

# Student Projects from the Archives

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Volume 3 *Student Projects from the Archives*,  
Summer 2020

Article 5

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2019

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### Recommended Citation

Brenner, James (2019) "A Prized Memento of the Civil Way: Joseph Abbott's "Lightning Brigade" Medal," *Student Projects from the Archives*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spa/vol3/iss1/5>

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## **A Prized Memento of the Civil War: Joseph Abbott's "Lightning Brigade" Medal**

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**I**t is not known how long Joseph N. Abbott's Wilder's Brigade medal has been in the family. My mother, Mary Marguerite Abbott Brenner knew little about it. On 19 August 1959, though, Mary Louise Abbott, Joseph N. Abbott's youngest daughter and my mother's aunt, mailed my mother a photostatic copy of a brief summary her father had written of his Civil War experiences. Dating to 1920 or 1921, the narrative hints at the story behind the medal. Less than two pages in length, the document recounts his early life and military service from enlistment to muster out. Born on 10 September 1845 in Franklin County, Indiana, the Abbott family moved to Illinois in 1856. Joseph Abbott enlisted in Company B, 98<sup>th</sup> Regiment Illinois Infantry on 3 August 1862. After six months, the regiment was assigned to Colonel John T. Wilder's brigade. Abbott participated in the unsuccessful marches through Kentucky after Confederate generals Braxton Bragg and John Hunt Morgan. He had his horse killed from under him at the Battle of Hoovers Gap on 24 June 1863 and fired one of the first shots of the Battle of Chickamauga later that year. He participated in the battles around Atlanta and served as a courier for General Sherman. In 1865, Abbott was part of Wilson's Raiders and helped capture Jefferson Davis. He mustered out of service on 6 July 1865.<sup>1</sup>

Wilder's Brigade was one of the most famous Union regiments in the Civil War. John T. Wilder, a businessman from Indiana before the war began, enlisted in the Union Army in 1861. Within a year, he had become the commander of the 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry. By mid-1862, Wilder was a brigade commander and consisting of the 17th, 72nd and 75th Indiana; the 92nd and 98th Illinois; and the 18th Indiana Battery. In early 1863, Wilder received permission to convert his brigade from traditional infantry to mounted infantry; an organizational change that allowed his command to pursue and quickly close with the enemy. As mounted infantry, they had greater mobility than traditional infantry and their rifled muskets gave them greater range than cavalry carbines. Dissatisfied with the traditional single shot, muzzle-

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Abbott to Mary Marguerite Abbott Brenner, 19 August 1959. Letter and documents in the author's possession.

loading infantry musket, Wilder lobbied for the Spencer rifle with which to arm his men. The Spencer rifle had a tubular magazine that held seven rimfire, .56-caliber metallic cartridges. Once equipped with these rifles, Wilder's Brigade combined firepower with mobility to create a lethal force. Their baptism of fire was at Hoover's Gap in Tennessee, but their rear guard actions at Chickamauga saved the Union army from disaster and earned them the nickname "Lightning Brigade".<sup>2</sup>

In 1914, Abbott wrote a brief article for the editor of the *The National Tribune* titled, "Opening of Chickamauga Fight". In it, Abbott claimed that he fired one of the opening shots of the battle. "A comrade and I were on videt post. I think it was Dalton's Ford. About 2 o'clock we discovered a skirmish line advancing across the Chickamauga, followed up by a line of battle. I fired first and my comrade next. We stayed until we had emptied our Spencers twice and then fell back to the company."<sup>3</sup>

After the war, Wilder's veterans were justifiably proud of their service. To commemorate their experiences, Wilder, now a wealthy businessman, purchased at least 1,200 medals for a brigade reunion held at Greencastle, Indiana, in September 1887. Tiffany of New York City designed and produced the medals for the brigade and Wilder distributed them to the Brigade's members. A newspaper account described the presentation ceremony. "After the veterans had formed into their respective regiments each comrade was presented with an elegant silver badge ... The badge is of silver, about the size of a silver dollar. The medal bears on one side the appellation given the regiment by Gen. Garfield after Chickamauga, "Wilder's Lightning Brigade", the dates 1861 - 1865, a cannon, rifle and shield, while the reverse is left blank for the wearer's name."<sup>4</sup>

A family heirloom, Abbott's Wilder's Brigade medal has passed from Joseph N. Abbott through his children and grandchildren to his great-grandchildren. The medal conforms to the newspaper description. "Wilder's Lightning Brigade 1861-65" defines the outer edge of the field. In the center is a cannon, a crossed rifle and sword, and an acorn (not a shield), the symbol for the 14th Army Corps. The reverse has inscribed within a wreath: Jos. N. Abbott, Co.

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn W. Sunderland, *Wilder's Lightning Brigade and its Spencer Repeaters*, (Washington, IL; Book Works, 1984)

<sup>3</sup> Joseph N. Abbott, "Opening of Chickamauga Fight", *The National Tribune*, 9 April 1914.

<sup>4</sup>"The Greencastle Reunion", *The Indianapolis Daily Journal*, September 9, 1887.

B, 98<sup>th</sup> Ill. The medal is 1 1/8" in diameter. The rim is plain and not serrated. It is missing the red, white, and blue ribbon with the eagle pin at the top. The silver chain is not original to the medal.

At least two different designs of the reverse of the medal are known, suggesting that the popularity of the medal prompted Wilder to purchase additional medals. A laurel wreath decorates the reverse of Abbott's medal; other examples exist with different or even plain designs. Regardless of the design, sufficient space remained on each style in which to inscribe the veteran's name. The obverse remained unchanged. Suspension devices are also different, again suggesting different times of manufacture. For example, some suspension devices are simple red, white and blue ribbons. Others include an eagle pin on the ribbon, while still others eliminate the ribbon completely and the eagle is the suspension device. It is not known which design was earliest, but this medal dates to no earlier than 1887.<sup>5</sup>

In 1875, Abbott moved to Hamilton, Ohio, and married Sarah Clements. He worked variously as a farmer, a clerk, a railroad watchman for both the Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Dayton and Baltimore and Ohio Railroads, and a lock tender on the Miami and Erie Canal.<sup>6</sup> He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church and commander of the Wetzel-Compton GAR Post #96 in Hamilton, Ohio. He died on 27 June 1922.<sup>7</sup>

The medal is an important, personal memento of the Civil War. In addition to the sentimental value the family places on it, the medal is significant because it confirms the conviction that those who fought in the war knew what they were fighting for and were aware of the war's significance. The medal exists to remind Abbott's descendants that he was part of the army that served proudly in the war for the Union. And that is how he wanted to be remembered.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning, Wilder's Mounted Infantry Brigade in the Battle of Chickamauga*, (Huntington: Blue Acorn Press, 1997), 198. Also, David Foot's post on Facebook page : You're from Robinson Illinois if you Remember ...” Accessed 27 September 2029. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/104797999567738/permalink/2330287777018738/>

<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau, Census reports for 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, and 1920. [www.genealogybank.com](http://www.genealogybank.com).

<sup>7</sup> “Joseph Abbott Now Sleeps in Greenwood”, *Hamilton Evening Journal*, 30 June 1922; “Jos. N. Abbott Passes Away”, *Butler County Press*, 29 June 1922.



Figures 1 and 2. Obverse and reverse of Abbott's medal