

The Allure of Lincoln

Using Material Culture to Complicate Shared Memories

by Brian J. Carter

with Amy E. Platt

AT THIS VERY MOMENT, an incalculable number of historians, poets, filmmakers, writers, politicians, artists, educators, and leaders are working to bend the arc of Abraham Lincoln's legacy toward their own. Proximity to the era, and the man, has proven invaluable over the past 150 years. Closeness to Lincoln offers both a coveted transference of historical significance and the promise of contemporary cache. The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) recently capitalized on the benefits of such adjacency to Lincoln with an exhibition exploring America's sixteenth president, entitled *2 Years 1, Month: Lincoln's Legacy*.

The allure of Lincoln is understandable. What other U.S. president is as inextricably tied to nation-defining issues of such scale and lasting importance? When one thinks of our America, torn in half at its seams, the lens of remembrance is through Lincoln. When one thinks of the inhumanity of slavery and especially the fight for its eradication, the image conjured is of Lincoln. When one thinks of the bloodiest battles fought on our soil, neighbor against neighbor, the specter of Lincoln arises.

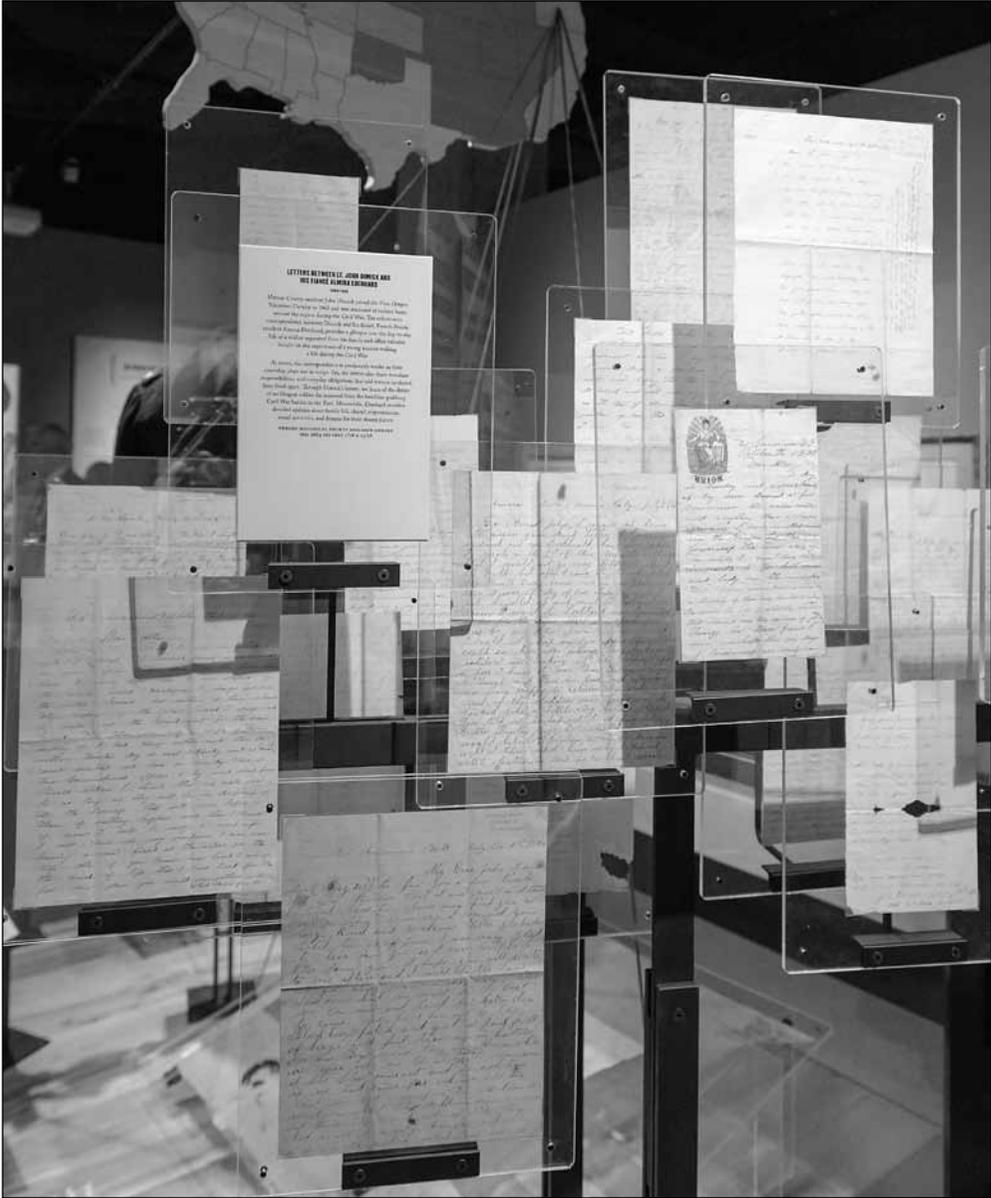
The display and interpretation of material culture in museums can provide a gateway to the historic individual and, perhaps more important, to the collective memories harbored in the various constructions of his legacy. Predictably, the digestion of complex historical experiences into collective memories causes problems, as we reshape fact and reality to fit within the vessels we use to carry our past. Those vessels have immense power because of our desire to carry agreed-on memories. Toward that end, *2 Years, 1 Month* purposefully taps the power contained in a remembered Lincoln through



