

Don't Mess with Jersey's Butterfly Boys...

A book that follows New Jersey's Hussar-inspired cavalry in the Civil War.

New Jersey Butterfly Boys in the Civil War: The Hussars of the Union Army

Peter T. Lubrecht

2011: The History Press, Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-60949-132-1

Softcover, 190 pages, black and white

★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

BOOK RATING SYSTEM

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com

There's something about a man in uniform that can instill desire in women and respect in men—a stereotypical idea that the Union Army hoped to capitalize on as the Civil War ground into what would be its last bloody year. Despite the realities driven home by the previous three years, perhaps enough men would be lured into service by a dashing uniform, styled after the European Hussars, and the romantic prospect of riding off to glory, saber in hand, with a cavalry unit. Peter T. Lubrecht tells the story of the Third New Jersey Cavalry—also known as the First American Hussars—in his book, *New Jersey Butterfly Boys in the Civil War: The Hussars of the Union Army*.

The less-than-masculine moniker of “Butterfly Boys” came from the bright yellowish-orange cape linings, pinned back such that they resembled the colorful wings of a butterfly. At first, it was meant by grunts to mock the men who wore such fancy, glittering uniforms, but it stuck. While evoking such an insect might not strike fear into the hearts of one's enemies, the unit's fighting history might cause a

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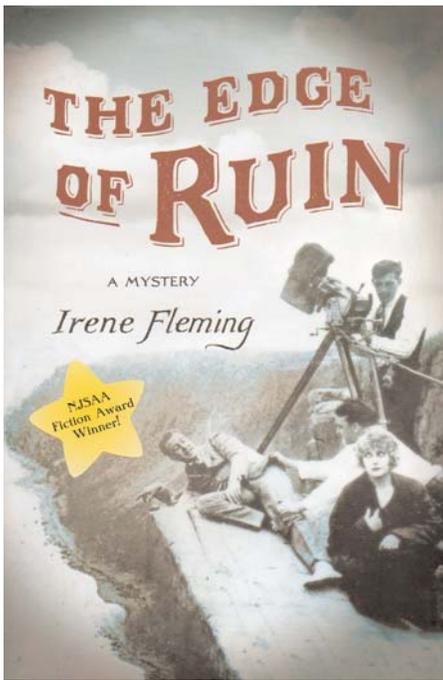
second thought before using it too disparagingly.

Raising a hussar-styled unit was the brainchild of Andrew Jackson Morrison, a colorful mercenary from New York State, whose life story, as Lubrecht describes, “resembles that of a mid-nineteenth-century superhero who traveled to all parts of the earth to fight for justice.” His father had served under Andrew Jackson—hence his son’s name—in the War of 1812. Morrison tried joining the Army during the Mexican War but was eventually discovered to be underage. He went on to mercenary armies planning invasions of Cuba and Nicaragua and rubbing shoulders with the likes of Giuseppe Garibaldi and Narciso Lopez. Erratic behavior caused his superiors to accuse him of being a drunkard—something added by historians to the euphemistic adjective of “colorful” when describing his career. But it may actually have been a mind befuddled by a case of severe sleep deprivation rather than the effects of alcohol.

By the time Morrison had this idea, the war had been going badly for the Union and it was hard to find young men willing to throw themselves into the meat-grinder. By creating a unit that restored some of the glamor and romance of being a soldier, perhaps it might be a little easier to fill the manpower quotas. It worked, though it probably had less to do with the fancy uniforms and more with the cash bounties—as evidenced by the numbers who disappeared after collecting them. Lubrecht traces the New Jersey-raised unit—comprised of many Irish and German immigrants—from formation in early 1864 through their forty-two battles and skirmishes, and beyond into their lives as veterans.

They may have come into the war late, but the Third New Jersey saw its share of the action. Under General George Armstrong Custer (yes, *that* Custer) and General Philip Sheridan, they chased Lee and his troops through the Shenandoah Valley, leaving dead Jersey boys in graves far from home. They would be on picket duty around Appomattox, witnessing the end of the war with Lee’s surrender to Grant. Elation over the conclusion of the carnage would be blunted by news of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, however, and it is believed they participated in the funeral procession. All totaled, New Jersey’s Butterfly Boys lost 157 men to disease and combat. Lubrecht includes a list of all the men who served as an appendix, including birthplace, occupation and what their fates were.

Lubrecht draws from numerous contemporary accounts, from newspaper articles to journals and reports. Military historians will appreciate the detail, while more general history buffs will appreciate the stories that flesh out the men as real human beings. *New Jersey Butterfly Boys in the Civil War* is another example of how New Jersey has a deeper—and more fascinating—connection with that conflict than one might at first think.



