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A Brief Profile of Orderly Books

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The Origin of the Orderly Book

The study of the American War for Independence is both particularly alluring and concurrently frustrating due to its having occurred during a “transitional” period of history with regard to written records and archival maintenance. During just the few several centuries prior to 1775, both the rates of literacy throughout Europe and the eastern hemisphere were so low as to significantly minimize record-keeping and the conditions for archival preservation were so unpredictable that great gaps in the historical record are common. Conversely, the American Civil War of 1861-1865 yielded a 128-volume set of “official records” being published by the U.S. War Department, as well as an accompanying atlas of hundreds of maps, an extraordinarily large body of private correspondence and literally thousands of soldiers diaries. By comparison, an extensive and thorough survey of Continental Army enlisted men’s diaries has uncovered less than one hundred such sources.

Being well schooled in the mid-century record-keeping practices of the British army as result of their exposure to such during the French and Indian War, virtually all senior officers of the Continental Army initiated such practices in April 1775. More than one correspondent and diarist, in fact, commented on the amount of “paper work” required for the effective management of the army. Company and regimental officers were expected to be fully familiar with the broad array of weekly strength reports, bi-monthly muster rolls and payrolls, clothing and arms returns, inspection reports and descriptive rosters, all being required for timely submission to higher headquarters. Perhaps the most basic document to be kept was the orderly book, that recording of all orders affecting a given command. Immediately following the Lexington-Concord eruption of hostilities, the New England militia companies surrounding Boston were ordered to begin the maintenance of orderly books. As the army became formalized during June and July, so also did the practices and content associated with these books. Though not the sole purpose, one of the key reasons for the recording of all orders was a disciplinary one, to put into clear action that “purported ignorance of the law is no defense.” As phrased in a reiterative and summary order issued by General Washington on January 1, 1776:

And that the plea of ignorance, which is no excuse for the Neglect of Orders (but rather an Aggravation) may not be offered, It is order'd, and directed, that not only

every regiment, but every Company, do keep an Orderly-book, to which frequent recourse is to be had, it being expected that all standing orders be rigidly obeyed, until alter'd or countermanded -- It is also expected, that all Orders which are necessary to be communicated to the Men, be regularly read, and carefully explained to them. -- As It is the first wish of the General to have the business of the Army conducted without punishment, to accomplish which, he assures every Officer, and Soldier, that as far as it is in his power, he will reward such as particularly distinguish themselves; at the same time, he declares that he will punish every kind of neglect, or misbehaviour, in an exemplary manner.

From the initial regulations set forth by New England army commander Artemas Ward and by General Washington upon his arrival at Cambridge in early July, and as the appropriate standards became increasingly time tested, the orderly book quickly became the controlling document of day-to-day life within the army. During a period without photocopiers or even pens other than goose quills, the daily process of orderly book maintenance was quite a logistical accomplishment. General orders for the day originating at Washington's headquarters were transferred by the officer filling the rotating position of "major general of the day" to the adjutant general. The division adjutants of all divisions attended at the office of the latter quite early each morning, when the orders were communicated to them through dictation. Returning to their respective quarters, the division adjutants then met with the assembled brigade majors, repeating the process of dictation, inclusive of any additional division orders. The brigade majors continued the process through dictation to and copying by all appropriate regimental adjutants, any additional brigade orders for the day also being specified. The regimental adjutants then repeated the process by assembling the first and/or orderly sergeants of their regiment's companies, reading for transcription all the preceding orders as well as any regimental level orders for the day. Finally, the full slate of orders for the day was read aloud before the assembled men of each company.