This in-gallery image shows a raised platform displaying a number of Oregon-specific artifacts and documents from the Oregon Historical Society's collection. Embedding these materials amidst the larger collection of recognizable Lincoln artifacts — and with equal prominence and creativity — allows guests to grapple with difficult historical topics that played out simultaneously on the national and local levels.

display of evocative and deeply personal objects. On display, for example, are an Authorized Edition of the Emancipation Proclamation featuring Lincoln's signature in deliberate hand, a small scrap of paper with his handwritten merciful pardon of a Civil War soldier, and embellishments that adorned his coffin and catafalque. These items reinforce Lincoln as a collectively remembered touchstone that provides access to defining moments of our shared past. None of us experienced that past, but we are drawn to it because it confirms an essential human desire: that a meaningful connection exists among what has been, what is, and what will be.

So we invoke Lincoln, and we celebrate Lincoln, and we critique Lincoln, and we deconstruct Lincoln. And then we build him back up to start the process anew. We do this with hopes that it will help us understand our own existence at this time, in this place. The danger inherent in this collec-



This bouquet of letters displays communication between John Dimick of the Oregon Volunteer Cavalry and his fiancé, Almira Eberhard. Exhibit creators believed it was important that this installation demonstrate the sheer volume of letters contained in the Oregon Historical Society's large collection while still capturing the intimacy and energy of a courtship played out in script.

tive mode of processing historical reality is that the people, families, and communities who existed and evolved in the wake churned by Lincoln's passage through our shared past are overlooked and undervalued. These individuals, and the lives they lived, were shaped by the larger events and icons of their time, but they did not fail to shape and influence events and individuals in significant ways.

It was therefore OHS's responsibility to use the opportunity provided by the grandeur of the subject matter to create space for exploration of stories surfaced by Lincoln's wake. We crafted an interpretive path that allows exhibit viewers to move from the evidence of history embodied by a remembered Lincoln through the monumental dilemmas of the era — war, slavery, emancipation, and equality — and to a valuable exploration of the people, families, and communities who coexisted with Lincoln.

Accomplishing this feat required looking no further than the world-class collections of the OHS Davies Family Research Library and the OHS Museum. It required the obvious and emblematic inclusion of Oregon's story. The artifacts, documents, and images from OHS's collection add necessary dimension, emotion, and life to the grand but ill-defined historical memories of an era embodied by Lincoln. The voluminous correspondence between Oregon Volunteer Cavalryman John Dimick and his fiancé Almira Eberhard, for example, offer visitors the mundane responsibilities and everyday obligations that add texture to shared lives lived apart. An 1863 letter from the bombastic Dr. Henry G. Anson to his wife Eliza demonstrates how Lincoln was informed and influenced by old Illinois friends who had migrated to Oregon. The Saturday April 15, 1865, diary entry of OHS's first curator, George H. Himes, poignantly articulates the impact of Lincoln's death on the newly formed state: "Stores all closed, flags at half mast and deep feeling exists in the hearts of all true men."

