

# Finnish Sailors and Soldiers in the American Civil War



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## Introduction

The involvement of Finns in the American Civil War (1861–1865) has received very little attention. The American Civil War, as we know, was the result of disagreements involving the issue of slavery between the northern and southern states of the Union. While the South favoured slavery, the North was against it. Literature which deals with the involvement of Finnish soldiers and sailors is limited to one major contribution (Ilmonen, 1919). In his book on Finnish-American history, a number of individuals — particularly sailors — are noted, who fought on the side of the Northern Union. In this brief article, I present some findings of individuals who participated on both sides of the Civil War. A list of soldiers and sailors is also presented from data collected from Ilmonen (1919), from archival sources obtained from the U.S. National Archives in Washington DC as well as from the Sailor's

Snug Harbour facility which was the home for many retired Finnish sailors following the Civil War.

## Previous studies

According to Ilmonen, the participation rate of the Finns was significant and greater than expected given the small Finnish population that lived in America at the time. Ilmonen estimates that some 1000 Finns lived in the United States during the 1860s, and of this number perhaps as many as one hundred Finns fought in the Northern Army and Navy (Ilmonen, 1919:158).

The largest proportion of Finns — at least in the North — joined the Navy. Only a few individuals were found in the Army. From primary sources dealing with the Confederacy, it appears that more Finns were part of the Army and Cavalry in the south (Tables 1 & 2).

Part of the reason for a lack of study on Finnish military involvement in the Civil War is the result of very poor records kept on the various enlisted personnel. Records are so poor in fact, that amongst the Confederate Forces, no mention is made of the place of

birth for the soldiers who were mustered into service in the Confederate South. Other scholars interested in this topic concur with this dilemma (Haggman, 1997; Olin, 1997). This has hindered the research in establishing ties to Finland, although a number of names are presented in this article which may undoubtedly have Finnish roots regardless of the spelling which may have been altered during the enlisting of each soldier.

An extensive 16-volume collection of participants in the Confederate Forces was published in 1995 (Hewett, 1995). Examination of this collection produced about a dozen names of possible Finnish soldiers, even though the spelling may be erroneous. Names such as Lambie and Mattil were originally believed to be of possible Finnish origin, but cross-referencing these names with the little data available for the Confederate Forces indicated that Lambie (who reached the rank of 1st Lieutenant in Virginia) was of Irish birth (Military Service Records - Virginia). According to other information, the Lambie name originates from Scotland (Lambie, 1998). The surname

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Otto Mauno Geers, veteran of the American Civil War, served in the Navy consecutively for 21 years. – *Amerikan Suomalaisten Historiaa I*.

Mattil in turn most likely was of German origin (Mathiel) which was changed during the 1800s (Mattil, 1998). A collection of names from the Union (Northern) Forces has been established previously by Ilmonen, and thus the soldiers in the Southern Forces is entirely new to the reader. The available literature generally points that more Finnish immigrants resided in the northern

states, and thus more Finns were fighting in the Northern Armies and Navies than in the Confederate South. However, there were sizeable Finnish populations in coastal cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana during the 1860s, where up to 200 Finns resided (Kero, 1997:130). The presence of these early Finns may have been a source for some Finns in the Confederacy as proposed by

the discovered data. Present research into the American Civil War and the Finnish involvement is being conducted by scholars such as K-G Olin of Jacobstad, Finland and Dr. Haggman of Helsingborg, Sweden (Olin, 1997; Haggman, 1997). Additional confirmation and service and pension records are being sought by the author for the numerous Union sailors listed by Ilmonen.

