful resource since the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center destroyed nearly 80% of the Army and Air Force discharge records held by the federal government.

The Veterans Affairs website is at: <http://www.va.state.vt.us/>.



The Veterans Affairs' claim assistance program helps all Vermont veterans access information on federal health care and monetary compensation programs. It also provides a first in the nation "Thank You" booklet listing all available services for veterans. For a copy of the booklet call (888) 666-9894 or (802) 828-3379.

The State Archives holds various records related to Vermont's military activities. Go to the Archives record series database and you can search by various terms (war, pensions, etc). The site is at: <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>. The Archives is currently improving access to Vermont's adjutant general and other military records and will add a new finding aid to the record series database once completed. In the meantime, the current finding aid can be accessed by going to the Buildings and General Services website at:

[http://www.bgs.state.vt.us/gsc/pubrec/referen/finding\\_aid.htm](http://www.bgs.state.vt.us/gsc/pubrec/referen/finding_aid.htm).