These materials, and others from OHS's collections, make audible to visitors familiar humanistic notes — the bright language of new love, the battle sounds of hubris fighting humility, and the somber resonance of loss. Through this effort, the messiness and beauty of humanity's past, often subsumed by the monolith of Lincoln's legacy, are given place and voice. There exists little doubt that Lincoln will continue as a chosen and venerated carrier of our historical consciousness. It is the hope of this institution that 2 Years, 1 Month responsibly uses its proximity to Lincoln to create an environment in which visitors engage with the complicated and contested past to make richer meaning of their present.



This hand-sewn guidon (flag) belonged to John F. Nobel, 2nd Lieutenant of “G” Company, First Oregon Volunteer Cavalry. This artifact provides a vivid reminder of the complicated military roles Oregonians played during the Civil War. Distant from the headline-grabbing battles in the East, units of the First Oregon Cavalry, like “G” Company, nonetheless played a pivotal role in Lincoln’s plans for westward expansion.

THE CIVIL WAR AND OREGON

ONLINE RESOURCES BY THE OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The people who lived in Oregon during the Civil War years left behind letters, photographs, documents, and artifacts — each item giving us access to a time of great political and social change in the state. The mid nineteenth century was a time of resettlement, violent tensions among emigrants and Native communities, and political arguments over the war. Many of the artifacts held by the Oregon Historical Society Research Library and Museum are windows to people's lives, both their circumstances and what they thought was important.

Oregonians had enjoyed statehood for only a year when they voted in the presidential election of 1860, and Abraham Lincoln relied heavily on his contacts in the state to help him win its three electoral votes. Oregon was a majority Democratic state, but Lincoln's close friends, including Edward Baker, worked with Republican leaders Thomas Jefferson Dryer and Henry Corbett to win against Joseph Lane, Oregon's former territorial governor who was on the national ticket with presidential hopeful John Breckenridge. Dryer took on *Statesman* editor Asahel Bush in a lively and name-calling debate in print, ushering in what became known as the Oregon Style of journalism.

After the war began in April 1861, the Union Army summoned regular army units — including those led by Ulysses Grant and Phillip Sheridan — from their Pacific Northwest posts to reinforce troops in the East. To fill the now-empty barracks at Fort Vancouver and other Oregon outposts, volunteers formed the First Oregon Cavalry and Infantry Units to protect Oregon ports and monitor the Indian populations.

The stories of these military and political men — and many more — can be found in The Oregon Encyclopedia (OE) and Oregon History Project (OHP), two of OHS's Digital History Projects. The history of the Civil War in Oregon can be discovered in the archives of the OHS Research Library, which has photographed artifacts from the collections for publication on the OHP. Oregon historians used those rich research materials to write authoritative OE entries on the period.

OHS has curated a Civil War in Oregon webpage on The OE, bringing together images from the collections and encyclopedia entries, written by experts who place the artifacts and archival documents in historical context. There is also an annotated bibliography, which can be downloaded, along with a list of the Research Library's many Civil War-related manuscript collections. Some of those materials are highlighted in a slideshow so visitors can learn more about the significant places and the people who lived in Oregon during the 1860s. Find the page at www.oregonencyclopedia.org.

Several of the images and associated OHP captions, written by Amy E. Platt, are reproduced on the following pages (note that the drum is included only in the physical exhibit).



