
Chapter 5

Mystery Soldier

Sgt. Crabtree

There is a photo of an unknown soldier that seems to be related to the Crabtree family. The first I knew of the mystery sergeant was an email of the photo from Sarah Crabtree Gill's descendant, Dan Brady. It was labeled "Crabtree Brother."

Months later, the ambrotype of Sergeant Unknown and other items which had been in the possession of Johnie Crabtree (grandson of Rachel Crabtree, Sarah's sister), were sent to Cal Bivens.

Possibilities & Opinions

- The mystery soldier would seem to be related to Sarah Crabtree, her sister Rachel Crabtree, or possibly Rachel's husband Arnold Crabtree.
- Sarah and Rachel had three brothers, John, William, and Jonathan Crabtree. (See Chapter 4 for the little information that there is on the brothers.)
- Richard Arnold (Elijah's brother and Arnold's father) had four sons, but only James Crabtree seems to be a possible candidate. James was in the Mexican War and said he raised or helped to raise a regiment in New Orleans. He was a private in the Civil War. James is the only one I've been able to document as being in the Civil War for sure. (See Chapter 2.)
- I have heard two opinions from cousins as to who this soldier is. One is that it is William (Billy), Sarah and Rachel's brother, and Elijah Crabtree's son. The other opinion is that it is James, the son of Richard Arnold and Mary Crabtree, and a brother to Arnold, Rachel Crabtree's husband.

Email Information from Cal Bivens

I have included some of the information Cal Bivens sent me during our email discussions as to who this soldier might be.

In the Soldiers and Sailors System (4–6 million records now)...there is no Sgt. William Crabtree.



Unknown soldier labeled "Crabtree Brother." Courtesy of Dan Brady, a descendant of Sarah Crabtree Gill.

There is no Joseph, William, or Jonathan who fits.

The color of the chevrons on his sleeve indicates his specialty (MOS these days). White or blue for infantry, yellow for cavalry, and red for artillery. Looking at my original ambrotype, the chevrons are of a quality of gray in the photo that could be red. The uniform is an artillery uniform I am sure. There is a John Crabtree in the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery who was a sergeant. If our John remained in Maine when the rest came to Illinois, this could be him. (John F. Crabtree, 1 Maine Heavy Art'y, Union



This is an ambrotype, set in its original leather bound wooden case. The image is right on the glass and set against a black background. Generally in ambrotypes, hand tinting shows that the subject was doing well. There is a hint of color still in the cheeks of this man. Scan of ambrotype and comment: Cal Bivens.

and a sergt. Company D)—*Civil War Soldiers and Sailors*

February 25, 2005

I believe that James (son of Richard Arnold Crabtree and brother of Arnold Crabtree) may be the best candidate. I have seen nothing that says he attained that rank in the Civil War, but he may have donned his old uniform in anticipation of resuming his former rank, as the army needed not only experienced officers but also experienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs).

James is the only one of the Crabtree or allied families that I can find who wore sergeant stripes.

March 8, 2005

During the Civil War, uniforms were not standard. The regular army had uniforms much like the one in the photo, which they also had at the time of the Mexican War. Volunteer regiments during the Civil War wore a variety of uniforms. Some were modeled on the regular army, many were simply what the state militia had been wearing. Then there were the different Zouave units, that were

modeled on French uniforms. So the uniform in the photo could be either Civil War or Mexican War.

May 13, 2005

James Crabtree is listed as a private in Michigan, in the Civil War. (www.michiganinthewar.org/cavalry/10cava.htm).

September 16, 2005

I am less convinced of it being John as the only one I can find who was a sergeant was a descendant of Agree Crabtree.

I am not convinced that whoever labeled it simply “Crabtree brother” actually knew who it was. Seems like they would have written the name if they did.

September 22, 2005

At this point I have to waffle back to thinking it is James in his uniform, but sometime after the Mexican War.

In the 1850s, he (James) may have been building his image and donned his old uniform for the photographer. Photos were becoming more affordable for more people then. ❀

Ambrotypes

by Cal Bivens

The ambrotype is a thin negative image on glass made to appear as a positive by showing it against a black background. It is assembled similar to a daguerreotype:

1. Outer protective case.
2. Black paper, cloth, or metal backing.
3. On-glass-image, emulsion to the front, black varnish on back.
4. Brass die-cut frame.
5. Gilt border of thin brass to edge wrap the frame, glass, and backing.

It was common for the ambrotype to be colored. Suggestions of rouge cheeks or lips suggested a person of substance. Buttons, watch chains, pendants, broaches were often tinted with color.

Disadvantages of ambrotypes:

1. Very slow (up to 20 seconds) exposure, compared to 2 seconds for a daguerreotype.
2. The very fragile glass couldn't withstand travel or being carried in a locket as a daguerreotype could.

Advantage of the Ambrotypes

Price: It could be sold profitably at a low price, approximately 25 cents, less than half of the daguerreotype.

The time frame for this type of photo is rather brief, generally from about 1854 to about 1866. Daguerreotypes were made as far back as 1839. Far enough back to be a Mexican War soldier. ❀