

# The *New Paltz Times* Reports the Civil War: Sergeant Rooster Ackert in Cajun Country

Laurence M. Hauptman

“We are now in the land of alligators and I am pleased that we shall, I mean the 156th, do its part in driving the rebels out of the Teche country....”

—Sergeant Charles J. Ackert

Company A, 156th New York State Volunteer  
Infantry, 19th Army Corps, Army of the Gulf,  
reporting from Berwick, Louisiana, in the  
*New Paltz Times*, May 1, 1863

In recent days, as a result of American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, print and other media journalists have received both praise and criticism for their reporting. A new term—“embedded reporter”—has now entered the lexicon of American English. Some of these war correspondents, such as NBC newsman David Bloom, have made the ultimate sacrifice in covering the American march to Baghdad. Others, such as Fox Network’s Geraldo Rivera, have been censured for providing information about American troop movements. In late 2004, Edward Lee Pitts of the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* was praised *and* criticized for his role in helping an active member of the Tennessee Army National Guard draft a pointed question to Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld about the appalling lack of armor on American military vehicles in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

The role of reporters in war has long been a subject for historians. The Civil War was no exception. Much has been written about famous Midwestern reporters such as Sylvanus Cadwalader and Whitelaw Reid; the coterie of fine New York City journalists including Albert D. Richardson, George W. Smalley, and Henry Villard; and the pioneer foreign correspondent of the *London Times*, William Howard Russell. Most previous studies of Civil War journalists have focused on



**Charles J. Ackert, “The Rooster,”  
publisher-editor-journalist-soldier from New Paltz**



**Mrs. Ackert (Eliza Varick), “Mrs. Publisher”**

ACKERT, ELIZA. THE NEW PALTZ TIMES. 1860-1909. TIMES PRINTING OFFICE, NEW PALTZ, NY. 1909. PAMPHLET COLLECTION. HUGUENOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NEW PALTZ, NY.

reporters from major urban areas who were assigned by their editors to cover the horrendous conflict between North and South.<sup>2</sup> Unlike these studies, the present article focuses on Charles J. Ackert, a publisher-editor-journalist from New Paltz, whose population was slightly more than 2,000 in 1860. Ackert was also a soldier. Nicknamed “The Rooster,” he served as Fifth Sergeant, later Fourth Sergeant, in the Union army from the summer of 1862 to late December 1863.<sup>3</sup>

Akert’s unique role as a soldier-war correspondent and his openness about the Union’s military leadership and strategy set his reports apart from most other Civil War journalists. Ackert sent his dispatches to his wife, Eliza Varick, marked “Mrs. Publisher.” She then printed them in the *New Paltz Times*. The articles are surprisingly frank about the problems faced by the Union army and its enlisted men, as well as the abilities or incompetence of the military’s high command.

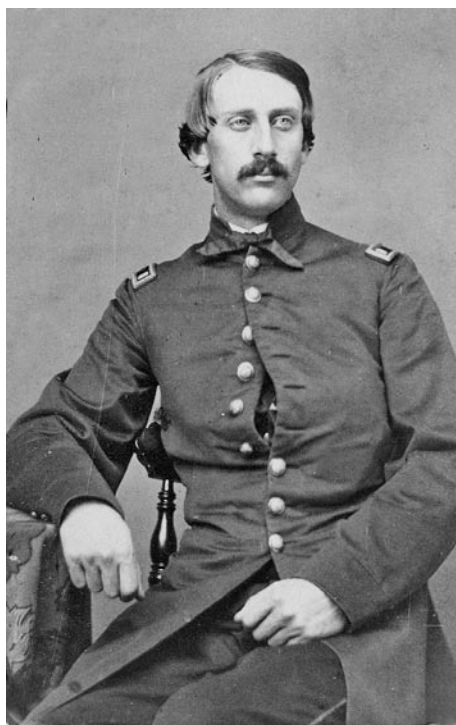
The sergeant’s remarkable coverage of the war occurred largely during the Union army’s campaigns in Louisiana—from New Orleans to Alexandria—where his regiment, the 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry, part of the 19th Corps and popularly known as the “Mountain Legion,” spent eighteen months of its military service.<sup>4</sup> Ackert was in Company A, serving in General Nathaniel Banks’ Department of the Gulf. Company A was mostly recruited from New Paltz, and a significant number of its soldiers (although not Ackert) were descendants of the Huguenots, French-speaking Protestant refugees.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, during their tour of duty in 1863 and 1864, these troops spent most of their days in Louisiana’s Cajun Country, whose white inhabitants were largely descendants of French-speaking Catholic refugees.<sup>6</sup> For much of its military service in Louisiana, the Mountain Legion was largely responsible for patrolling the lower Mississippi and its tributaries, a region in which the Confederates attempted to run the Union blockade.<sup>7</sup>

Akert saw Cajun Country as a strange and exotic world, one that had to be explained in his descriptive columns to his unknowing readers back home. To help them understand, he constantly contrasted the unique climate, flora, and fauna of Louisiana with his Hudson Valley homeland.<sup>8</sup> For example, he noted that the “slimy water” there was filled with strange creatures—alligators—which he insisted were more numerous than northern tadpoles.<sup>9</sup> He compared the Mississippi’s flatboats with those that plied the Hudson, or ironclads on southern waters with Ulster County canal boats.<sup>10</sup> The soldier-reporter proudly claimed that the “rebels don’t like our Ulster style fast travelers”—Union gunboats on patrol on the Mississippi.<sup>11</sup> He contrasted Baton Rouge with Kingston, telling his readers that the northern city “I think is bigger.”<sup>12</sup> He drew comparisons between the Louisiana sugar plantations along the river with the farms of New Paltz.<sup>13</sup>