UNION

July
Fort Vancouver W. T.
October the 11th / 1863
Dear Alla

To day
is Sunday and a most beautiful
day never deemed at Fort
Vancouver. All nature smiles
and everything wears a cheerful
appearance. I have revolved around
over the Garrison but there is a
consensus that most wear of
For while I can see it
impossible to get both mind
and body in the same place
What softened remembrances ^{the house} comes
In thinking of those we have been lost to so long
The sorrows the joys of which they once were a
still sound me little visions of ^{day} people
through. But - Dearest friend I
am in hopes that my days
at Lewis and Clark we nearly over

LETTER FROM JOHN DIMICK TO HIS FIANCÉ ALMIRA EBERHARD

The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) holds a collection of letters written by John Dimick to his fiancé (and later wife) Almira Eberhard, during the time he was part of “B” Company, First Oregon Volunteer Cavalry. Dimick was one of hundreds of Oregon men to enlist in the cavalry. He enrolled on January 12, 1862, and in April that year left his family farm in French Prairie to be trained at Camp Ellsworth near Salem. Dimick intended the letters to be a record of his time as a cavalryman, and he provided meticulous details of military life in the Pacific Northwest during the Civil War.

For army volunteers stationed in Oregon, far from the bloody battles in the East, the days could be boring and uneventful. When the regular army units stationed in the region were called to the East, volunteers from California and Oregon took over their duties — mainly to facilitate the settlement of overland emigrants by building roads and suppressing the Native populations. For much of the Civil War period, the days were often filled with non-events, such as this one described by Dimick in June 1862:

Since I wrote [...] I have been out with a scouting party [we] were out about a week. We were on what is called the Umatilla Reservation. The Indians there numbering about 1500 began to show symptoms of hostilities. A detachment of our company amounting to 22 men went over there but when we got there all was quiet.

For her part, Almira kept John abreast of the local news and activities in Marion County: “We get along fine now, only a little lonesome but we must do the best we can now and trust for better days to come,” she wrote John in 1864. “We have been out to the Black berry patch and got a pail full of berrys [*sic*] and put them up in bottles for our Boys when they come Home.”

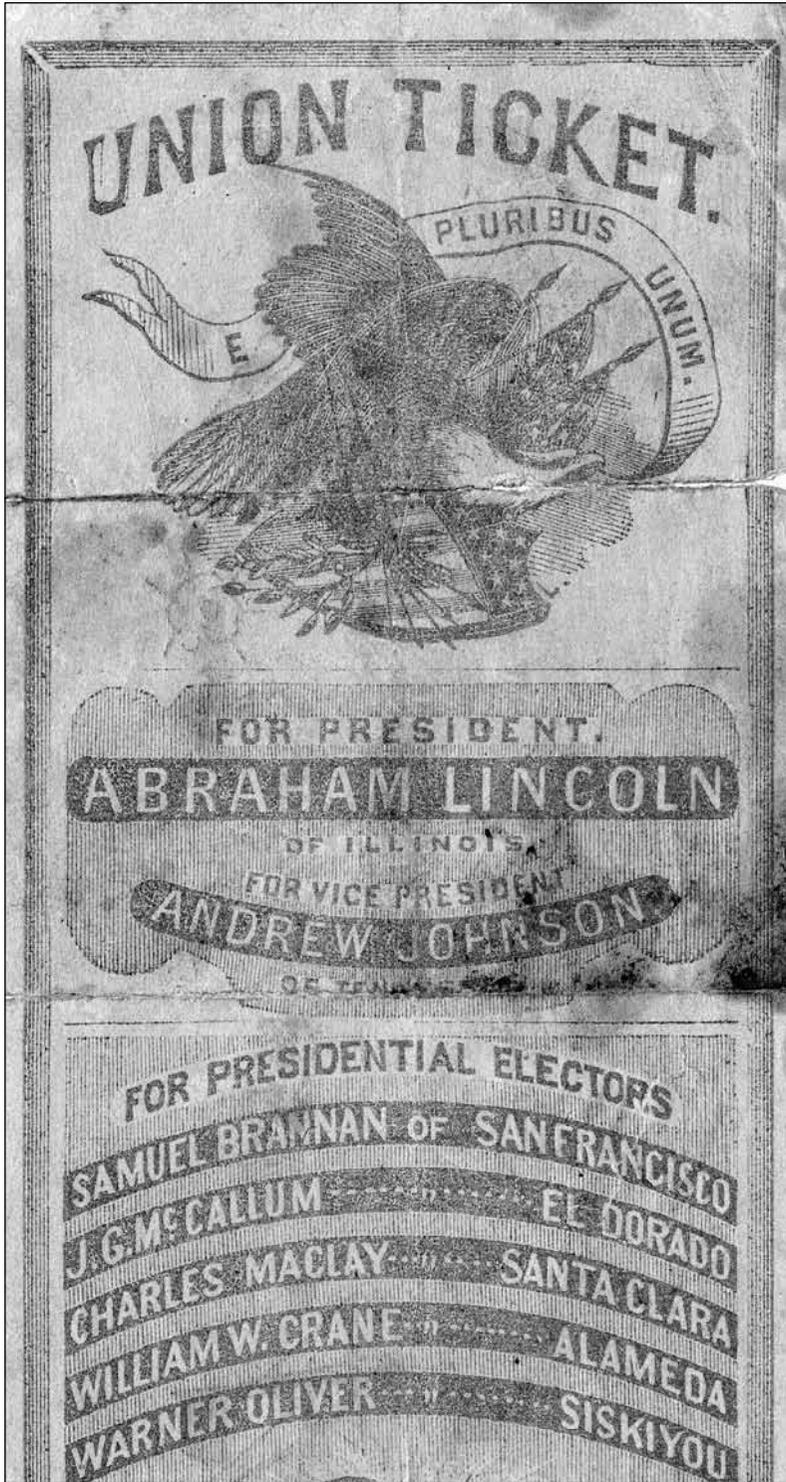
Dimick was refused a regular army commission after the war and so returned to Marion County and pursued politics. He was elected to the state legislature in 1886. A number of Dimick’s letters to Almira are on display in the 2 Years, 1 Month: Lincoln’s Legacy exhibit at OHS.

