Charles Westerfield served in the 8th Illinois Cavalry, Company F, alongside his childhood friend, Charles McDaniel. The Museum has photos of their Company F comrades that the two veterans brought home. The 8th Illinois fought in the Army of the Potomac from Mechanicsville to Gettysburg. After the war, Charles returned home, where he worked as a surveyor, helping to lay out the streets of the new village. His father, John Westerfield, became the first Village President in 1872, and Charles served as Village Clerk. He and his wife later moved to Waukegan.

Other Veterans

Many of Wilmette’s Civil War veterans were not living in this area during the war, but settled here afterward. Among the first of these were Henry Gage and his cousins, Edwin and Horace Drury, who built some of the first houses in the new village in the early 1870s, and Milton Springer, who was twice elected Village President. John “Daddy” Hood, who had a particularly colorful war career, was a familiar sight in the annual Memorial Day parade until his death in 1939. Hood’s grandson still lives in the Village today. The last Civil War veteran in Wilmette had been born in what became Gross Point: Frank Alles, who lived at 1614 Wilmette Avenue, and died on July 30, 1940.

Memorials

At least thirteen Civil War veterans lie today in the cemetery of St. Joseph’s Church at Ridge Road and Lake Avenue: Thomas Frake, Peter Schuetz, August Trapp, Andrew May, Mathias Selzer, Peter Hansen, Peter Bauer, Henry Thalmann, T. T. Simmons, Joseph Carpenter, William Quince, Frank Geier, and John Pettinger. Six white stone markers are still visible, on each of which is inscribed the veteran’s name and regiment.

The names of James Mulligan and John Fiegen can be found today on the Memorial Wall in front of Wilmette’s Village Hall.

Additional Resources

To find out more about Wilmette and the North Shore during the Civil War, visit the Research Room of the Wilmette Historical Museum, open Sunday through Thursday, 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

These websites may also be of interest:

http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/
http://www.8thillinois cavalry.org/

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The War to Save the Union

The day after the Civil War erupted in April 1861, North Shore men enthusiastically crowed into Chicago & Milwaukee Railway cars and headed into the city to get the latest war news and to rally for the Union. A group of patriotic Northwestern students missed the train and walked the twelve miles to join the crowds.

Chicago's North Shore had been settled by Europeans for less than thirty years when the war began. Wilmette had not yet been established, making New Trier Township the local governing body. The township was a sparsely settled farming community with a population of less than 700 people, many of them immigrants from Germany, England and Ireland. From this community, about 35-45 men went off to war, serving in many different Illinois regiments. Across the North Shore, approximately 700 men served, 54 of whom died in action. Illinois had one of the North's highest records of service -- 256,297 soldiers and sailors, or about 15% of its 1860 population.

On the home front, local men and women supported the cause in a variety of ways. They organized the Sanitary Fairs to raise money for the troops, participated in abolitionist causes, and sent supplies and letters to loved ones.

Some of the men who left here for the war never came home, and many others coped with the wounds and memories of the war for the rest of their lives. Here are the stories of just a few of Wilmette's Civil War veterans.

When war broke out, John Fiegen was already 43 years old, and living with his wife and children in a farmhouse on Illinois Road in what was to become the Village of Gross Point (now west Wilmette). He joined Mulligan's 23rd Illinois Infantry in Chicago on March 2, 1862, along with neighbor Mathias Selzer. Fiegen was captured in the same battle that claimed the life of James Mulligan, and sent to the notorious Confederate prison at Andersonville, Ga. He died there on August 20, 1864.

The tintype shown here was treasured by his widow – the Historical Museum has a photo of her holding it – and passed down in the Fiegen family for generations. Some of John Fiegen's descendants still live in Wilmette today.

James Mulligan

Having moved to the Gross Point area from New York before the war, charismatic James Mulligan in 1861 raised the 23rd Illinois, known as “the Irish Brigade,” and served as its colonel. At the Battle of Lexington in Missouri, the 23rd fought courageously but was forced to surrender. The regiment was later reinstated and fought in the Shenandoah Valley, where Mulligan fell mortally wounded in the Second Battle of Kernstown in Virginia in 1864. His imposing monument can be seen today near the Chicago Avenue entrance of Calvary Cemetery in Evanston.

Henry Thalmann

Henry Thalmann came to New Trier Township from Prussia as a child, and joined up in 1861. Wounded in September, 1862, and sent home, he would serve as the first postmaster of the Village of Gross Point. In later life he received a disability pension because of his war injuries. When he died in an old soldier's home in Milwaukee in 1900, his body was brought home to be interred at St. Joseph’s cemetery. The Thalmann family are the longtime owners of Wilmette’s Chalet nursery.