Two implications of this process are immediately evident. First, a huge number of highly duplicative books was being maintained within the army at any given time. If we assume an average of seventy-five regiments and nine companies per regiment, a basic minimum of 675 books were concurrently in process. Atop this, however, books were kept at the headquarters of the seventy-five regiments as well, at, perhaps, fifteen brigade headquarters, at approximately eight division headquarters, and at all staff levels. Thus, on any day, perhaps at least 800 books were being maintained, all recording predominately the same orders. Second, and completely to be expected, the precise wording of any given order almost invariably would become somewhat distorted or "garbled" as it was repetitiously transmitted orally and transcribed. Based on verbal presentation, speed, ability and level of literacy, that wording which began at the general headquarters level rarely would arrive in precisely that same content at the company level.

The first factor noted above raises a theoretic basis for approximating the survival rate of Continental orderly books. Given that the typical duration of an orderly book averages about three months of coverage, a roughly estimated total of more than 20,000 books produced across the seven and one-half years of the war is probable. The current Index, which assuredly reflects the large majority of surviving books, documents slightly less than 1,000 volumes. Thus, by a very large majority, the preponderance of books have been lost. Much more importantly to the present-day researcher, the surviving sample of Continental Army orderly books is in *no way random*. As examination of the Orderly Book Index tables will very quickly demonstrate, the large majority of the surviving sample is skewed to the New England states. It is literally amazing that, for example, the Virginia Line of 1777 numbered fifteen regiments, but that Virginia orderly books are remarkably uncommon. While other factors surely have affected the survival rate of orderly books and other colonial and revolutionary period archival material, the devastation of the Civil War must be atop the list of such causes.

Regardless of the reasons for such losses and their comparative extent of effect, the student of the southern state lines and the southern campaigns clearly has a much more difficult challenge than does the student of the New England and middle states' forces and of the Highlands and Middle Department theaters.

As to the issue of transcribed accuracy, it is clear that Washington's orders should be studied from the copies of those orders maintained at his headquarters and surviving within the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress. Variations in spelling, capitalization and punctuation may be considered of minimal impact, but regimental and brigade level transcriptions of general headquarters orders can, and often do, eliminate entire phrases and sentences and, at times, thoroughly "garble" intended meaning. When the option exists, therefore, the student should attempt to seek a book maintained as near as possible to the originating headquarters. In reality, though, company level books dominate the surviving sample and, in many cases, one does not have the luxury of multiple books for a particular time span and location. Nevertheless, for a thorough examination of a particular unit, campaign or time frame, it is suggested that multiple books for the period and place of interest be consulted whenever possible.

The Nature and Content Of Orderly Books

Given that the very large majority of orderly books were developed through transcription of verbal dictation, it is unsurprising that the quality of penmanship and resultant readability in surviving volumes varies tremendously. In addition to the expected additional variation in motivation and discipline among first and orderly sergeants, the skill level of these copyists clearly ranged from virtually superb to only sufficiently literate. Some books are beautifully written, consistent in style, spelling, page layout and devoid of scratch-outs or errors. One actually wonders at times whether a book of such perfect appearance might not be a second copy, made from the actual transcription notations. Far more common, though, are books with poor penmanship, numerous misspellings, errors in syntax not in the original orders, and a broad sprinkling of scratch-outs and ink blots. Even without the effect of fading ink, a significant proportion of these original manuscripts are quite difficult to read in their original format. In particular, the standard "oddities" of eighteenth-century writings need be initially understood.

To those students first exposed to such material, colonial and revolutionary period manuscripts are surprisingly erratic. It is very quickly evident that "standards" of written presentation were nowhere near as developed as they are today. Even among prominent and eloquent people of the time, handwriting styles could and did vary from year to year, and even from letter to letter during the same week. "Rules" of correctness just were not particularly relevant:

- Sentence structure was especially random, the effect being the appearance of a series of "run-on" sentences. Dashes were often used between sentences, while commas and semi-colons were far more commonly used than is seen today. The result is frequently a very lengthy paragraph-like sentence composed of segments divided by semi-colons and appearing nearly incomprehensible on first examination.
- Capitalization very often appears nearly random in its usage. Among many Continentals of lesser rank, written sentences often failed to open with a capital letter, while capitalization internal to the sentence seemed to be nearly whimsical, even to the extent of random variation as to proper nouns.
- By far, the most curious aspect of manuscripts of the period are the variations in

spelling. In general, contractions were more commonly used than they are today, and with the added speed required in transcriptions, are particularly seen in orderly books. For example, past-tense words ending in “ed” often appear with the “e” omitted and a simple “d.” As would be expected with semi-literate copyists, many words are spelled phonetically, these sergeants struggling mightily with the “big words” of the general officers. Lastly, and of particular interest in understanding regional dialects, are the effects of geographic accents as written, the classic example perhaps being the Yankee “catteridges” for “cartridges.” Such seemingly cryptic content can often be “sounded out” while reading an orderly book entry, and actually adds to the pleasure of discovery in working with these sources.

Concurrent with understanding the variations in written construction, the typical *content* of orderly books is of particular importance. The following summarizes the most frequently encountered topics found within orderly book entries and the manner in which they are typically labeled:

1. At the top of each day’s page of orders, the “Parole” and “Countersign” of the day are typically specified. Through much of the war, the words selected progressed alphabetically from day to day, then beginning again with “A” for both signs.
2. “General Orders” refer to those orders originating at the headquarters of General Washington or a temporary commander serving during his rare absence from the army. As frequently as such being labeled “General Orders”, “Headquarters”, with the date, is commonly seen. Either the “General Orders” or “Headquarters” phrasing is also seen in relation to detached commands such as the Southern army as commanded by Gates, Lincoln or Greene.
3. Department commanders’ orders might also be titled “Headquarters” with further specification, as entitled, for example, “Headquarters, Highlands.” Often of less clarity, such department orders might be simply preceded by the place at which the headquarters were located, such as “Robinson’s House” or “Davenport’s.” An additional use of the term “headquarters” will be seen in autonomous or semi-autonomous commands such as distant forts, their orderly books being maintained somewhat in isolation. In many of these cases, the term “garrison orders” will appear in the dateline, an excellent example being books kept at West Point. As part of the Highlands Department, orders of the department commander will generally be datelined “Headquarters Highlands”, while orders originating from within the confines of West Point itself will appear under “Garrison Orders.” (To potentially complicate departmental orders even further, it is not rarely seen that such are titled “General Orders” and need be carefully identified as being from a departmental commander rather than from General Washington.)
4. When particular actions or declarations of the Continental Congress had relevance to the army’s administration or contained news felt to to be beneficial, these proceedings were entered in the orderly books and read to the troops. These typically were preceded with a dateline citing “Philadelphia” or were introduced and began with “Resolved.” In addition, during the later phases of the war, similar resolves and announcements by the assemblies and legislatures of selected states would be introduced into the orderly books of their respective line regiments.
5. At times, orders were issued before the next day’s normal issuance time, these being referred to as “After Orders”. Frequently, this titling was indicated through the simple abbreviation “A.O.” It should be noted that after orders could also originate at lower headquarters, so that a book may contain “division after orders (D.A.O.)” or “regimental after orders (R.A.O.)” as well as “general after orders

(G.A.O.)” Although relatively rarely seen, examples do exist of a third set of orders being issued during a given day, these being somewhat amusingly titled “after after orders.”