UNION PARTY TICKET (1864)

In the 1864 presidential election, Republican incumbent President Abraham Lincoln faced Democratic challenger Gen. George B. McClellan, Lincoln's former commander of the army whom he relieved of duty in 1862. The Republican Party decided to choose a new running mate for Lincoln, and they nominated Democrat Andrew Johnson (Tennessee) whose sympathies were tempered by his declarations of support for the Union. All of the states still in the Union in 1864 had flyers, such as this one from California, that listed not only the national candidates but the state electors who could be counted on to cast an electoral vote for the Union Party ticket.

In Oregon, Republican Party members adopted the national strategy of coalitioning with War Democrats under the Union Party label. The Democratic Party in Oregon—as in most of the country—had not quite recovered from its 1860 split among those who opposed secession and supported the war (War Democrats), those who wanted to negotiate the South back into the Union (Peace Democrats or “Copperheads”), and those who supported the right of the South to secede. Lincoln had benefited from this split in 1860 when Democrats could not concentrate their votes behind a single candidate. Democrat Stephen Douglas took 28 percent of the Oregon vote; proslavery Southern Democrat John Breckinridge (with former territorial governor of Oregon Joseph Lane as vice president) took 34 percent; and Lincoln achieved a narrow win with 36 percent. In 1864, however, the Democratic Party began to rally behind Peace Democrat McClellan, and Lincoln contemplated defeat.

The creation of the National Union Party gave non-secessionist Democrats a way to vote for the salvation of the Union without becoming Republicans, and many joined the secret organizations called Union Leagues alongside their Republican neighbors. That political maneuvering helped Lincoln win the election and earn a second term. Oregon voters split nearly evenly: 53 percent voted for Lincoln, 46 percent for McClellan. Oregon, however, had been a majority Democratic state, which meant that many Oregonians who had voted for a Democratic candidate in 1860 decided to vote Union in the very next election, thereby rejecting both secession and peaceful negotiation with the South.



Constitution.

1,

The object of this League shall be to preserve the Government of the U. S. and the ^{Constitution} ~~laws~~ ~~of the~~ ~~State~~ and the constitution and laws of this State; and to thwart the designs of traitors and secession sympathizers.