Startled by his visit to an immense sugar plantation, he told his readers to imagine “one man owning half the town of New Paltz....”<sup>14</sup> Ackert frequently complained about the exorbitant wartime prices for food and other commodities compared with those back home. He proudly noted that Orange County butter, Ulster County hay and apples, and Irish potatoes from the North were being sold in Union-occupied New Orleans, but the latter were being marketed at “double the price at home.”<sup>15</sup> Ackert was especially impressed by the hard labor performed by ex-slave women and insisted that Northern women did not have it so bad in contrast.<sup>16</sup> In addition, he wrote dispatches about the fear of dying in battle and the ever-present terror of disease and resulting death from malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever, all present in the low-lying bayou world of southern Louisiana.

Along with the entire Mountain Legion, Sergeant Ackert faced Confederate firepower on April 13, 1863 at the Battle of Fort Bisland, near Pattersonville in Louisiana’s Teche (Bayou Teeche) country. During the long siege of Port Hudson that followed, Company A came under attack while successfully guarding an ammunition train outside the Confederate stronghold. In June 1863, the Mountain Legion also participated in two assaults on Brashear City, an important food supply center for the Confederates. After that, until Ackert’s return to New Paltz in February 1864, Company A was largely detailed to picket and patrol duty.<sup>17</sup>

The sergeant was “no run-of-the-mill” reporter but an experienced journalist who had a long record of achievement in the publishing business. Ackert was born in Hyde Park, Dutchess County, on May 1, 1830. His father, Samuel, was a mason from Rhinebeck; his mother was Sarah Ann Sleight of Hyde Park. After attending school, he was sent at the age of fourteen to apprentice and learn the trade of printer in the office of the *Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*. He married Eliza Varick



Sol Hasbrouck

JOSHUA P. LEFEVRE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM, 1860S. PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, HUGENNOT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NEW PALTZ, NY.



Peter Lefevre



Johannes Lefevre

JOSAH P. LEFEVRE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM, 1860S. PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, HUDSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NEW PALTZ, N.Y.

Silvernail at the Congregational Church in Poughkeepsie in 1851. In the next decade, Ackert served in different capacities at several mid-Hudson newspapers: foreman of the *Highland Democrat*; pressman at the *Poughkeepsie Daily Press*; head of the mechanical department at the *Amenia Times*; and editor and publisher of the *American Banner* (later renamed the *Dutchess County Times*) as well as the *American Citizen*, which he moved from Rhinebeck to Pine Plains and renamed the *Pine Plains Herald*.<sup>18</sup>

In July 1860, backed by 150 subscribers who paid a one-dollar annual rate, Ackert and his wife established the *New Paltz Times*. In his first editorial on July 6, 1860, he promised to publish a “Family Journal” that would “be devoted to the best interests of all classes, ages and sexes” and would be especially helpful to all farmers. He pledged that his newspaper would be both “interesting and reliable” and that he would take “pains to collect and give to its readers, a concise summary of all the leading incidents that are continually transpiring, so that they will be well informed upon all topics of general and local interest.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Ackert was later a leading Ulster County Democrat, he reflected much of the town’s pro-Lincoln Republican sentiments from the time of secession (December 1860–April 1861) through Appomattox. He was quick to blame radi-

cal Southerners and fanatical abolitionists for the war; however, he saw loyalty to Lincoln and the war effort as essential to preserve the Union. He frequently castigated dissenters as disloyal Copperheads.<sup>20</sup>

After the Civil War, the newspaper was an organ of the Democratic Party. Always active politically, Ackert later became New Paltz town clerk, town supervisor, a New York State assemblyman, and head of the Democratic Party of Ulster County. The success of the Democrat-leaning *New Paltz Times* led Ralph LeFevre to establish a second town newspaper in 1867. The Republican-leaning *New Paltz Independent* soon challenged the Ackerts' paper for readership and advertising in the small community. After Charles J. Ackert's death, his wife continued to publish the newspaper until her death in 1916. Subsequently, the newspaper was merged with the *New Paltz Independent*.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Ackert could have escaped military service—he was exempt because he was a volunteer fireman (and fire commissioner of New Paltz). Nevertheless, he enlisted on August 9, 1862.<sup>22</sup> The thirty-two-year-old newspaperman joined up with many of his New Paltz neighbors. In Company A, approximately seventy-five percent of the soldiers were farmers. It also included eleven laborers; six carpenters; four boatmen; two blacksmiths, schoolteachers, and musicians; and one butcher, mechanic, miller, sailor, and teamster. Ackert was the only newspaperman listed in the official roster.<sup>23</sup> Companies A and B were recruited largely by Edmund Eltinge, president of New Paltz's Huguenot Bank. Eltinge's twenty-three-year-old son, Peter, soon received a commission as second lieutenant, serving capably as commander of Company E and later Companies A and B.<sup>24</sup>