The Edge of Ruin

Irene Fleming

2010: Minotaur Books, New York, NY

ISBN: 978-0-312-57520-5

Hardcover with dust jacket, 230 pages

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

I know there are many folks who will be aghast by this, but, with rare exceptions, considering all the history books out there, reading fiction just seems like a waste of time to me. Nevertheless, I decided to make an exception with Irene Fleming's *The Edge of Ruin* for three reasons. First, it's historical fiction—so I can at least make the excuse that it's “history” of a kind. Second, it was the 2011 winner of the New Jersey Studies Academic Alliance award for fiction. (In the interest of disclosure, I am a member of the NJSAA, but I did not participate in the award candidates reviews or selections.) If the NJSAA, with its emphasis on proper history scholarship, thought that highly enough of it, perhaps it was worth a look. Third is the author herself. She was at the NJSAA panel lecture with the other non-fiction award winners last October at Rutgers University's Alexander Library. She looked a little bewildered at being invited to speak with a group of “serious” historians. But her dry wit was charming and she had, evidently, done her homework when it came to the factual foundations of her fictional world.

The Edge of Ruin is a murder mystery, set in 1909 Fort Lee, New Jersey, during the opening years of the American movie industry. Adam Weiss, well-off from a string of nickelodeons, tells his wife, Emily (the story's heroine), that they are going to sell everything and move from their comfortable lives in the Philadelphia's suburbs to New York City to get in on the burgeoning movie-making business. He has struck a deal where, if they can make four one-reel movies in a month, they will be paid handsomely, and recoup what they're giving up and then some. At the early 20th century, that meant not running off to Hollywood, but Fort Lee.

As many GSL readers will no doubt already know, Fort Lee was America's first movie capital. Independent movie-makers were drawn by the dramatic Palisades and proximity to New York City. The young couple move into Manhattan's Knickerbocker Hotel—a real location that still exists on Times Square as “6 Times Square.” Emily, a former chorus girl, hunts down talent in the local bohemian bars while Adam engages an experienced cameraman. The cast includes a Swede who looks good but can't act, a Russian actress who takes herself too seriously, a legitimate stage actor who is also a drunken lecher, and two Mohawks on break from their high steel construction jobs. Adam and Emily must complete their four movies according to contract or else face financial ruin—and, it is intimated, marital ruin as well. This was the wild days of making movies, when anyone with a camera, some “actors” and a shoestring budget could get into this new field of American entertainment so long as the sun was shining (an indoor

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studio with electric lights was a luxury). But as they begin making their movies, actors begin to die—murdered, perhaps even by someone in the cast.

Among the more interesting aspects of the period that Fleming didn’t have to invent was the dark side of Thomas A. Edison. Not that he wasn’t a smart man who had some great ideas (though he also had some real doozies of failures). But once he had them, turning them into a living meant controlling the patents, buying up competition and finding ways of charging licensing fees to anyone who wanted to use the technology. Independent movie-makers were a threat to his own movie-making company, but since he owned the patents to some of their equipment, he could use that as a weapon to interfere with their work. He hired Pinkerton detectives to go haunt the other movie companies and insist that they inspect their cameras to make sure they were not in violation. And, if some film happened to get ruined when they opened the cameras, tough luck! Independents learned to be wary of Mr. Edison’s detectives, who were not above using strong-arm tactics to open someone’s camera. Significant to the storyline, Pinkerton men were often hired by big-business bosses to infiltrate and spy on labor union activities in mines and steel mills. Provocateurs would help turn their strikes violent and virtual wars were not unknown during the period.

Among those with a past who paid a visit to the Weisses’ movie company—named Melpomene—was Pinkerton detective Seamus Duffy, who Emily manages to convince to play as an extra in a mob scene for their western. But before Adam can shout “cut,” Duffy is dead, killed by an unseen hand. Fort Lee’s police chief—either a stereotypical pompous copper or a shrewd man who knows more than he lets on—accuses Adam and throws him in the local jail. This leaves Emily with the dual role of keeping their little production running *and* finding the real killer to save her husband. Things become more complicated with a second murder, this time one of her actors.

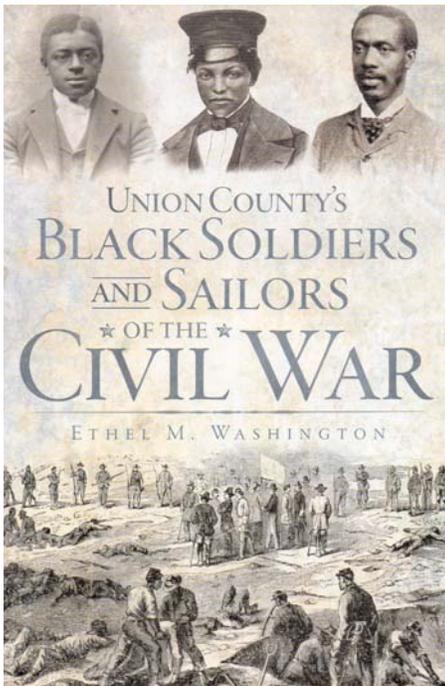
Fleming tells the story partly in third person and partly in the head of Emily, which permits the reader to see the logic in suspecting this character now and then that character later, as things progress. Capable though she is, Emily’s one big flaw is a crippling fear of heights that plays into the conclusion with a flare worthy of the melodramas they’re filming. It also plays into giving the title more than one meaning.