2,

This organization shall be called _____ County Council No. _____ of Union League of America.

3,

The officers shall be—
(here insert those named in the ritual.)

4,

The duties of the officers shall be such as are provided in the ritual and as are exercised ~~exercised~~ by such officers. The Treasurer shall receive all monies—keep on accurate account of the same and pay them out by order of the Secretary under the direction of the Council.

5,

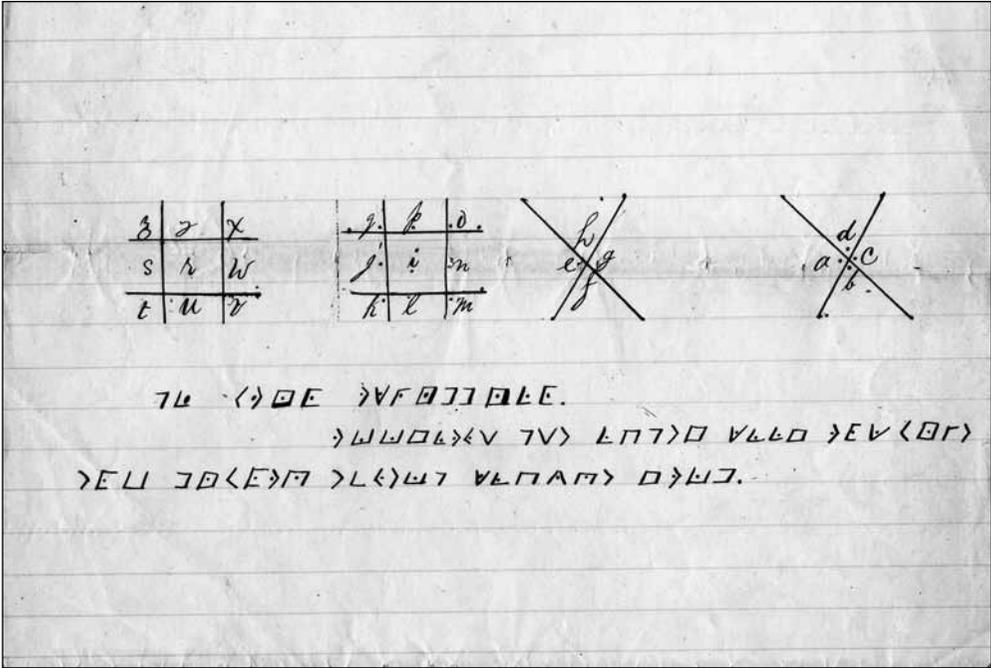
~~Any~~ No person shall become a member of this Council except by a two thirds vote of the members present and three negative votes shall

UNION LEAGUE CONSTITUTION

During the Civil War, many cities and towns formed Union Leagues, fraternal/political clubs supporting Lincoln and his war efforts, and opened their membership to both Republicans and Democrats. As a result, Democrats — loyal to their party but against secession — could vote Union without formally aligning with the Republican Party. The Marion County League described the purpose of this ideological partnership in its first resolution: “That as all former political issues are now obsolete, the attempt to divide the friends of the Union on party names, demonstrates hostility to our Government.” Perhaps most importantly, Democrats in northern states could assert their patriotism and avoid being labeled enemies of the United States. As a political strategy, the creation of Union Leagues was successful; many Union candidates won local and state races, and Lincoln won the 1864 election with a majority popular vote.

Following the war, Union Leagues in the South and East welcomed newly enfranchised African American men into their ranks. The Fifteenth Amendment created a powerful voting block of black voters, and Republicans saw an opportunity to recruit and steer votes to benefit Republican candidates and interests. In Oregon, it is unlikely that the local Union Leagues had black members; the state had excluded African Americans from residing in Oregon by constitutional provision and, although African Americans lived in Oregon, they were severely marginalized.

