**Indulging Research Tangents: Interpreting Evidence Through the Lens of Age Differences**

Blog Post published by Daniel Farrell on Friday, September 30, 2022

*In this post for the H-CivWar Author's Blog, Daniel Farrell shares research on and discusses the challenges of interpreting people’s behavior through the lens of age and age differences. Ultimately, how much emphasis should historians place on tangents, however interesting?*

During some recent archival research, I came across what I considered to be a somewhat humorous letter. In September 1863, a Marylander, Samuel Freeland, petitioned the War Department to release his son, a Confederate soldier imprisoned at Fort Delaware. His rationale? His son was allegedly weak-minded and easily tricked – he wrote that although his “boy was between 19 and 20 years of age [when] he left me...I do not consider his intellectual development superior to the majority of boys [aged] 12 or 14 years. I plead that evil influences, thrown around him by bad companions, and being of an excitable temperament...succeeded in entrapping him to join their traitorous cause.” Whether Freeland honestly considered his son’s “intellectual development” lacking is not the main point. Instead, it’s how he leaned into a common stereotype about young people: that they are impulsive, irresponsible, and immature. The petition similarly prompted me to think more deeply about how 19\textsuperscript{th}-century Americans thought about age and maturity and how it relates to my research surrounding loyalty and treason.

To be sure, this is not the first time I have thought about the issue. Throughout my research, I have uncovered a few interesting examples where age was an explicit concern, but I’ll focus on two. The first relates to young Confederate prisoners with social and familial ties to the Border South. The second focuses on how older Americans, typically over forty-five, sought alternative ways to serve the Union war effort because they were too old to serve in the army. In general, I am not sure if Civil War historians have placed much emphasis on analyzing how one’s age or perceived maturity influenced behaviors and actions. Childhood appears to be one major exception. An older work by James Martin (*The Children’s Civil War*) explores the myriad of ways children experienced the war, but often through a lens legible to adults. The conflict forced many children to “grow up” early and take on the burden of adult issues, such as loss, anguish, duty, patriotism, increased work responsibilities, and so on. I imagine newer works on the mental and physical
disabilities of Civil War veterans account for age, as the aging process certainly exacerbated such maladies. Nevertheless, that is not quite the same as how one’s stage in life informs one’s outlook.

As noted already, age and maturity are common tropes in petitions to free Confederate prisoners. And whereas the contents of Freeland’s plea were unique, the overall theme was not. Throughout the conflict, the War Department allowed military prisoners to petition for release, assuming they could unambiguously demonstrate their loyalty to the Federal government. Case files often included statements from the prisoner, family members, neighbors, and prominent politicians. The War Department intended the program to be used by civilian and political prisoners who believed that military authorities arrested them unjustly. However, Confederate soldiers, primarily from the Border South, also took advantage of the opportunity. A common story occurs throughout these petitions: a Kentucky Unionist family is distraught over their young son’s decision to join the Confederate army. Often, the parents cite age and immaturity as the culprit. The “boy” was not old enough to understand the virtues of loyalty and patriotism. Older secessionists manipulated him by preying upon his youth and inexperience. Typically, families made these claims on behalf of boys aged 15-18 at the time of their enlistment, with the War Department routinely taking pity on, and releasing, prisoners from this age group. Many parents tried to stretch this argument to include slightly older men, 19-24, often with less success, unless there were other mitigating factors. Here, military officials drew distinctions between age-appropriate conceptions of loyalty and treason. One petition illustrates the point well: the father of a 24-year-old prisoner wrote the familiar script, only to receive a sarcastic reply from Ethan Allen Hitchcock, who assessed the case. “A ‘youth’ of 24,” Hitchcock mocked, was old enough to realize he was committing treason against the United States. Thus, the War Department denied the petition.

That does not imply that petitions solely came from the Border South and always involved young men. In a different example, age and maturity played a prominent role in Hitchcock’s verdict. A newspaper editor from New Orleans argued he was always a Unionist but admitted that secessionists pressured him to join the army. Hitchcock was skeptical, sarcastically noting that secessionists could not have easily swayed an educated man, actively employed in the business of “popular persuasion” (I.E., the newspaper business), into treason. In other words, Hitchcock felt he was either lying or should have known better based on his age and life experience.
The material I have found on older Americans, however, is perhaps more consistent with themes emerging within the literature on disability. Many men who were too old to serve in the federal army attempted to challenge ideas surrounding age and infirmity, arguing that they were still “useful” and physically fit. At the outbreak of the war, sixty-seven-year-old Jonathan Watts offered to form a militia company. He assured Indiana Governor Oliver Morton that despite his old age and having sustained a combat injury in the War of 1812, he was “able and willing to serve in any capacity.” The “old citizens, aged 45 to 60 years” of Madison, Indiana, similarly informed the governor in April 1861 of their value. About one hundred of these older men formed a home guard to patrol the streets in search of secessionist sympathizers and to repulse any “surprise” attacks from Kentucky. A Tennessee Unionist argued that despite being fifty-seven, he wished to join the Union army and could raise seventy men to serve with him. When Philadelphia resident John Ford sought permission from the War Department to visit his wayward Confederate son, a prisoner at Point Lookout, he leveraged his heroics to demonstrate his loyalty. When he heard the news of the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania, he immediately rushed to Harrisburg with his musket, despite being an “aged man” of sixty-four.

These are only a handful of examples I have come across. It has been continuously interesting to consider how Civil War participants self-consciously engaged in ideas surrounding their age, maturity, youthfulness, etc. But while interesting to consider, I do think there is some deeper interpretive value, as well as potential pitfalls. When sifting through hundreds, if not thousands, of Civil War-era letters and documents from largely unknown persons, it is convenient to take what they write at face value without considering their ages or life experience. Unless the writer is self-conscious about their age, such as in the examples I provided, I imagine it must be exceedingly difficult to determine if one’s age influences their behaviors. Such considerations raise several questions: Do the social dynamics within a Union regiment, for example, differ for men over thirty or under thirty? Were the formation of Union leagues and similar vigilance committees in the North partially the result of anxieties over one’s usefulness and inability to join the federal army? How should we interpret the age differences of women on the home front? Guerrillas captured by the federal army are occasionally over forty-five; is that meaningful? One could endlessly ask similar hypothetical questions.

For my research on loyalty and treason, the importance of age differences are an open question. It’s a sub-theme I am interested in addressing, but the subject is outside the scope of a full analysis. It is certainly possible that it is difficult to say...
anything definitive about age groups. There will also be young people who act with unusual forbearance and wisdom, older people who behave foolishly, and everything in between. Regardless I think it is fruitful for conversation. I am interested in learning if anyone has attempted a similar analysis or has advice on balancing your primary research agenda with the litany of subthemes that inevitably crop up when working on a large project.

CIVIL WAR AUTHORS BLOG publishes a new post on the fourth Friday of each month. These posts reflect questions and challenges from Civil War books-in-progress, and are intended to create conversation among H-CivWar subscribers. In addition to our regular contributors, we welcome posts from guest bloggers. If you would like to contribute a guest post, please contact David Prior at dmprior@unm.edu.

Posted in: The H-CivWar Authors' Blog