The characters are reasonably well-developed and have a diversity that plays off each other. Historical fiction is a genera that sometimes suffers from authors improbable name-dropping to fix the time period or at least give them the credibility of research. For the most part, *The Edge of Ruin* is believably nestled into the context of the era without such indulgences.

It’s a light, fun read. If I had to make a criticism, it would be that it is more short story than full-bodied novel. There are some fertile areas begging to be developed beyond the history or even the murder

mystery itself. People have *died* after all, and the murderer may still be in their midst. Yet Emily must carry on, business as usual, if she is to stave off ruin. There is a moral dilemma in balancing the value of human life in risking further murders and the almighty dollar that could have been more deeply probed as a subplot. The tension on the set over what happened also seemed thinner than might be realistic. While I enjoyed the book overall, I was left feeling a little “hungry” for more expansion.

A little more “heft” might have helped it in places, but *The Edge of Ruin* is still an entertaining read, with enough of an historical foundation to keep the interest of self-proclaimed “real” history readers like myself.



Union County's Black Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War

Ethel M. Washington

2011: The History Press, Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-59629-446-2

Softcover, 207 pages, black and white

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

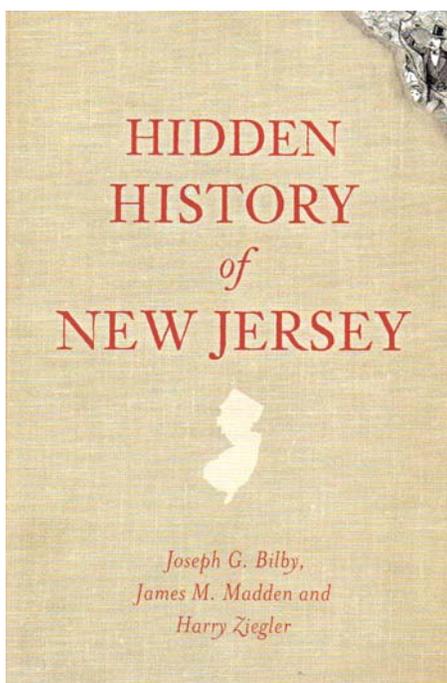
While there is a deep complexity as to what motivated men to pick a side and take up arms during the American Civil War, at the heart of the matter remained the question of whether slavery ought to be sustained or banished from the land once and for all. It might, at first blush, seem rather obvious why a black man would welcome a chance to fight for the Union. Yet, while fighting *against* a socioeconomic system that had kept him and his kind in bondage, he was also fighting *for* a government that didn't necessarily see him as an equal citizen either.

While pop history tends to see The North as some kind of bastion of progressive abolitionism, nothing could be further from the truth. It was more a matter of degrees—The South was just more dependent on slave labor and so less able to let go of it as an institution. The attitudes that underlay the “peculiar institution,” however, could be found around these parts as well—including right here in New Jersey. Historian Ethel M. Washington has created a resource for anyone interested in how this dynamic played out, specifically to Union County. But it is a snapshot of a scene that probably would have been found in any of the more urban, industrial communities of the region.

The bulk of Washington's work, *Union County's Black Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War*, is taken up by a surprisingly lengthy catalog listing all the African-Americans who served in the Union Army or Navy during the Civil War. That alone will be a goldmine for genealogists! But it is in the contextual material of the first six, short chapters that will make it worth reading beyond Union County.

Washington lays out the cultural and economic landscape for the county's African-Americans leading up to the war. She mixes statistics with firsthand accounts, citing specific individuals as illustration. As an example, after reciting the statistics of black employment opportunities

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before and after the war, she homes in on veteran Elijah Pippenger, Rahway’s colorful unpaid town crier. For seventeen years, he hand-cranked the press for the town’s *Union Democrat* newspaper until being replaced by a newly-invented steam-powered press. There’s a picture of the popular Pippenger, bell in hand. The importance of churches in Union County’s black community and the evolution of abolitionist and equal rights sentiments is also treated in detail.

The raising of “colored” troops was as much a practical expedient as a political statement. The Union Army was beleaguered by heavy losses from battles and disease as well as desertion and a general decline in enlistments. While strongly opposed at first, the idea of including the black population to help meet quotas became more appealing, at least on the federal level. New Jersey’s Democratically-controlled legislature backed Governor Joel Parker’s resistance to organizing black troops. It took a directive from the War Department to change and soon Jersey’s black residents were mustering in. Necessity was the mother of inclusion, but black troops had to work harder to earn respect and even equal pay.