The formation of the Mountain Legion began in the late summer of 1862 at Camp Samson (near Kingston), where training commenced. Soon, the regiment was ferried to Rhinebeck, where it boarded the *Rip Van Winkle* for New York City. In lower Manhattan, the regiment set up temporary quarters in "Park Barracks" (in front of City Hall), and the men began their adjustment to the soldiering life.<sup>25</sup> In the November 21, 1862, issue of the *New Paltz Times*, Sergeant Ackert reported that two recruits had contracted measles and that several of the younger soldiers were already suffering from homesickness, "a natural consequence of having not been away from home or visited the city before...."<sup>26</sup> After some instruction in the handling and firing of Enfield rifles, the Mountain Legion was sent, with 10,000 other troops, for further instruction to the major recruitment and training camp at Riker's Island.<sup>27</sup>

On December 3, 1862, the regiment boarded the steamer *M. Sandford* in New York harbor, setting sail for Louisiana. Off the southern tip of Florida, the ship hit Carrysport Reef because of the carelessness of the ship's pilot. The soldiers,

who were already suffering from seasickness, had to evacuate the vessel quickly. Eventually, they made their way to Key West. After a brief stay, the Mountain Legion boarded the government transport *McClellan*, which traversed the Gulf and reached the Mississippi River and New Orleans at Christmas time.<sup>28</sup> Ackert described the lower Mississippi–Gulf region: “The waters of the Wallkill will also at any time, be more palatable than what we have had for the past two weeks—warm and dirty ruin water.”<sup>29</sup>

In his first two columns after he and the regiment arrived in New Orleans, which had been occupied by the Union army since April 1862, the sergeant commented about the wide streets, the unusual cemeteries with their “vaults built of brick or boards, on top of the ground” (because of the city’s constant flooding), its costly churches, and its majestic St. Charles Hotel, which he compared with the Astor Hotel—Manhattan’s finest. Yet, he concluded that the city’s tallest buildings were only three stories high and “in architectural beauty are much inferior to those in New York City.” To Ackert, New Orleans matched up well in one area: Its market buildings were better arranged and cleaner than any found in the North.<sup>30</sup> The soldier-reporter chided the city’s residents for ignoring the inscription on Andrew Jackson’s equestrian statue in Jackson Square—“The Union must and shall be preserved.”<sup>31</sup> His sense of morality was further offended by what he considered to be the immorality of the city’s residents:

Another thing I noticed which would not be tolerated in any northern city or village, is the almost universal desecration of the Sabbath by the citizens. Stores and markets are open, and all kinds of business generally is carried on as openly and with as little concern as any day of the week. All along the levees peddlers with wares of every description were busy in disposing of the same. Also places of amusement were open and seemed to be doing a good business.<sup>32</sup>

Although no supporter of abolitionism, Ackert soon expressed outrage, which he conveyed to his readers in New Paltz, about the vestiges of slave markets in the city. His article published on February 13, 1862, revealed his strong feelings: “The ‘signs’ are still up on the different buildings in the city of New Orleans, with the names of those who sold slaves previous to the rebellion. What a comment on a Christian and intelligent people?”<sup>33</sup> Although he fought the war to reunite the nation and to punish the “secesh” [his words], Ackert by 1863 had little tolerance for and was fed up with slavery’s defense by the Southern white planter class, whom he blamed for the war. Moreover, he was especially annoyed at remarks by Southern belles, who often referred to Yankee soldiers as “Lincoln’s rats.”<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, over time Ackert modified his views somewhat about Southerners, especially about the more cooperative merchants of New Orleans, the poor rural folk suffering from the horrors of war, and even some planters themselves. By the time he departed Louisiana for home in 1864, one could clearly see a change in his harsh attitudes: “To deny to the South either refinement or honesty, is contrasted by the number of true gentlemen it has bred, as polished as any the world can produce.”<sup>35</sup> Ackert explained his reversal of position, suggesting that Louisianans were no longer seeing the Yankees as Goths or Vandals. Once again he used a Hudson Valley analogy to explain how this transformation had taken place: “They [Louisianans] are looking at Northerners with the wonder of Rip Van Winkle, after his prolonged siesta.”<sup>36</sup> His new view was partly conditioned by an invitation to the Perkins’ plantation in Baton Rouge at Christmas time in 1863, where his troops were served excellent food and danced until the wee hours of the morning with Southern belles who were “neatly dressed.”<sup>37</sup>

Just as he had a change of opinion about white southerners, Ackert’s views about blacks changed considerably—and for the better—while in military service. Even before his departure for Louisiana, he and many other Northern troops viewed blacks with disdain. Unlike certain soldiers in his company who “amused” themselves by playing pranks on blacks, Ackert never did so but simply saw freed slaves as camp entertainers for the troops or needed agricultural laborers for the Union army.<sup>38</sup> From his landing in New Orleans and throughout his service in Louisiana, Ackert spent much of his time describing black Louisianans. Coming from a mid-Hudson community with a small percentage of black residents, Ackert commented about New Orleans: “In no city in the Union, for I consider New Orleans, while the soldiers remain ours—can there be found such a mixture of races. Negroes are of every shade, and those who call themselves white look as if they had half a dozen mixtures in them.” The Creole culture of the residents baffled him: “We counted some different races selling oranges, not one out of five could we make understand what we were talking about....”<sup>39</sup> Yet, he soon became annoyed that the newly liberated slaves refused to work the plantations, which he felt was a necessity of war, to supplement the Union food supplies.<sup>40</sup> One month after the Emancipation Proclamation and the formal Union recruitment of black soldiers began, Ackert was startled to see “two Negro regiments armed and equipped the same as the 156th regiment N.Y.S.V.”<sup>41</sup>