According to the Portland *Oregonian* (a Republican paper), the first Oregon Union League was formed in Forest Grove on April 28, 1863. Other towns followed suit, and eventually many of the state’s most influential politicians and civic leaders had some part in the leagues, including Gov. Addison Gibbs. Handwritten copies of one of the Union League’s Constitution and Bylaws are held in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library. The first constitutional provision declares: “The object of this League shall be to preserve the government of the U.S. and the laws & constitution thereof and the constitution and laws of this state; and to thwart the designs of traitors and secession sympathizers.”



UNION LEAGUE CIPHER DIAGRAM (1863)

This coded message was one of several created by Union League members. Although the Union Leagues had political goals that they made public — primarily through the politically partisan *Oregonian* — members also took the rules of privacy seriously. Secret codes and knocks, passwords, hand signals, and voice commands were all important parts of nineteenth-century fraternal organizations engaged in political activities. The political climate during and following the Civil War was volatile, and declaring party membership could also be a declaration of patriotism or treason. Many Union League members preferred to keep their membership affiliations separate from their day-to-day lives, so they followed elaborate rituals as declarations of trust for their fellow members.



DRUM PLAYED AT ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S FUNERAL

William Henry Brooks, a Union soldier, played this drum as part of the consolidated drum corps during President Lincoln's funeral procession in May 1865, marching from Springfield to Oak Ridge Cemetery. He later remarked in his memoir: "The funeral lasted most of the day . . . these were Sad Times for we loved our President we had heard so many of his kind Deeds to the Private Soldier." A September 6, 1931, *Oregonian* article recounted Brooks's military service. At age fourteen, he enlisted on October 1, 1861, by spring of the following year, was engaged in fighting at Cumberland. He was taken prisoner on April 6, then released on May 24, 1862. After re-enlisting on December 1, 1863, he participated in Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's Meridian Campaign, marching over 800 miles. In 1908, Brooks moved to Oregon, where he lived in both Portland and Hillsboro.



UNIFORM OF COL. THOMAS R. CORNELIUS

This uniform, belonging to Col. Thomas R. Cornelius of “D” Company, First Oregon Volunteer Cavalry, is representative of those worn by soldiers in the Union Army. Although the regular army units were sent east when the war started, the federal government maintained volunteer soldiers in Oregon — not only to defend Pacific ports against possible Confederate attacks (including from mercenary ships called Commerce Raiders, which pursued whalers and supply ships), but also to maintain the efficient resettlement of the region by white emigrants and to secure the region’s resources. Civil War battles between the Union and Confederate armies reached as far west as Arizona (Battle of Picacho Pass, 1862), but the federal government’s main purpose in extending its Union army to the West was to subdue an entirely different “enemy”: Native Americans.

The United States had concerned itself with the control and land dispossession of Native populations long before the recruitment of volunteer armies began in 1861. Beginning in 1849, Fort Vancouver, originally a British trading post, was occupied by American soldiers who helped build infrastructure and provided safe passage for travelers on the Oregon Trail. Several forts around Oregon and the region had been built for this purpose, among them Fort Yamhill, Fort Hoskins, and Fort Umpqua. When the regular army units posted there left for war in the East, the War Department repopulated the barracks with volunteers from California. More forts were built (including Camp Watson and Fort Klamath), and eventually the First Oregon Volunteer Cavalry Regiment (1861) and the First Oregon Volunteer Infantry Regiment (1864) were created.

Lincoln made clear in his papers that the rapid settlement and control of the West—an area rich with resources such as gold and silver mines — was an important part of his war strategy. Through legislation such as the Homestead Act and building of transcontinental railroads, he encouraged westward migration (and Union loyalty) in order to increase his reach across the country. Any Native groups who interfered with that plan were intimidated, subdued, and relocated.

The first few years of the 1860s were relatively quiet between soldiers and Native Americans in Oregon, but the kind of brutal, mass violence against Indians that was taking place around the country arrived in 1864. The Snake War (1864–1868) involved the Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, and Bannock Indians against the U.S. army. The war is considered one of the deadliest Indian wars in the West — almost 2,000 people were killed by its end. Following the end of the Civil War, the army regarrisoned regular soldiers to take over for the volunteer units, transferring their attention from the seceding Confederates to Native people fighting to save their ancestral lands.