

Who Were the Last Living Veterans of the American Civil War?

By Garry Victor Hill



Introduction:

This is a drastic condensation from the revised edition of my 419 page book *America's Last Civil War Veterans and Participants: An Investigation* (2016). For those who want more detail for coming to the conclusions, as well as source notes, a Works Cited and more information about how the last thirty survivors lived, the full book has free access on my website Garry Victor Hill. Locations for library copies can be found on webcat.

A problem arises when the question is changed slightly to who was the last surviving Civil War combatant? For of the nine who outlived the last fully verified Civil War survivor, only two claimed to have been combatants and their claims are dubious. That is a separate question and a complex one. It will be dealt with in a separate article.

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Written Without Prejudice

Who was the last survivor of America's Civil War?

This frequently asked question has caused much controversy. The has often been emphatically given as Albert Woolson (1847-1956) of Duluth, Minnesota He enlisted in October 1864 and was mustered out a year later. His service was as an artilleryman doing garrison duty in Chattanooga. He saw no combat. In terms of an easily traceable, undisputed military record in a recognised unit Albert Woolson was America's last Civil War soldier. This remains the correct answer.

However the first problem is that several others who outlived Woolson claimed service in auxiliary units, some had claims made for them and a few claimed enlistment and combat roles. While none of these people have clear undisputed evidence that verifies and some claims are disproved, some are possibilities.



Woolson during the Civil War. Courtesy of Fold 3. Creative Commons



Woolson celebrating a birthday. This original photo is the gift of Jay S. Hoar.

Of these who outlived Woolson four claimed or had claims made for them of having served the Confederacy in some supporting role. They can hardly be called veterans: participants is a more accurate term for their claimed often brief supporting service. According to a 1980s urban legend Maude Nichols Jones (1880-1957) served as an assistant apothecary to her husband who travelled around central Florida in a wagon, aiding soldiers and civilians with supplies. In reality her future husband and brother in law operated a ferry further northwards, sometimes moving Confederate troops, but her own records and marriage certificate show that Maud was born in May 1880. Maud apparently did not start the legend off.

William Allen Lundy (? -1957) claimed to have guarded a courthouse during his time in the Alabama militia and then to have served in Roddy's 4th Alabama Cavalry, but not to have been in any fighting. No enlistment document for him in either organisation exists and his birthdate in the censuses goes from 1848 to 1860. No known claim to have been in the Civil War emerges before he tried for the veteran's pension in 1932. Similar confusion exists about the birthdate and enlistment of John B. Salling (1856? 1858?- March 1959). He claimed to have scoured under floorboards in a Virginian saltpetre mine during the war's later stages. He did know the names of six Confederates involved in the little known operation and stated that he had no uniform and saw no combat. Children were used in mining in this way at this time. One relative did vouch for his service. However the wide range of census dates, his name not being on the list of soldiers employed in the mine and the lack of substantiation before he applied for a soldier's pension in 1933 all count against verification.



William A. Lunday



John B. Salling



Walter Williams

Walter Williams (1854-1959) used to be acclaimed as the last Confederate veteran. Initially he claimed to be a forager for Confederate troops in Mississippi in the war's last eleven months and as the Confederacy had many groups of boys doing this, his initial story is likely to be true. There are several Confederate cavalry enlistments in cavalry units near where he lived and who bear his name, either Walter Williams or W.W. Williams, so that they could well be his enlistment. Unfortunately in 1932 Williams boosted his age and service to claim the pension and others seem to have built on this. He was almost certainly not one of Quantrill's raiders as claimed and was not a veteran cavalryman serving regularly with John Bell Hood. He may have been briefly enlisted in one of Hood's units as a Walter Williams is enlisted there, but was dismissed for being under aged. This was in a war where fourteen year olds were regularly accepted and he would have been nine or ten in 1864.

With all three of these men there was no affirmation of Civil War service when the questions were asked in the censuses of 1910 and 1930.