Later, he reported that blacks made “tolerably good looking soldiers” and that the plan was for them to “do most of the garrison duty south the coming summer.” In stereotypical fashion, Ackert hoped that this plan was true since the ex-slaves “are acclimated and can stand the heat much better than northern soldiers who



have recently arrived here.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, Ackert was to have an epiphany on May 27, 1863, one that permanently affected him throughout the rest of his life. During the siege of Port Hudson, the 1st (later the 73rd United States Colored Troops) and the 3rd Louisiana Native Guards, comprised of former slaves commanded by white officers, advanced across open ground against the well-fortified position of the 39th Mississippi. Although repulsed, losing more than 400 men, the black troops demonstrated their bravery and commitment to the Union cause.<sup>43</sup> Ackert witnessed their heroism, later writing in the *New Paltz Times*: “We have some negro regiments here, and so far have done good fighting. The rebs don’t like the idea of our enlisting negroes to fight and I understand if they take any of them prisoners, will show them no mercy.”<sup>44</sup>

From that time onward, Ackert urged recruitment of blacks. He chided former slaveowners for referring to blacks as “NEGRO BRUTES” and insisted that they made “good soldiers.” He praised Major Charles Bostwick, his acquaintance from Amenia, in Dutchess County, for his willingness to command the 1st Louisiana Engineers (Colored) Regiment.<sup>45</sup> Although not modern in his views about blacks, after the war Ackert helped Jacob Wynkoop, the first black homeowner in New Paltz, to secure his Civil War pension. (Wynkoop was one of the black soldiers who had fought so bravely at Port Hudson.)<sup>46</sup>

Although reporters during the Civil War faced severe restrictions in their movements and censorship of their writings, Sergeant Ackert appears to have had a free hand. In a war in which the Union military controlled the telegraph lines, and federal officials gave sweeping powers to H.E. Thayer, the Union’s official censor, to restrict even harmless dispatches, Ackert succeeded in freely reporting about, as well as openly criticizing, Union military policies.<sup>47</sup> Although there was usually a two- to three-week gap between the date of Ackert’s dispatches and their publication in the *New Paltz Times*, the enemy could have easily gathered useful information about General Banks’ command by reading the reporter’s articles. While stationed at Baton Rouge in early April 1863, more than a month before the full Union assault on Port Hudson began, Ackert revealed troop strength and the number of soldiers fit for duty. He indicated that the Union army had 40,000 men and a supply line eight miles long, and that a “great struggle” was “soon to take place up the [Mississippi] river.”<sup>48</sup> In April and May, he provided his readers with locations of the Army of the Gulf and the type and extent of Union reconnaissance around Port Hudson.<sup>49</sup> Importantly, he described the capabilities of General Banks’ mounted cavalry, which Ackert insisted could be used to pursue Louisiana and Texas Confederate guerrillas. Well in advance of General Banks’ ill-fated 1864 Red River campaign, the reporter revealed the Union’s future plans.<sup>50</sup>

Ackert was also quite critical of key aspects of military life. On February 6, 1863, he criticized how officers received their commissions as lieutenants or surgeons. Calling it a “Government robbing” process, the sergeant described how these aspiring officers would do anything to secure their commissions, even enlisting “men who could not stand wet feet” or sleep “on damp ground,” knowing full well that they “were not fit for a soldier.”<sup>51</sup> In his articles, he castigated the army brass for its slowness in crushing the enemy; for protecting secessionist planters and merchants who were lying about their newfound loyalty to the Union; for not suppressing the activities of war profiteers and mercenary sutlers with Confederate sympathies; and for allowing cowards to enlist, attracted merely by the sizable military bounties paid to them.<sup>52</sup> Toward the end of his military service, Ackert expressed his strong displeasure at the military’s practice of allowing substitutes as paid replacements for those conscripted, referring to these new “soldiers” as “poor apologies for men.”<sup>53</sup> He and other members of the 156th, many of whom had not been paid in months, were well aware that men were being recruited in Kingston by being promised \$325 for their enlistment, and that the town of New Paltz was scheduled to follow suit.<sup>54</sup>

Ackert criticized the supercilious attitudes of commissioned officers toward enlisted men and noncommissioned officers, as well as the arbitrary restrictions about the distribution of whiskey rations. In February 1863, the man who later became president of the New Paltz Reform Society (whose aim was to advocate temperance), bluntly put his complaints in print:

The commissioned officers of the 156th are on their ‘dig.’ They will not allow an enlisted man to eat, sleep or drink with them, and hardly to speak to them. But such is discipline. I am a little inclined to think if we ever get in an engagement, some of them will be afraid to play ball with us. The ‘catchers,’ you know, are generally ‘played out’ when they receive a ball. But I notice that the officers of the 156th are not the only ones who wish to show their bringing up, or, in other words, how a little office will elevate them. An officer gets intoxicating beverages to drink—so can a colored citizen; but an enlisted man, or ‘contraband,’ is denied the privilege. Now I hold that a ‘little’ of the ‘criter,’ after being exposed to the cold and chilling rains of winter, is just the article to enliven one. But thanks to Gen. Banks, who issued the edict, I think I can hear some of your readers say—it is a ‘good thing.’ Well, I for one don’t see it.<sup>55</sup>

