

**Sgt. George H. Morse,
Co. A, Massachusetts 56th Veteran Volunteer Regiment
of Walpole, Massachusetts
1837-1920**

Over the coming months I intend to write some articles based upon the very short biographies contained in a book related to members of the Elbridge B. Piper Post, Grand Army of the Republic. The Piper Post, named after Elbridge B. Piper, Walpole's first man to die in the Civil War, was made up of Civil War veterans from Walpole or who resided in Walpole after the war. This book, whose entries seem to have been made by one or two anonymous persons who interviewed the veterans, is in the possession of the Walpole Historical Society. By the way, I have been told that the Society intends to arrange public access to the Civil War Memorial at the Police Station (Old Town Hall), around the time of the coming Union encampment to take place at Adams Farm. Details will follow at a later date.

While transcribing the entry of the first selection, Sergeant George Henry Morse, it became apparent that he had once been a prisoner of War much like Private Hartshorn. After some further research at the Historical Society, we have found that Sergeant Morse and Private Hartshorn both re-enlisted and were mustered into the service of the Massachusetts 56th Veteran Volunteers, on December 26, 1863, in Readville, Massachusetts. According to military records, they served together in Co. A. Lowell E. Hartshorn and George H. Morse, both Walpole residents and veterans of previous enlistments may have been shoulder-to-shoulder during most of the engagements.

The entry is as follows:

Comrade George Henry Morse who was born the fourth day of February A.D. 1837 in Walpole County of Norfolk State of Massachusetts.

He first entered the service at Watertown N.Y. March 14th 1862 in Co. D 35th N.Y. Vols. as private. He held the rank of Corporal and Sergeant. Was promoted Corporal January 1864 Sergeant July 1864 & held latter rank at close of war. Was frist (sic) discharged at Elmira, NY June 10th 1863 expiration of term of service. Re-enlisted November 10th 1863. Discharged at Readville, Mass June 10th 1865 by order from War Department discharging those who had been in "Rebel Prisons".

First engagement was at Rappahannock Station. Others Sulphur Springs, Second Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Wilderness, Spotsylvania May 12 & 15 1864 before Petersburg and mine explosion July 30, 1864. Was confined in hospitals at Washington, Nov. 1862, Baltimore Dec. 1862, Annapolis Oct. 1864 & Readville Dec. 64 & Mar., Apr. & May '65. Was taken prisoner at Mine explosion July 30, 64. Was confined in prisons at Danville Va & Libby from Aug. 1864 to Sept 14, 1864. Parolled for sickness. Considers the battle of the Wilderness and prison life the most important events in his service. States he was very sick in prison with malaria and in a critical condition. Weight reduced from 160 to 110 lbs thumb & forefinger would meet around the fleshy part of his arm. Thinks about 1/3 of those taken there (when he was captured) died from bad air, worse food and still worse water together with close confinement". An addendum added at the back of the book points out that Sgt. Morse served in the Mass. 56th.

The Mass. 56th served alongside the Mass. 57th regiment, whose service is detailed in the excellent book titled ***Mother, May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen.. The Fifty-seventh Massachusetts Veteran Volunteers in the Last Year of the Civil War.*** There one can read about all of the above-mentioned engagements. The Battle of the Wilderness has gone down in history as one of the bloodiest confrontations made during the Civil War. The mine explosion at Petersburg is famous for its uniqueness: Union troops had dug a very long tunnel under the Rebel fortifications and detonated 4 tons of gunpowder, totally surprising the Confederates. A scene in the recent movie "Cold Mountain" graphically depicts the explosion and following battle, which was considered a Union failure.

I have recently come across a passage in the ***War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld 1861-1865***, the Lt. Colonel of the Massachusetts 56th regiment, in which he graphically describes the battle at the mine explosion, where

he was taken prisoner along with Sgt. Morse. In a few paragraphs, Weld, a Harvard graduate and an eventual resident of Dedham, tells the tale of his capture and of what would be considered a war crime today:...*"As soon as we got into the crater, I did all I could to get my men together, and in some sort of shape for a fight. By that time it was almost impossible to do anything. We were as badly off then as we were in our own (rifle) pits. There was no head. Our division commander was off on the other side and did not come over with us. General Bartlett was a cripple and had his wooden leg broken, and it was almost impossible to get anything done. I came near having my head knocked off by the grape-shot two or three times. Finally the rebels charged on both our flanks. I was packed in there in the midst of the negroes.* (note: Union African-American regiments were taking part in the battle). *It was perfect pandemonium. The negroes charged into the mine, and we were packed in there like sardines in a box. I literally could not raise my arms from side to side. Finally, when the Confederates charged, those of the men nearest the rifle pits next our line got over the line and got away. Luckily most of my men I had formed there, so that they were able to get away and protect our colors.*