6. The content which most notably differentiates otherwise identical books relates to “Division Orders” and “Regimental Orders”, frequently appearing as “D.O.” and “R.O.” While, on rare occasions, “Wing Orders” can be found in orderly books, no example of company level orders have come to the compilers’ attention. Very rarely, orders originating at a level lower than regimental appear with regard to a detached unit, which may have been a company, several companies, or even a group smaller than a company. Such entries, again very rare in appearance, typically are titled with the location of the detached operation, such as “Pines Bridge.”
7. Not unusual are equally simplistic regional references or cantonment names, such as “Morristown”, “Soldiers’ Fortune”, “New Boston” or “Connecticut Village.” These will almost always relate to brigade or regimental orders, particularly when these sites are recognized as being smaller unit camp locations. In some instances, a regional or household reference is linked with “headquarters”, these typically relating to Washington’s orders or those of a department commander. Examples of the former are: “Headquarters Pompton”, “Headquarters Newburgh”, “Headquarters Moore’s House” or, most simplistically, “Moore’s House.” The latter can create difficulty unless the site is known or the order’s content demonstrates the command level represented.
8. A section heading not infrequently seen is “Advertisement.” These book entries basically translate to today’s “classifieds” within newspapers, often relating to lost items of clothing or equipment. It is unclear what determined who could or could not enter an “ad” within an orderly book, as there surely were more “lost and founds” than appear in the books. Such entries, however, almost certainly originated at the regimental or brigade level, and were likely favors provided to officers, surgeons and chaplains.
9. Occasionally, an orderly book will be found to contain extraneous content such as notes of personal expenses and loans, lists of rations issued, mileage marched and routings through towns, etc. None of this form of content was truly authorized, the books being meant to contain orders and no other material. Indeed, a minority of books are also found to contain poems, song lyrics, cartoon-like “folk art” sketches and truly inane gibberish. In 1780, Highlands commander Major General Robert Howe ordered an examination of orderly books and responded with a blisteringly acerbic evaluation of what he had found, describing many of the department’s books as “an incoherent, incomprehensible parcel of stuff.” Indeed, the variance of quality in content is amazing, ranging from the perfectly maintained minority to the mediocre majority to the delightful few maintained with child- like disregard of authority and a sense of disorderly mischief.

The **content** of orderly books covers a remarkably broad range of topics and, more than any other archival source category, offers students a reliable perspective of the army as contemporaneously recorded. While not inclusive, the following specifies general categories of information commonly found within orderly books:

1. Orders relating to the army’s organization, such as the composition of wings, departments, and brigades, are commonly found.
2. Orders specifying the composition and development of the army’s command structure and officers’ seniority levels are frequently seen.

3. **Thoroughly detailed accounts of all general courts martial cases, as to charges, case dispositions, and sentences are profuse within orderly books. Many books, in fact, are primarily catalogs of criminal activity and Continental Army justice. Regarding the former, documentation of crimes is particularly valuable to an understanding of the army's behavior standards, especially as related to local inhabitant property. With regard to the specifications of court decisions and punishments, the most striking learning relates to the clearly discriminatory manner of dealing with "gentlemen" officers versus members of the rank and file, and to the range of corporal punishment which would now be considered to be barbarous. In addition to general court martial proceedings given comment within General Washington's orders, division level books will almost always contain coverage of division court activity, while brigade level books invariably profile both division and brigade court proceedings.**
4. **Minute details of camp life are very frequently documented in orderly books. Given, in fact, the relative rarity of detailed soldiers' diaries and the often mundane nature of their content, as well as the virtual total absence of post-war "regimental histories", the details of army life to be found in orderly books clearly make them the primary source for understanding the "real" Continental Army. Notably, when a topic appears within an order as a prohibition, this is nearly indisputable evidence that the prohibited practice was almost surely a widespread problem. Given General Washington's tendency to be involved with the most minute issues, orderly books can be found to comment on topics as focused as the prices to be charged by camp followers for laundry, the fines to be levied against enlisted men for the loss of a single musket cartridge, and the prices to be charged by sutlers, "tippling houses" and civilians selling produce to the army.**
5. **With the transcription of resolves and announcements issued by the Continental Congress appearing in these books, we can understand what factors were considered important for the maintenance of morale, order and discipline. Especially with regard to the former, the choice of specific Congressional statements can be interpreted as "public relations" or even "propaganda" applied for the best management of the army as judged by the General.**
6. **With the inclusion of division, brigade and, particularly, regimental level orders, orderly books very clearly become the best source for the study of the "micro-history" of the Continental Army. Given the absence of finely detailed "official records" and the relative scarcity of highly focused detail within diaries and correspondence, orderly books provide a great many of the "missing pieces" of the army's history, its operations, and life within the officer corps and among the common soldiers. Based on the datelines of regimental entries and on internal content evidence, a given regiment can literally be "tracked" on a day-by-day basis, such remarkably detailed research only being constrained by the frequency and detail of those entries. Such focus can answer many detailed questions which are totally ignored by other contemporary sources. In this sense, orderly books, in aggregate, represent "the diary of the army."**
7. **One important point which should additionally be made is that orderly books are *not* particularly productive for genealogical research. Excepting in relation to court martial proceedings and sentences, it is relatively rare for individuals, especially members of the rank and file, to be mentioned within orderly books. Occasional appearances of promotions do emerge, but these can almost always be also found within a given soldier's service files at the National Archives. (See ["Unit Rolls"](#) section introduction.) Excepting for when a genealogical researcher wishes**