At no time did General Banks or other military officials reprimand Ackert for his reports. The sergeant’s military record was spotless, except for a minor

drinking bout that made him absent from roll call.<sup>56</sup> Captain Peter LeFevre of H Company of the 156th later wrote about how Ackert and his company faced heavy fire at the Battle of Port Hudson, “lying down in the furrows of the cane field, listening to the music of the bullets as they came whistling along the ground, searching for a head, that might perchance, be a little too high.”<sup>57</sup> In a letter that appeared in the *New Paltz Times* after the war, LeFevre, wrote that Ackert “always showed himself an active, brave, intelligent sergeant; one who took great pride in doing his duty well and promptly.”<sup>58</sup>

The sergeant understood that his community back home had one overriding concern—the well-being of their sons and neighbors in the war. Much of Ackert’s reporting dealt with the health of the soldiers in the Mountain Legion, and not just in his own Company A. In rather typical fashion, he reported on April 17, 1863: “The health of the regiment is poor indeed, colds, rheumatism and dysentery in all its various stages seem to be prevailing complaints.” In this same report, he noted that his men feared summer duty in the deep South because during that season they were more susceptible to diseases associated with the region. To die off from one of these, he wrote, was “worse than the enemy’s bullet.”<sup>59</sup>

Ackert’s articles were filled with details about the health of his company, regiment, or corps, as well as the quality of care at Union hospital facilities. These concerns were clearly not misguided or exaggerated. Of the nineteen Union soldiers in Company A who perished while in service in Louisiana, only one was killed by the Confederates. Eleven died of either typhoid or dysentery.<sup>60</sup> Union troops were well aware that 9,000 to 11,000 of the 75,000 to 80,000 residents of New Orleans had perished in the epidemic of 1853, the most devastating yellow fever scourge in American history.<sup>61</sup>

Despite new medical facilities and improved public health policies and regulations initiated by General Benjamin Butler in 1862, Union troops in the Mississippi Delta were more affected by disease than by combat. In his first report from New Orleans, Sergeant Ackert mentioned that 300 to 400 soldiers in Banks’ Army of the Gulf had been hospitalized in the main marine hospital in the city, where they were suffering from “the chill and swamp fever, in many cases proving fatal.”<sup>62</sup> From March through May 1863, half of the Mountain Legion’s nearly 1,000 men, including Ackert, were suffering from dysentery, rheumatism, and typhoid. The soldiers were filling up Union hospital beds from New Orleans to Brashear City. By the end of May, twenty-five of the 120 men in Company A were in military hospitals suffering from various diseases.<sup>63</sup> In effect, Ackert was lobbying for improved army medical care by constantly bringing his fellow troops’ major concern to the attention of friends and family on the home front.

*New Paltz Times*

August 15, 1862

## Secession at Home

We have not before mentioned the shameful, yet undeniable fact, that our town is cursed with noisy secessionists. We have some in our village who even go so far as to discourage enlistments. Telling those who are foolish enough to listen to them that they will not get the bounties offered, and c. Now this is all wrong. Our country is in peril, and calling the war “an abolition on,” does not restore peace and harmony. She wants every able-bodied man—those who believe that not one star should be erased from the firmament of the States—to come forward and freely offer his services. And while we are writing this, several yong men are being mustered into service from this town, and while they are gone, shall the contemptible sneaks at home be allowed to breathe forth their venomous anathemas against government? No! We answer, No!

YOUNG MEN OF ULSTER—Now is the time for the young men of New Paltz, Plattekill, Gardiner, Shawangunk, and Rosendale to come forward and help fill up the Company now forming from these towns. The officers are qualified for their respective positions, and there should be no delay. Meetings will be held at the following places, during this coming week:

At John Upright’s Hotel, Gardiner,  
on Thursday evening August 20th.

At C. Schoonmakers’s Hotel, New Paltz,  
on Thursday evening August 21st.

At Wm. Steen’s Hotel, New Paltz,  
on Friday evening August 22nd.

The following speakers are expected to be present:

Hon. T.R. Westbrook; Ja’s G. Graham, Esq.; J.O. Hasbrouk,  
and probably, Capt. Thomas A. Glover, of Sickles’ Brigade.

Capt. Griggs, or Lieut’s Lefever and Elting will be in attendance  
to receive Recruits.

In camp, May 28, 1863

Mrs. Publisher: The excitement here in this locality for the past four days has been very great. Several fights have taken place between our forces and the rebels outside of their works, but to-day they are contented to remain inside of the fort, which is very strong. They have felled the woods which surrounds it, making a charge upon their ranks almost an impossibility. A great many have been killed on both sides, and the wounded are numerous. I visited one of the hospitals—out in the woods in open air—and I saw a sickening sight, but a soldier soon gets used to it. The surgeons were busy in attending to wounded men, dressing wounds, amputating limbs, &c., and the number of legs and arms that were cut off and thrown under a table, as a butcher would a piece of waste meat, convinced me that war was a horrible as well as a mangling business to engage in at \$13 a month, and paid when they get ready at that, for our regiment has not been paid off since December 31st, Government owing the defenders of the compact for five months. But of all gallant soldiers I saw lying on the ground awaiting their turn for treatment, I heard not a groan! Only regrets that they were for the rest of this campaign deprived of assisting their comrades. Chloroform was administered before a limb was taken off.

