

A CIVIL WAR DIARY INTRODUCTION

This is the personal account of the siege of Petersburg, Virginia by John W. Howell of Millerstown, Pennsylvania, a member of the 208th Pennsylvania Infantry.

The diary covers the period from July 8, 1864 until November 30, 1864. During this time Howell makes the transition from a carriage maker in Millerstown, PA to a soldier in the Union Army.

Unlike today, soldiers of that time did not receive any type of basic training. Howell went from civilian life to the battle zone within three weeks. For a short while new troops usually were placed in the rear of the skirmish lines to get indoctrinated into the Army way of life. Howell and the 208th spent approximately three months in the rear before moving to the front lines at Fort Sedgwick south of Petersburg.

Howell's diary is a small 4" x 6" brown leather book designed to fit into a vest or shirt pocket. The first part is a ledger of his carriage maker's business and seamlessly moves into his life in the Army.



The cover of John Howell's Diary shown in the open position. The tab on the right fits through the loop on the left to keep the book closed.

Throughout this book I will show the actual diary pages followed by a transcription for easier reading. I will then put the details into historical perspective with explanations and period photos.

The Siege of Petersburg Va

The 10-month Union siege of Petersburg, Virginia, led to the surrender of Confederate Gen. Robert E.

Lee on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Courthouse, effectively ending the war.

In June 1864, as Union forces closed in on the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, attempts were made to take Petersburg, Virginia, a railroad hub 20 miles south of Richmond. After two unsuccessful assaults, the Union attempted a third attack on June 9. A small force attacked Petersburg but was repulsed by the Confederates. A week later 60,000 Union troops again tried, but were held back by only 38,000 Confederates. Union commanders then decided to settle in for a siege.

Each side dug a maze of deep trenches outside Petersburg. A soldier raising his head above ground level was likely to be shot by an enemy sniper. The stalemate dragged on for nearly a year as residents in Petersburg and Richmond were reduced to poverty.

The final battle for Petersburg took place on April 2, 1865, when 63,000 Union troops drove 19,000 Confederates from the city at nightfall. A few days later, Richmond also fell and its top government and military leaders fled toward the west.