to understand the soldier life of his or her ancestor, orderly books will likely be found to be basically unproductive.

As a very small exemplary illustration of the typical content of orderly books, the following excerpts have been selected and transcribed. All spelling, punctuation and sentence construction has been maintained from the source transcription, this book being that of the First Pennsylvania Regiment during the summer of 1778 (PA-01C-01):

HEAD-QUARTERS, WHITE PLAINS, July 26, 1778.

*Major Genl, to-morrow, Barron de Kalb
Brigadier, Parsons.
Field Officers, Col Willias, Lt Col Cropper, and Lt Col Littlefield.
Brigade Major, Hitchcock*

Col Wood's Regt of Militia, are to be Employed in Collecting Forrage until Further orders. Col. Wood will Receive Directions Where and How to employ his men from the Forrage Master Genl. Additional pay will be allowed them whilst on that Duty. One Man from each Brigade who is acquainted with the Burning of coak, to be paraded on the Grand parrade to-morrow morning at Guard Mounting.

The Genl Court Martial, whereof Col. Putnam is president, is Dissolved, and another Genl Court of the Line to assemble to-morrow morning at nine o'clock, at the New Dining Room at the left of the Park, Nigh Genl Morris' Quarters. Col Stewart will Preside.

As it is necessary, for the sake of Regularity, that there should be Fixd Genl Rule for arranging and Disposing in the line of the army the troops of the Different States, During the present Campaign, they are to take post, so far as Circumstances will permit, according to the relative Geographical Position of the States to each other, supposing their front to the ocean; this arrangement is not to establish any Point of honour or precedency between the troops. All Guards and detachments are to parade agreeably to this Roll. ...

HEAD-QUARTERS, WHITE PLAINS, July 27, 1778.

*Major Genl to-morrow, McDowgal.
Brigade Genl, Clinton.
Field Officers, Col Hall, Lt Col Millen, Major Sumner.
Brigade Major, Barrien.*

The Gentlemen who held themselves as Candidates for Commissions in the Companys of Sappers and Miners, are Requested to Wait on Genl Duportail, Chief Engineer, who will examine their Respective Pretentions and Qualifications, and make a Report to Head-Quarters accordingly.

A Hogshead of Rice will be Delivered to each Brigade for the use of the sick.

At a Genl Court Martial, July 17, 1778, Col Putnam, President.

Mr. James Davison, son of Col James Davison, Livingston's Regt. Tryed for Defrauding the soldiers of their Provisions, Embesseling Contl Property, and Disposing of several articles Belonging to the United States, found guilty, and sentenced to be Cashiered. The Commander-in-Chief approves the sentence, and orders it to take place immediately.

At the same Court, Henry Scott, a soldier in Col. Sherburn's Regt, was tried for Desertion, found Guilty, and sentenced to receive fifty lashes, and to be Confined in some Gaol untill he can be put on board the Contl Navy, there to remain During the War. The Commander-in-Chief orders him to receive his Lashes to-morrow morning on the Grand parade at Guard mounting, and then Return to his Regt.