May 29

The rebels still hold possession of Port Hudson, but before this reaches you I have no doubt it will be in our possession. We have some negro regiments here, and so far have done good fighting. The rebs don't like the idea of our enlisting negroes to fight, and I understand if they take any of them prisoners, will show them no mercy. The 156th regiment, N.Y.V., has not lost a man yet, and it is doubtful whether they get in the battle—being detailed for other duty. C.J.A.

Ackert graphically pictured medical practices at field hospitals, describing the horrors of surgeons' amputations at Port Hudson:

A great many have been killed on both sides, and the wounded are numerous. I visited one of the hospitals—out in the woods in open air—and I saw a sickening sight, but a soldier soon gets used to it. The surgeons were busy in attending to wounded men, dressing wounds, amputating limbs, &c., and the number of legs and arms that were cut off and thrown under a table, as a butcher would a piece of waste meat, convinced me that war was a horrible as well as a mangling business to engage in at \$13 a month, and paid when they get ready at that, for our regiment has not been paid off since December 31st, Government owing the defenders of the compact for five months. But of all gallant soldiers I saw lying on the ground awaiting their turn for treatment, I heard not a groan! Only regrets that they were for the rest of this campaign deprived of assisting their comrades. Chloroform was administered before a limb was taken off. <sup>64</sup>

Undoubtedly this graphic description of war's casualties and Ackert's reference to the government's failure to pay its long-suffering troops did not generate warm feelings at home about the Union command, the War Department in Washington, or President Lincoln.

Despite the bluntness of Ackert's reports, they never brought retaliation from the army brass. The sergeant used the initials "C.J.A." or "Rooster" at the end of his dispatches; however, both noms de plume could have been easily traced back to him. Instead of being censured for his writings, he actually was promoted and put in charge of General Banks' military newspaper, the *Port Hudson News*, suggesting that his abilities far outweighed concerns about what he was reporting.<sup>65</sup> The fact that he, along with Lieutenants Peter Eltinge and Mathias Ewen of the 156th, were sent by General Banks on a special recruiting assignment to New York City from September to November 1863 further indicates that the sergeant was well-respected and not out of favor in the 19th Corps of the Department of the Gulf. His work was recognized by General Banks, who recommended him for a commission in the summer of 1863.<sup>66</sup>

When he returned from the recruiting mission, Ackert sincerely believed that he would be mustered into his regiment as a second lieutenant. Consequently, he put his papers in, resigning from Company A as a noncommissioned sergeant. He was granted an honorable discharge.<sup>67</sup> Much to his regret, he was prevented from mustering back into his regiment as a second lieutenant since the size of the Mountain Legion, which was not up to full strength, did not warrant adding a new commissioned officer.<sup>68</sup> Despite his complaints and those registered by Lieutenant

Eltinge and Captain LeFevre, he found himself out of military service because of the snafu. Eltinge wrote home that Ackert had obtained an order from General Banks discharging him as a sergeant to “enabel [sic] him to accept a commission but he cannot get mustered.” Despite his repeated appeals, Eltinge noted: “No new second lts’ can be made in regiments below the minimum 840 men.” Eltinge believed that Ackert had no choice but to leave service: “It is certainly unjust to keep him in service as Sergt, and to compel him to act Lieut on Sergt’s pay is also pretty hard therefore I think unless he can yet manage to be mustered in he should be honorably discharged.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, Ackert formally notified the assistant adjutant of the Department of the Gulf that he was leaving military service since he couldn’t “be mustered as a second lieutenant.”<sup>70</sup>

By that time, Ackert had lost his taste for Army life, which he insisted was filled with boredom, heavy drinking, and debauchery. His declining enthusiasm for fighting Confederates, as well as health problems that plagued him for the rest of his life, also were factors in his decision to leave his colleagues, go home to his wife, and resume editorship of the *New Paltz Times*.<sup>71</sup> He wrote the last column in his role as soldier-reporter: “If the war should end soon, the country would be full of ‘dead-beats’ and pauper gentry.” He added sadly: “I am thinking that the war, instead of promoting Christianity, is causing more debauchery and criminality in communities than existed before its commencement.”<sup>72</sup>

The men of Company A threw Ackert a going-away party and gave him an overcoat as a gift of their affection.<sup>73</sup> Ackert’s postwar activities as a respected journalist, as a leader of the GAR, and as an elected politician in Ulster County further reflect on his men’s appreciation of the editor’s military service.

Sergeant Ackert’s Civil War reporting brought news about Ulster men back to their families. By being “embedded,” he was providing an immense service to the residents of New Paltz and its surrounding communities. To them his pencil was more important than the Enfield or Sharpe’s rifle on his shoulder. As a trained journalist with a decade of experience and the trust of New Paltz’s residents, he painted canvases of Louisiana—its physical geography, its architecture, and its economy—that Hudson Valley residents could understand. Ahead of his time, he dispelled romantic notions about war, challenged opinions about race held by Northerners, and called into question policies set by President Lincoln, Congress, and the War Department.