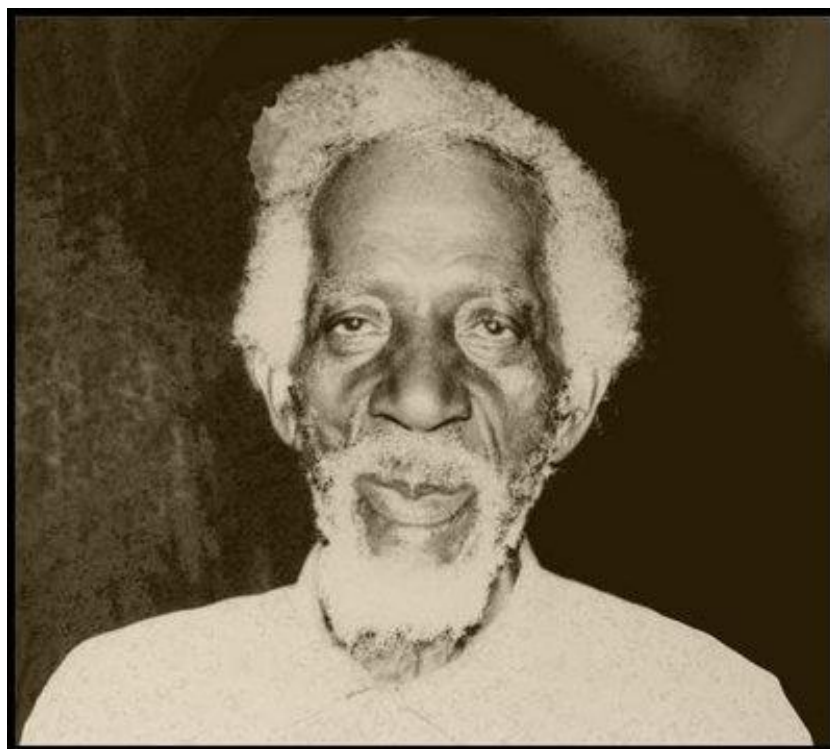
With the Union claimants to being the last Civil War veteran the answers become less clear. After Albert Woolson died on August 2nd 1956 and was described in he media as the last Union soldier, the Baker family of Guthrie Oklahoma stated to the media that am aged family member, Louis Nicholas Baker was the last living Union soldier. The family had what seemed to be his enlistment documents. At this stage Louis Nicholas Baker was too ill too talk; he died in January 1957. A prolonged media investigation started but could come to no conclusion. Given the muddled, incomplete and ambiguous nature of the evidence this is understandable. In a 1948 interview he said he served as a drummer with his father in the 6th Missouri regiment on garrison duty for three months starting in June 1861. As his claimed enlistment documents which had a variation on his name were for a soldier who served three years and three months, took part in many campaigns and was aged twenty-nine when discharged in June 1864, this cannot be him. The documents are almost certainly for his namesake father. The family legend

that he served with his father fits in with a common practice in the Civil War and is plausible, but no clear documentation has appeared to support it. His use of alternative spellings of his name, the existence of a younger brother with the same first name, several differing birthdates and places of birth in his (?) documents and the enlistments of several other Union soldiers named Lewis or Louis Baker cause confusion, not clarity. What clear documentation there is goes against verification. In 1910 he left the Civil War service census question blank and in 1930 clearly wrote no.

Another possible Union Civil War survivor was a Sioux Indian, Red Cloud (1842-1962) Strong evidence in censuses, marriage certificates and early interviews preclude the obvious scepticism of his great age, that is not the problem The lack of detailed information about what he did in the years 1861-1865 is. In the one brief reference this writer has been able to find, a 1953 interview, he did say that he was not enlisted and did no fighting. When the war started he was working in South Carolina but went north to Washington. He may have been some type of auxiliary in the Union war effort. He was described as a peacekeeper and a messenger. Was this in Washington? The massive flow of civilian refugees and deserters into the then small city would have led to tensions and negotiators would have been invaluable. He may have been involved in serving the Union elsewhere. We do not know.

Sylvester Magee (1841-1971) may have been the last Civil War survivor, but conflicting evidence makes his claim unclear and uncertain. He always stated that he was born on May 29th 1841 in North Carolina. With his father Ephraim his name appears on a will dated February 1859. This document held in the Court of Chancery Covington County Mississippi. He had not been in Mississippi long before the war broke out and he was used as a valet by his new master and others during the siege of Vicksburg. At this point accounts diverge. He stated that he escaped, joined the Union army and was wounded twice, once at the battle of Champion's Hill and once during the

seige of Vicksburg. In 1970 he showed interviewers a scar left on his arm by a war wound. Interviewers were impressed with his knowledge of the Vicksburg campaign, the way he correctly identified his master in a photograph and his general modesty and sense of veracity. However in 2000 *Genforum* put together a collection of interviews and comments by descendants and people who knew him.