Likewise, Alexander Grier alias Smith, a Soldier in Col. Megg's Regt, Tryed for Desertion, Unanimously found Guilty, and sentenced to be shot to death. John Craig, of the 4th Maryland Regt, at a brigade Genl Court Martial, July 10th, 1778, was tryed for deserting to the Enemy, found Guilty, and unanimously sentenced to suffer Death. His Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief, approved the two last mentioned sentences. ...

DIVISION ORDERS, July 28th, 1778.

The Commissaries are Imediately to furnish the Soldiers with Soap, a Considerable Quantity of that article having arrived. It's expected that the Comisaries will take care to have a sufficient Quantity of that article to supply the troops from time to time.

The Commanding officers of Brigades are requested to be very attentive to the Maneuvering of the troops, whenever the weather will permit.

The Whole Division to parade the Day after to morrow, at six o'clock in the morning; the men, arms, and accouterments to appear in the most soldierly order Possible; the Officers will be punctual in their attendance, and be careful that every man fit for duty appear on the parade.

Major Ryan will furnish the Commanding Officers of Brigades and Regts. With a copy of the several Manuveres which he will Imediately Make out for the Occasion.

BRIGADE ORDERS, July 28th, 1778.

At a Brigade Genl Court Martial, whereof Col. Stewart was president, the Court proceed to the tryal of Patrick Grant, of the First Pennsyla Regt, charged with Desertion, and Denying that he belonged to said Regt, pleads Not Guilty. The Court Considering the evidence and the prisoner's Defence, Do find him Guilty of absenting himself from his Regt without leave, and doth sentence him to Receive fifty lashes on his bare Back, and to serve out his time in the Regt that he has been Driving teams.

The Court then proceeded to the tryal of George Lucas, a Sergeant, Belonging to the Seventh Pensy's Regt., charged with Desertion. The prisoner Pleads Not Guilty.

The Court having considered the evidence, and the prisoner's Defense having Nothing of Consequence to say, are of opinion that he shall be Reduced to the Ranks. The Court would add Corporal punishment, But from the character Given of him by his Captn, Formerly, are willing to use mercy on this occason. The Col Comdt Confirms the above sentence, and orders Grant's punishment to take place this evening, George Lucas to Return to his duty. ...

REGIMENTAL ORDERS, July 29, 1778.

The Quarter master is immediately to see that the Camp Cullermen has vaults sunk in front of the Camp, and have the Camp, within the Limits of the Regt, Cleaned of all meat or Bones Cast away by the Soldiers, or any stuff that will occasion a bad smell. The Recrutes Lately brought to Camp by Capt. Buchannon, is to be incorporated in to Capt. Craig's Company. It is expected that every officer, for his own honour, will Endeavor to make his men appear to morrow on the parade as desent as possible, with wooden snappers. ...

BRIGADE ORDERS

The Brigade to parade to morrow morning, at 6 o'clock. Agreeably to Division orders of the 6th Instant, the Colonel Commandant expects the officers Commanding Companys will make there men Clean themselves this Day, that they may appear on the parade to morrow as Decent as Possible their Circumstances will admit, and have wooden snappers in their Guns; the Troops to exercise on Mondays and Thursdays By Brigades, and Regimentally the Remainder of the week. When any Detachment or Command is ordered out of the Brigade, the Adjutant is to have their men on the Brigade Parade one hour before the time mentioned in General orders, that the Major of Brigade may examine weither they are furnished with Ammunition and Provisions agreeably to General orders. ...

Those interested in further exploring a representative orderly book's content are directed to the following [website](#), which contains the complete transcription of the orderly book of the Third Virginia Regiment for the period May 15 through July 1, 1777 (VA-03-01), together with an excellent genealogical introduction and annotations. Also, the National Park Service's conservation facility at Harper's Ferry, WV has posted an excellent [site](#) introducing orderly books and, in particular, detailing the conservation of an original book within the NPS collections.

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