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## Notes

1. For the Rumsfeld incident, see Howard Kurtz and Thomas E. Ricks, "Reporter Prompted Query to Rumsfeld," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2004, A18. For the censure of Geraldo Rivera, see David Carr, "Pentagon Says Geraldo Rivera Will Be Removed from Iraq," *New York Times*, April 1, 2003, B14. For a one-year overview of the policy, see Verne Gay, "Back from the Front: A Year Later TV's Embedded Reporters Ponder the Merits of How They Covered the 'Drive-by War,'" *Newsday*, March 18, 2004.
2. For the most recent account, see James M. Perry, *A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents—Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000). For one of the better reporters covering the Union army, see Sylvanus Cadwalader, *Three Years with Grant as Revealed by War Correspondent Sylvanus Cadwalader*. Benjamin P. Thomas, Ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955).
3. Charles J. Ackert's Compiled Military Service Record, 156 New York State Volunteer Infantry, Co. A, Office of the U.S. Adjutant General, Records of the U.S. War Department, RG94, National Archives [hereafter cited as NA]; Charles J. Ackert Civil War Pension Record, Invalid Certificate #594513 (N.Y.) and Widow's Certificate #538648 (N.Y.), Civil War Pension Records, NA. Frederick Phisterer, Comp., *New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1865*. 3rd ed. (Albany: J. B. Lyon, 1912), V: 3822.
4. For a brief but accurate history of the Mountain Legion, see Seward R. Osborne, *The Saga of the "Mountain Legion" (156th N.Y. Vols.) in the Civil War* (Hightstown, N.J.: Longstreet House, 1994). For the history of the 19th Corps, see Richard B. Irwin, *History of the Nineteenth Army Corps* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893). Other information about the 156th can be found in Will Plank, *Banners and Bugles* (Marlboro, N.Y.: Centennial Press, 1961); however, Plank's book must be used with care since it is simply a Civil War Centennial celebratory account that contains some inaccuracies about the military involvement of Hudson Valley regiments.
5. The 54 New Paltz residents in the 156th were either members of Company A or Company E. Josiah J. Hasbrouck [Town Clerk], Register of "Officers, Soldiers and Seamen" from the Town of New Paltz...in the War of the Rebellion, MSS. in Huguenot Historical Society Library, New Paltz. See also John M. Sherwig, "Who Rallied 'Round the Flag? A Hudson Valley Community and the Civil War," unpublished MSS., Huguenot Historical Society, New Paltz.
6. For Cajun country during the Civil War, see John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1963); Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803–1877* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 58–73.
7. See, for example, the *New Paltz Times* [hereafter cited as *NPT*], March 13, 1863, 2.
8. *NPT*, March 20, 1863, 2.
9. *NPT*, May 1, 1863, 2.
10. *NPT*, March 13, 1863, 2; March 20, 1862, 2.
11. *NPT*, March 13, 1862, 2.
12. *NPT*, April 3, 1863, 2.
13. *NPT*, June 5, 1863, 2.
14. *NPT*, March 6, 1863, 2.
15. *NPT*, January 23, 1863, 2. For Ackert's complaints about prices of food items, see *NPT*, April 3, 1863, 2.
16. *NPT*, March 13, 1863, 2.
17. Osborne, *The Saga of the "Mountain Legion,"* 7.
18. Nathaniel B. Sylvester, *History of Ulster County, New York with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1880), 26–27; Alphonso



- T. Clearwater, Ed., *The History of Ulster County, New York* (Kingston, N.Y.: W. J. Van Deusen, 1907), 546; Eliza J. Ackert, *New Paltz Times, 1860–1909* (New Paltz: New Paltz Times, 1909), 2; “Charles J. Ackert,” *Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier*, June 8, 1900, 5 (obituary).
19. *NPT*, July 6, 1860, editorial.
  20. *NPT*, August 14, 1863, 2.
  21. See footnote 18. For Eliza V. Ackert, see “Miss Eliza Silvernail Ackert,” *Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier*, May 14, 1916, 21 (obituary); “Aged Woman Editor Dead in New Paltz,” *Kingston Freeman*, May 11, 1916 (obituary). For the extraordinary life of pioneer editor and publisher Eliza V. Ackert, see Laurence M. Hauptman, “Mrs. Publisher,” *Archives*, forthcoming.
  22. *NPT*, August 15, 1862, 2; September 9, 1862, 2. “Ackert, Charles J.,” 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry Co. A, Abstract of Muster Rolls, Records of the New York State Adjutant General’s Office, New York State Archives, Albany [hereafter cited as NYSA].
  23. Regimental Books, Vol. II, 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry, Company A, Office of the U.S. Adjutant General, Records of the United States War Department, RG94, NA; Josiah J. Hasbrouck, Register of “Officers, Soldiers and Seamen” from the Town of New Paltz....
  24. Edmund Eltinge and his son Peter recruited 54 New Paltz residents for the Mountain Legion. Sherwig, “Who Rallied ‘Round the Flag?..,” 24–26. *NPT*, August 15, 1862. “Eltinge, Peter,” Town Clerk’s Register of Civil War Soldiers, New Paltz, New York; “Eltinge, Peter,” 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry, Co. E, Abstract of Muster Rolls, Records of the New York State Adjutant General’s Office, NYSA.
  25. *NPT*, November 21, 1862, 2; November 28, 2; Osborne, *The Saga of the “Mountain Legion,”* 1–2.
  26. *NPT*, November 21, 1862, 2.
  27. *Ibid.*
  28. *NPT*, December 26, 1862, 2; January 2, 1863, 2; January 16, 1863, 2; Osborne, *The Saga of the “Mountain Legion,”* 1–2.
  29. *NPT*, January 16, 1863, 2.
  30. *NPT*, January 16, 1863, 2; January 23, 1863, 2.
  31. *NPT*, January 23, 1863, 2.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. *NPT*, February 13, 1863, 2.
  34. *NPT*, February 27, 1863, 2.
  35. *NPT*, January 15, 1864, 2.
  36. *Ibid.*
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. *NPT*, October 10, 1862, 2; March 6, 1863, 2; March 20, 1863, 2; April 3, 1863, 2.
  39. *NPT*, January 23, 1863, 2.
  40. *NPT*, March 20, 1863, 2; April 3, 1863, 2.
  41. *NPT*, February 6, 1863, 2.
  42. *NPT*, April 3, 1863, 2.
  43. For the Battle of Port Hudson, see Edward Cunningham, *The Port Hudson Campaign, 1862–1863* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1963); and Lawrence L. Hewitt, *Port Hudson, Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1987). Hewitt’s work incorrectly minimizes the role of the 10 companies of the 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry during this campaign. Although not directly in the frontal assault on Port Hudson, Ackert’s Company A came under Confederate fire. See *NPT*, July 3, 1863, 2 (Peter LeFevre’s account of the Battle of Port Hudson).