Sylvester Magee

They state that he was freed after Vicksburg fell and then accepted an offer to serve as a cook and a scout in the Union forces. This version was also published in *Jet* in 1967. In a 1969 interview he claimed to have been at Gettysburg. As Gettysburg concluded on the same day that Vicksburg fell one statement must be wrong. One version of what happened to him at Vicksburg must also be wrong – or both could be. This writer found a

Sylvester Magee in the Mississippi censuses for 1920 and given his age there he would have been born in 1889 or 1890. Other census records for a Sylvester Magee in Covington County give birthdates of 1893, 1894 and 1895. This clearly indicates the unreliability of censuses. Is this the same man or a relative? In 2016 Associate Professor Max Grivno of Hattiesburg went through a collection of documents concerning Sylvster Magee. While he did find one 1940 document which gave Magee a birthdate of 1843 he also found his 1949 marriage certificate in which his age is given as sixty. Magee also fathered a child during that marriage at the supposed age of 109. This is seventeen years beyond the verified record for fathering a child and his claimed age of 130 years is sixteen years beyond the verified age for any male on the planet.

While some good evidence exists for Magee's claim, some statements conflict, the negatives are too strong and so he can only remain a possibility.

In the second half of the 1970s after Magee's death, two others were claimed to be Civil War survivors. One ridiculous Confederate claim included easily proven hoax evidence and the other for the Union was disproved by his own earlier accounts, census birthdates a marriage certificate and his own silence when exposed.

The following list of the last thirty survivors, real and claimed, is taken from my book *America's Last Civil War Veterans and Participants: An Investigation* (2016). This can be found on my website:

Garry Victor Hill.

- 1 *Pleasant Crump* died December 31st 1951 CSA *verified on enlistment documents*
- 2 *Felix Melvin Witkoski* died 3rd February 1952 CSA *evidence problems/ possible/probable*
- 3 *Thomas Edwin Ross* died 27th March 1952 CSA *confused sources/ possible /probable*
- 4 *Douglas T. Story* died 22nd April 1952 *Union* *accepted*
- 5 *Israel Aaron Broadsword* died 25th July 1952 *Union* *accepted*
- 6 *Patrick O'Leary* died 29th August 1952 CSA *verified on enlistment documents and interviews*
- 7 *Richard William Cumpston* died 5th September 1952 CSA *no evidence/ unknown/existence unlikely*
- 8 *William Loudermilk* died 18th Sept. 1952 CSA *contradictory and confused sources/ possible*
- 9 *William Jordan Bush* died 11th November 1952 CSA *verified on enlistment documents*
- 10 *Arnold Murray* died 26th November 1952 CSA *verified on enlistment documents*
- 11 *William Allen Magee* 23rd January 1953 *Union* *accepted*
- 12 *William Townsend* died 22nd February 1953 CSA *verified on enlistment documents*
- 13 *James Albert Hard* 12th March 1953 *Union* *accepted*
- 14 *William Albert Kinney* died 23rd June 1953 CSA *verified on enlistment documents*
- 15 *James E. Erwin* died 16th November 1953 CSA *contradictory sources /possible/probable*
- 16 *Sarah Frances Rockwell* died 24th November 1953 CSA *verified*
- 17 *Frank H. Mayer* died 12th February 1954 *Union* *accepted*
- 18 *W.W. Alexander* died 16th February 1954 CSA *ambiguous evidence/ possible/probable*
- 19 *Thomas Riddle* died 2nd April 1954 CSA *confused and contradictory sources/ possible.*
- 20 *Hattie Cook Carter* died 11th January 1956 CSA, *insufficient evidence/ possible/probable*
- 21 *Albert Woolson* died August 2nd 1956 *Union* *accepted*
- 22 *Louis Nicholas Baker* died 17th January 1957 *Union* *confused sources/unauthenticated/possible*
- 23 *Maude Nicholls Jones* aka *Maud Martin* died May 1957 CSA *garbled legends disproved*
- 24 *William Allen Lundy* died 1st September 1957 CSA *unauthenticated/controversial*
- 25 *John B. Salling* died 16th March 1959 CSA *insufficient evidence/ confused sources/ possible*
- 26 *Walter Williams* died 19th December 1959 CSA *some claims seem true, others are not*
- 27 *Red Cloud* died 4th October 1962 *Union* *insufficient evidence/ possible/probable*
- 28 *Sylvester Magee* died 15th October 1971 *Union & CSA* *conflicting & insufficient evidence*
- 29 *Francis Healey* died 1977 (!) (?) CSA *proven hoax evidence given/unknown/ nearly impossible*
- 30 *Charlie Smith* died 5th October 1979 *Union* *His 1978 claim is disproved by his earlier statements.*



A monument to the 130th Pennsylvania at Antietam. Public Domain

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