### Finnish sailors in the Union and Confederate Navies

Among the best examples of Finnish military involvement is found among the Union Forces, where Otto Mauno Geers served as a sailor and eventual quartermaster in the Navy. Born in the parish of Eura, he immigrated to the United States in 1860 and settled in Boston. The following year he joined the Navy. Geers served in the Navy consecutively for 21 years. Geers participated in a number of battles, and according to Ilmonen, the most memorable fight was the Battle of New Orleans. In this battle, Geers' ship was sunk, and a large number of the crew drowned. As the ship was sinking, Geers jumped into the Mississippi River at the same time as the main mast was shot down by the Confederates. With the mast, the U.S. flag fell into the river. Geers grabbed the flag and swam to shore saving himself and the flag, which he kept as a treasured keepsake. Geers was wounded twice during the Civil War, the second time having received a bullet through the leg. Around 1880, Geers retired from the Navy, re-

ceiving a government pension along with many medals of recognition. Geers was married to a non-Finn, did not have children, and died in 1916 at his farm near Boston, Massachusetts (Ilmonen, 1919:159).

Among the Finns in the Confederate Forces, one sailor was discovered as being part of the 60-man crew of the renowned Confederate Cruiser Alabama (Lonn, 1940:297). This sailor was named "Jackalanwiski", whose name is most likely spelled incorrectly. According to an autobiography written by an English sailor on board the ship Alabama, "Jackalanwiski" was such a difficult name to pronounce that the crew called this Finn by the name "Jack-o-lantern" (Haywood, 1886:36). Haywood tells how the crew began to have re-occurring dreams which were interpreted as events that were to happen in the future. The Finnish "Jack-o-lantern" was a translator of dreams, and using a "dreambook" and speaking with "mysterious gutturals" (possibly in the Finnish language which does sound strange to foreigners!), attempted to embellish the situation and interpret the dreams. While the crew of the Alabama wanted to hear an interpretation of their dreams, an older bible-preaching member of the crew declared the event as being blasphemous and of the devil. This older sailor urged the crew to throw the devilish Finn overboard into the sea. Apparently the crew was afraid to do so. Haywood, who writes about the battles and travels of the C.C. Alabama until the final battle and destruction with the U.S.S. Kearsage in 1864

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## SUOMALAISIA ORJAINVAPAUTUS-SODASSA.

Amerikan sisällissota, (civil war) tunnetaan myöskin orjien vapautussodan nimellä, taisteltiin vuosina 1861—1865. Sota aiheutui etupäässä orjaksymyksestä. Yhdysvaltain eteläiset valtiot olivat orjuutta suosivalla kannalla, pohjoiset valtiot taas sen sitä voimakkaasti vastustivat. Vihdoin pohjoisvaltioitten yhä enenevän voiman ja valtiollisen vaikutuksen, kuin myöskin orjuutta tulisesti vastustavan Abraham Lincolnin valitsemisen tähden presidentiksi, erkaantuivat eteläiset valtiot Yhdysvaltain keskushallituksesta ja perustivat Amerikan etelä-valtioitten liittotasavallan, jossa tultiin edelleenkin sallimaan orjien käyttöä työvoimana. Yhdysvaltain kongressi piti etelä-valtioitten erkaantumista kapinallisena tekona, joka oli asevoimin kukistettava ja presidentti Lincoln päätti tehdä kaiken voitavansa Yhdysvaltain kokonaisuuden säilyttämiseksi. Neljä vuotta kesti tämä paljon uhreja kysyvä veljessota, päättyen pohjoisvaltioitten täydellisellä voitolla, jota seurasi orjien vapauttaminen ja luopuneitten valtioitten jälleen yhtyminen Yhdysvaltoihin.

Suomalaisten osa orjain vapauttamistaistelussa on suurempi ja tärkeämpi kuin kansalaistemme sen aikaiseen vähälukuisuuteen katsoen olisi voinut

S. Ilmonen tells about Finns in the American Civil War in "Amerikan Suomalaisen Historian I". — *Ilmonen 1919* (p. 157).

does not say anything else about the Finnish sailor (Haywood, 1886:114–115).

