

Email submitted from: jagdhistory@comcast.net at /stri/index.htm

While researching a businessman for a history column I write for the Clarksburg (W. Va.) Exponent Telegram, I discovered he was promoted from corporal to first lieutenant shortly after the battle at Stones River, in which his regiment fought. I'm enclosing the column, in the event you would like a copy for your archives to show more of Sam Gideon's life prior to and after the Civil War. The column appeared today, Jan. 10, 2010, in the Exponent Telegram. If you would like a paper copy, I will be happy to send you one. I'm a former volunteer at Stones River and wrote about the tornado there for HistoryNet.com. According to the History of Cabell County source mentioned, Gideon was later breveted a captain.

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Once, Long Ago: January 10, 2010

Sam Gideon and the new city of Huntington

Don't you just love January – oh, not the cold and the gray and the short days, but the promise? A whole new year stretches out untrammelled. January always reminds me of Samuel Johnson's comment about second marriages: It is the triumph of hope over experience.

Be that as it may, thinking about hope and opportunities got me thinking about one Sam Gideon who, like so many, came to America with nothing but hope and ambition.

Born in Wurtemberg, Germany, Oct. 19, 1836, he came to America when he was 20, penniless and alone in a country where he couldn't even speak the language.

He made his way to a family friend living in Rock Island, Ill., and quickly learned English. It is said he witnessed the 1858 debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas and became a follower of Lincoln. After the Civil War began during Lincoln's presidency, Gideon joined the 27th Illinois Volunteer Infantry.

His service record describes him as a merchant, five-feet-seven-and-one-half-inches tall with brown hair and eyes and a sandy complexion. He was a corporal in Company G before being promoted to 2nd lieutenant at Murfreesboro, Tenn., on Jan. 20, 1863. Three weeks earlier, his regiment had seen heavy fighting at the "Slaughter Pens" area in the battle of Stones River.

Just months after the war ended in 1865, he married Dora Eppinger, and they took up residence in Manchester, Ohio. Then he heard about this new town that was being built.

Railroad mogul Collis P. Huntington had purchased 5,000 acres along the Ohio River downstream from the mouth of the Guyandotte. The spot, known as Holderby's Landing, made the perfect western terminus for Huntington's Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, a place where cargo and passengers could easily be transferred from boat to rail and vice versa. He modestly named the town he founded in 1871 Huntington.

Samuel Gideon saw the possibilities this location offered as well. He and his wife arrived in 1872 and established a retail store that would become known as "the store that was born with Huntington." Gideon quickly became a leader in the new community.

Reportedly, he was a member of Huntington's first volunteer fire company, personally underwrote Huntington's first fair, and purchased the city's first electric light plant. Not bad for someone who had once been a penniless immigrant with no command of the language.

He was the first president of the board of education and served on that board for most of the next 25 years. A member of the city council, he was commissioner and president of the county court when the Cabell County courthouse was built and was a leader in developing good roads in the county. He retained pride in his war service and was commander of the local post of the Grand Army of the Republic veterans' organization.

In 1884, Gideon and Emanuel Biern organized the first minyan for Orthodox Jews, a quorum of 10 adult males required by Jewish law for public worship, according to the West Virginia Jewish History Web site. The congregation did not employ a rabbi, and Gideon was often the lay leader of services, according to "Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: a history," by Amy Hill Shevitz (The University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

Sam Gideon passed away June 20, 1923, four months to the day after his wife's death, yet, in a way, he is still giving to Huntington.

The Huntington Herald-Dispatch reported on Nov. 15, 2009, that a building erected along 3rd Avenue in 1915 to house the Sam Gideon Clothing and Furnishings Store was recently restored by its new owner, Dr. Joseph Touma, as part of Touma's personal campaign to revitalize downtown. Fittingly, he is also an immigrant, a man from Syria who came to Huntington 35 years ago.

Unless otherwise noted, today's information comes from "Representative Men and Women of Cabell County, W. Va." by Mary McKendree Johnson (self-published, 1929).
