

**Guide to the
Henry N. Bemis Diaries**



**Gettysburg College, Musselman Library
Special Collections & College Archives**

**Processed by Stephen Light
September 2004**

MS-60: Henry N. Bemis Diaries

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Biography:

Henry N. Bemis (1837 - sometime after 1880) was born in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, the son of Abel Bemis and Rebecca Richardson. The beginning of the Civil War found Bemis making a living as a farmer in Worcester, Massachusetts. On July 24th, 1861 he and his brother, Charles H. Bemis, were mustered in Company D, 15th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, as privates.

In the regiment's first action—the battle of Ball's Bluff on October 21st, 1861—Bemis was taken prisoner. He probably was sent to a prison in Richmond for a time before being released on parole in February of 1862. In July of 1862, Henry reported to a camp for paroled prisoners in Annapolis, Maryland to await exchange. He rejoined the 15th Massachusetts in October of 1862, but in November was transferred to Battery I, 1st United States Artillery. He served with Battery I until his three year term of enlistment expired. During this time he was engaged in many major battles of the Eastern Theater, including Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Cold Harbor. He was discharged on July 15th, 1864. In 1865 he married a woman named Georgia A. _____. The couple had three sons, Frederick, Edward, and Walter. He died sometime after 1880 and is buried in Hope Cemetery in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The 15th Massachusetts Infantry had a very tragic history in the Civil War, serving in all the major battles of the Army of the Potomac from Ball's Bluff through to the siege of Petersburg. At the battle of Ball's Bluff it lost over 300 men, many captured or drowned in trying to swim across the Potomac River to safety. At the battle of Antietam in September of 1862 the regiment was outflanked and lost fifty percent of its men in just a half hour in the West Woods. It was heavily engaged again at Gettysburg, where its Colonel George H. Ward was shot and killed. It served in Grant's 1864 overland campaign, and after the battle of Cold Harbor was reduced to only 5 officers and 70 men. On June 22nd, 1864 in the battle of Jerusalem Plank Road the regiment was surprised and all but one officer and 5 enlisted men were captured. The remnant of the regiment was attached to the 20th Massachusetts.

The start of the Civil War found Battery I, 1st U.S. Artillery stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The battery was sent east and equipped to serve as light artillery for the Army of the Potomac, and remained with the army for the entirety of the war. At Gettysburg the battery was stationed near Ziegler's Grove, and lost heavily in helping to repel Pickett's Charge. After the battle of Bristoe Station, the battery was made into a horse artillery unit and served with the cavalry. It was present at the battle of Trevillian Station, one of the largest cavalry battles of the war.

Scope and Content:

The Henry N. Bemis collection consists primarily of two diaries kept by Bemis during the war. The first diary runs from July 17th, 1862 to March 14th, 1864 while the second diary runs from March 17th 1864 to July 4th 1864. Both diaries contain frequent entries detailing the events of each day. Also included in the collection are two tintypes, a photograph, and Bemis' discharge from service. The two tintypes are most likely images of Bemis and his wife, Georgia A. Bemis. The photograph is unidentified.

The diaries for the most part do not offer detailed descriptions of battle (with some exceptions, such as the entry describing Gettysburg). Instead, they often provide a glimpse into the life of a Union soldier when not in battle. Bemis details the hardships of life in the Union army: the stop and go nature of marches, living on short rations when supplies could not get through, the brutal weather that the soldiers often endured with no shelter, the time and effort spent taking care of the horses that draw the artillery. One looking for a source with spectacular battle descriptions may be disappointed, but one looking into the everyday life of a Civil War soldier will find a great deal in these two diaries.

Box 1:

1-1 Diary, July 17th, 1862 – March 14th, 1864
132 pages

1-2 Diary, March 17th, 1864 – July 4th, 1864
72 pages

1-3 Discharge from Service, July 15th, 1864

1-4 Two tintypes and one photograph

Tintype images are likely Henry N. Bemis and Georgia A. Bemis
Photograph is unidentified