I got cut off and took refuge in a bomb-proof, as I could not run away, being surrounded on all sides. Pretty soon the rebels yelled, "Come out of there, you Yanks." I walked out, and the negro who had gone in there with me, and Captain Fay came out also. The negro was touching my side. The rebels were about eight feet from me. They yelled out, "Shoot the nigger, but don't kill the white man"; and the negro was promptly shot down by my side. They then grabbed my sword and my hat. "Come out of that hat, you Yank!" they yelled; and one of them cried, "What do you 'uns come down here and fight we 'uns for?" Then they told me to get over our embankment in their rear, which formed their second line, and I scrambled up, the bullets from our own men striking the dirt on all sides of me. I got over the embankment all right, and was walking to the rear, when I saw a negro soldier ahead of me. Three rebels rushed up to him in succession and shot him through the body. He dropped dead finally at the third shot. It was altogether the most miserable and meanest experience I ever had in my life...." Later on in his diary, Lt. Col. Weld mentions a Sgt. Morse who was taken prisoner with him on July 30, 1864 at the "mine".

Sgt. Morse was eventually imprisoned, as he mentions in his short biography. Unlike Private Hartshorn, Sgt. Morse survived his captivity and returned to Walpole where he resided at 415 Elm St. (yes, currently the address of the Elm St. School). He died in Walpole at the age of 83.

His obituary, from the Walpole Times, February, 1920, courtesy of a fellow history "sleuth" at the Walpole Historical Society makes excellent reading:

The funeral services of Mr. George H. Morse were conducted in the Unitarian church Sunday, February 15, at 2 p.m., by the Pastor, Rev. Charles E. Beals. There were extensive floral offerings and he was enshrouded in the American flag which he so dearly loved. Two of his favorite hymns, "All is Well" and "Lead, Kindly Light", were sung by the Unitarian choir. Members of the Grand Army of the Republic and Sons of Veterans and many friends attended. Mr. John S. Allen, Mr. Fred V. Bell, Mr. Waldo Pratt, Mr. Chester Donnell, Mr. Gilman Allen, Mr. Howard Battles, members of the Sons of Veterans, were pallbearers. In passing the Allen homestead the remains of Mr. Morse were saluted by his comrade and dear friend, Mr. M. W. Allen, from his bedside at the window. He was temporarily laid to rest in the vault at Maple Grove Cemetery, due to the inaccessibility of the Rural Cemetery where his final resting place will be in the Morse lot.

His is survived by his son, Elmer C. Morse.

Mr. George Henry Morse was the oldest son of Lyman and Sarah (Lewis) Morse and was born in Walpole, February 4, 1837. He was educated in the Walpole schools and in Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, N. H. He taught school in Walpole, Mass., and Fulton, N.Y., where he was when the Civil War broke out. He rode to Elmira on horseback and enlisted in Company D, 35th regiment, N.Y. Volunteers, for nine months. After being discharged from this service he returned to Walpole, went to Readville the next day and enlisted in Company A, 56th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers for three years. He fought in several of the fiercest battles of the war, some of which were second Bull Run, Wilderness, Antietam, Appomatox Court House, and Fredricksburg. He was wounded several times and was captured twice and held in the Rebel prison, once at Sibley and once at Danville.

He was home on parole in November, 1864, and voted for the re-election of President Lincoln on the 8th, being carried to the polls on a stretcher.

After the war Mr. Morse volunteered to go South to teach school under the auspices of the Freedman's Bureau of Boston. He taught in Warrenton, Va., where he met Miss Eliza Evans of Culpeper, Va., whom he married December 8, 1868. Miss Evans was of one of the first families of Virginia.

They settled in his home at 415 Elm street, which he had bought from Mr. Daniel Turner, grandfather of the present Mr. Daniel Turner.

Mr. Morse was a farmer, of which title he was very proud, and worked up to the very day he was taken sick, February 9th. He died February 13, with a smile on his face, knowing his life's work was well done.

He was a most respected citizen, a staunch prohibitionist and one of the truest Americans that ever breathed God's pure air. He was loved and respected by all who knew him and was a book of reference for many. His wonderful mind will be greatly missed.

Mr. Morse was the ninth generation in this country, being directly descended from Samuel Morse who came from England and settled in the town of Boston in 1635.

Mr. Morse was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, the Grand Army of the Republic, and several patriotic orders, including the American Legion.

The Freedmans Bureau, formed by the government during the Reconstruction years after the Civil War, was organized to provide relief and education for freed African-American slaves. One of Sgt. Morse's descendents, briefly interviewed by myself and a Walpole Historical Society member, claims that Sgt. Morse joined the Union Army because "he hated slavery".

There should be no doubt in our minds that Sgt. Morse was an intensely proud and noble American and faithful Union man who, even after "fighting for the noble cause", went one step further to assist a newly freed population of African-Americans for the betterment of us all.

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