### Conclusions

Much research remains to be done in a search for possible Finnish military involvement in the American Civil War. In discussions with members of the Virginia Civil War Round Table (a local

group of Virginia historians interested in the Confederate Forces and the battles of the Civil War), even the thoroughly knowledgeable historians lack information on the involvement of the Finns (WSVA AM-550). The presence of the Swedes is much better known, and a few Russians have also been documented as participating in the Civil War. The Finns, however, remain a mys-

**Table 1. Finns in the Union Forces**

Name	Area served in
<b>Union navy</b>	
Otto Mauno Geers	Union Navy, Quartermaster
Adolf Rantala	Union Navy
Ryssän Roopertti	Union Navy
Michael Johnson	Union Navy
Antti Junnikkala	Union Navy
Joseph Wilson	Union Navy
Mr. Grosbee	Union Navy
Mr. Aittola	Union Navy
George Brown (Virpi)	Union Navy, served on Admiral Farragut's flagship
Charles Broman	Union Navy
Peter Anderson	Union Navy
Aleksander Enman	Union Navy
Iso Brown	Union Navy
Gustaf Granqvist	Union Navy
Peter Tumber (Thornberg)	Union Navy
Frederick Hart (Lassila)	Union Navy
Abram Efraimson/Abramson	Union Navy
Anders Oskar Leppäluoto	Union Navy
<b>Union army</b>	
Gustaf Husberg	Union Army
Johan Heggström	Union Army
Peter Lahti	Union Army, Minnesota Artillery
Matti Johnson	Union Army
Charles Newman	Union Army
<b>Union cavalry</b>	
Isaac Johnson (Tuohino)	Union Cavalry

Source: *Ilmonen, 1919; Penn 1991; Sailor's Snug Harbour records, Sealevel, N.C., 1997.*

**Table 2. Finns in the Confederate Forces**

Name	Area served in
<b>Confederate navy</b>	
Jackalanwiski ("Jack-o-lantern")	Confederate navy, CC Alabama
<b>Confederate army</b>	
William J. Lambie (Lampi?)*	Virginia Light Artillery, Alleghany Battalion, Carpenter's Co. 1s. Lieutenant
William T. Lambie (Lampi?)*	Virginia 27th Infantry, Co. A.
Jacob Mattil (Mattila?)*	Tennessee 19th Infantry, Co. I.
Felix Rante (Ranta?)	Florida 8th Inf. Co. D., Corporal
James Saary (Saari?)	Louisiana 14th Infantry, Co. C.
Patrick Saary (Saari?)	Louisiana 20th Infantry, Co. E.
Patrick J. Tuohy (Tuohi?)	Louisiana 14th Infantry, Co. C.
Thomas Tuomey (Tuomi?)	Louisiana 22nd Inf. Wash. Mark's Co.
Timothy J. Tuomey (Tuomi?)	South Carolina 15th Infantry, Co. A.
<b>Confederate cavalry</b>	
Gustavus A. Jarvey (Järvi?)	Texas 4th Cav. Co. F.
D.W. Mattil (Mattila?)*	Kentucky 3rd Mounted Infantry, Co. D.
G.H. Mattil (Mattila?)*	Kentucky 3rd Mounted Infantry, Co. D.
Thomas P. Tuomey (Tuomi?)	Mississippi Cav. 24th Battalion, Co. A.
T.J. Tuomy (Tuomi?)	Texas Cavalry, Wells Regiment, Co. G.

\* These individuals are most likely not Finnish, as noted in the text.

Sources: *Haywood, 1886; Lonn, 1940; Hewett, 1995, and Military Service Records.*

tery. If, as Ilmonen suggests, the Finns represented a high degree of involvement compared to other immigrant groups found in the United States during the Civil

War period, it is important to pursue this claim and uncover the stories and experiences of the Finns who fought on both sides of the War. Time consuming re-

search in historical archives in locations such as Washington DC, Richmond, Virginia, and other locations are needed to build on the small list of names presented here.

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