44. *NPT*, June 19, 1863, 2.
45. *NPT*, August 7, 1863, 2.
46. Charles J. Ackert (and Elting Crispell), General Affidavit in support of Jacob Wynkoop's application for a Civil War pension, June 17, 1893, Wynkoop, Jacob (20th U.S.C.T., Co. K), certificate #582,524, Civil War Pension Records, NA. I should like to thank Ellen James of New Paltz, who resides in the Wynkoop house, for pointing out Ackert's relationship to this African American veteran of the Civil War.
47. For press censorship in the Civil War, see David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 324–326, 333–334; and especially Menahem Blondheim, *News Over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information, 1844–1897* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 130–140. See also Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951).
48. *NPT*, April 3, 1863, 2.
49. *NPT*, March 6, 1863, 2; March 13, 1863, 2; April 3, 1863, 2; April 10, 1863, 2; April 17, 1863, 2; April 24, 1863, 2; May 1, 1863, 2; June 5, 1863, 2; June 12, 1863, 2.
50. *NPT*, August 21, 1863, 2.
51. *NPT*, February 6, 1863, 2.
52. *NPT*, January 2, 1863, 2; January 23, 1863, 2; February 6, 1863, 2; February 13, 1863, 2; August 28, 1863, 2; January 22, 1864, 2; February 12, 1864, 2.
53. *NPT*, September 23, 1863, 2. See *NPT*, February 12, 1864, 2; April 3, 1863, 2.
54. Edmund Eltinge to Peter Eltinge, December 22, 1863, January 24, 31, 1864, Eltinge-Lord Collection, Duke University.
55. *NPT*, February 13, 1863, 2. Ackert was president of the New Paltz Reform Club in the 1880s.
56. Ackert, Charles J. Compiled Military Service Record. For the drinking incident, see *NPT*, April 10, 1863, 2.
57. Peter Lefevre letter in *NPT*, July 3, 1863, 2.
58. *NPT*, December 23, 1869, 2.
59. *NPT*, April 17, 1863, 2.
60. See footnote 23.
61. John Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1990), 160. See also his *Sword of Pestilence: The New Orleans Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).
62. *NPT*, January 23, 1863, 2.
63. *NPT*, March 6, 1863, 2; April 17, 1863, 2; May 1, 1863, 2; May 15, 1863, 2.
64. *NPT*, June 19, 1863, 2.
65. For Ackert's publishing of the Port military newspaper at Port Hudson, see *Fishkill Journal Weekly*, July 30, 1863, 2.
66. "Ackert, Charles J.," 156th New York State Volunteer Infantry, Company A, Abstract of Muster Rolls, Records of the New York State Adjutant General's Office, NYSA. *NPT*, September 11, 25, October 28, December 18, 1863 (all on 2).
67. Charles J. Ackert to G. Norman Lieber [Assistant Adjutant General, Department of the Gulf], December 10, 1863; Special Order No. 312, December 14, 1863, both found in Ackert's Civil War Pension File.
68. E. D. Townsend [Assistant Adjutant General], General Order No. 182, June 20, 1863. In: U.S. Department of War, *General Orders, 1863, 204–205*.

69. Peter Eltinge to Sister, January 2, 1864. See also Peter Eltinge to Father, January 6, 1864, Eltinge-Lord Correspondence, Duke University.
70. Charles J. Ackert to G. Norman Lieber, December 28, 1863, Charles Ackert's Civil War Pension File.
71. *NPT*, January 15, 1864, 2; *NPT*, February 12, 1864, 2. Charles J. Ackert's Death Certificate, New York State Bureau of Vital Statistics, found in Charles Ackert's Civil War Pension File. Apparently, Charles Ackert returned from war in poor health. See "Mrs. Eliza Silvernail Ackert," *Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier*, May 11, 1916, 21 (obituary).
72. *NPT*, February 12, 1864, 2.
73. See footnote 69. See also Diary of Charles Drake Gee (156th NYS Vols. Infantry Co. A), January 4, 17, 1864, Plattekill Historical Society, Plattekill, New York; Peter LeFevre letter to *NPT*, December 23, 1869.

