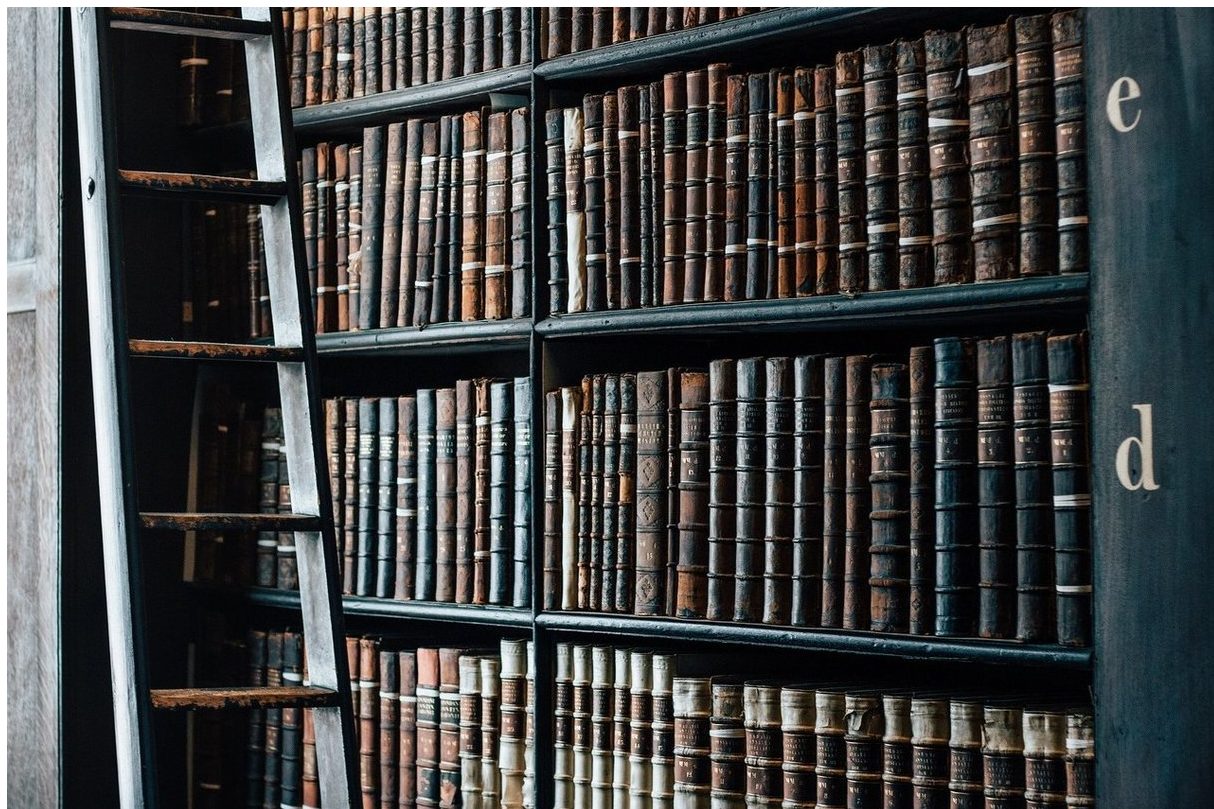




A Soldier's Story: Truth or Fiction?

By S. Waite Rawls III, April 27, 2020

blueandgrayeducation.org



History books | Pixabay

This is the story about an artifact that is in the collection of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society, more commonly known as the Museum of the Confederacy and now the American Civil War Museum in Richmond.

I have learned over the years that Civil War buffs come in many stripes. Some love tromping around battlefields; others get their kicks from collecting artifacts; a few would rather spend their weekends reenacting and working to ensure that their personal appearance is more authentic than anyone else in their group.

Me? In my heart, I'm a book guy. My personal collection numbers well over a thousand books, and I've actually read almost all of them. Well, over half of them are first-edition tomes written in the 19th century—many by the participants themselves in blue and gray. Many are memoirs, but there are also edited diaries and letters. I believed that what was written in all of them (or most of them) to be good history, as they were the records of the men and women who lived the experiences, not just studied the experiences of others.

As my reading experience grew, and especially after spending 16 years sharing space with the museum's great historian, John Coski, however, I began to realize that all those written words needed to be approached differently. Letters and diaries are closer to real history, because they were written by people who did not know what was going to happen tomorrow, or next month, or next year. And they certainly did not know how the whole "recent unpleasantness" would turn out. Memoirs, on the other hand, contain a whole lot of Monday morning quarterbacking.

The memoirs of leaders—politicians and generals—are usually packed with what we might call "spin." Those writers often had a wide view of events as they happened, but their memoirs are too often history as the writer wished it had been. (See, for example, Bill Clinton's memoir. Oops, wrong era. See, for example, Joe Johnston or John Gordon.) The generals often take credit for all the victories and blame somebody else for defeats, and the politicians rationalize away the mistakes they previously made or speeches they formerly gave. On the other extreme, enlisted men had a very narrow field of view. In battle, the noise and confusion obscured their ability to see much. On the march, they mostly saw the backside of the guy in front of them more than anything else, and didn't know where they were going until they got there. But the enlisted men's memoirs are filled with great anecdotes which I love. (See, for example, Carlton McCarthy or David Holt.) The best memoirs, to me, are those written by educated staff officers, who saw and heard a lot but whose personal responsibility was more limited. (See, of course, Porter Alexander or McHenry Howard.)

But, what to believe? And this piece is supposed to be about an artifact!

One of the best memoirs of all is John O. Casler's *Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade*, which was published in 1893. Casler had served in the 33rd Virginia, part of the Stonewall Brigade, and his personality as a soldier really comes out in his book. He was irreverent, humorous, and full of adventure. He claims to have been a solid fighter, but his respect for discipline and those who tried to impose it was—shall we say, "somewhat limited." So the question is, do we believe all of the things that he said?

Finally, let's get to the artifact. In 1894, Casler donated something to the museum. It is a very nice blue leather snuff box.



The snuff box | Courtesy of author

When he donated it, he told the ladies of the museum (and they recorded it) that he was often appalled at the behavior of soldiers after a battle. Before they began the laborious duty of burying the fallen, many soldiers would steal their shoes or clothing. And some would actually go through the pockets to steal personal items. Casler related that he never succumbed to such behavior—except for once. He took this snuff box from a dead Yankee after the battle of Chancellorsville, which he duly recorded on its back.



Bottom of the snuff box | Courtesy of author

But he justified his behavior by telling the ladies that he only took it because, written in gold letters on the top, were the words "Help Yourself." So, again, the question is, do we believe him? When the snuff box was on display several years ago, I was with Gary Gallagher. As we looked at the snuff box, I told him the story of its provenance and put the question to him. Gary laughed and replied, "Absolutely not!"

I think I believe Gallagher more than Casler.



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.