Now a resident of Union County, I certainly knew there was a rich African-American heritage in the area. But I was struck by how “close” slavery was until relatively recently. A photo of Horace A. Reed revealed a man born a slave in Virginia (1857) but living as a freeman in Elizabeth, NJ by the 1930s when the WPA photo was taken. Another WPA image shows a wood building used as slave quarters that was still standing on Grove Street in Elizabeth until the 1930s.

Union County’s Black Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War will appeal more to residents of Union County, of course. But it’s one of those books that belongs as a reference on the bookshelf of anyone interested in New Jersey history as a whole.

Hidden History of New Jersey

Joseph G. Bilby, James M. Madden, Harry Ziegler

2011: The History Press, Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-60949-463-6

Softcover, 158 pages, black and white

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

New Jersey is a place brimming over with history—fortunately for me as ePublisher of GSL. Even once you exhaust the obvious stuff—Battle of Monmouth, Thomas Edison, first baseball game, etc.—you’re still left with a pile of fascinating, quirky, dramatic lesser-appreciated events. Marc Mappen’s *There’s More to New Jersey Than The Sopranos* recently demonstrated how lucrative mining this resource could be. The History Press has now added to the genre the aptly-named *Hidden History of New Jersey*.

In the interest of full-disclosure, I have to admit to a couple of things right off. One is that I’m currently working with The History Press on a similarly-themed book, drawing from some of the

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material I’ve created over the years for GSL. Another is that one of the authors of *Hidden History* is Joe Bilby—a frequent contributor to GSL. And, finally, I helped with the last chapter of their book.

That being said, you’d have to be a pretty poor writer *not* to make an interesting book out of the material Bilby, Madden and Ziegler were drawing from. It’s a fairly eclectic mix of twenty-two short essays. But there is a somewhat strong military history current that runs throughout—likely due to the association of the authors with the National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey in Sea Girt. The first chapter, for example, explains the history of the “Jersey Blues” beginning with the great line, “Neither a sad reflection on the state nor a 1920s jazz riff, ‘Jersey Blues’ has been a nickname for the Garden State’s fighting men for more than 250 years.” And, the second chapter talks about “Scotch Willie” Maxwell, whom they make the case for as “New Jersey’s Forgotten General.” Later chapters explore the heroic role African-American soldiers of the NJ Militia played during the *Morro Castle* disaster in 1934—before federal integration of the nation’s armed services. A Jerseyan’s chest might swell with a little more pride when the Garden State’s contributions to World War II are read—when American troops were stalled by the insanely thick Normandy hedgerows, it was a Jerseyman’s ingenuity that helped them break out; it was a reporter from Newark who was the first journalist to land after D-Day; and the first American soldiers to push into a liberated Paris were from the Garden State. Somehow New Jersey always seems to figures in!

But *Hidden History* is certainly more than just war stories. Other essays talk about P.T. Barnum’s “Great Hoboken Humbug,” the truth behind a storied Jersey City cemetery haunting, the rough-n-tumble of post-Civil War Trenton politics, an Asbury Park inferno, the reality behind Atlantic City’s famed diving horse attraction, and so on.

Among the more enlightening chapters explores the nicer side of the notorious Jersey City Mayor, Frank Hague. He has gone down in popular history as the archetypal political boss—New Jersey’s 20th century answer to New York’s 19th century Boss Tweed. Hague’s shenanigans are well-known as he built a political machine that extended its influence beyond the Garden State into national politics, setting Hague up as something of a kingmaker. In a state with a dubious reputation for first-class political corruption, Hague still stands out.

But, like most powerful men, Hague was a bit more complicated than the character. There was a definite benevolent side to him and it was his generosity to the working class and poor that earned him the loyalty—and votes—of many Jersey City residents. *Hidden History* illuminates this aspect of his character, which it could rightly be said, is a “hidden” aspect of New Jersey’s history.

Despite a relatively small size, New Jersey still retains a strong regionalism that influences its politics, culture and even history (see the North and South Jersey article in this issue!). One of the more curious manifestations of this social dynamic has been “The

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Pineys”—communities who settled in the Pine Barrens and achieved an unfortunate stereotype as scary yokels every bit as inbred and backward as any equally stereotyped southern hillbilly. How this image—as inaccurate as it is unfortunate—was another area not normally found in other histories of the state.

Like most places, New Jersey has not been without its less proud history. The Ku Klux Klan once vacationed here and otherwise patriotic German-American communities found themselves under pressure from pro-Nazi groups.

Disasters have also been part of the state’s heritage. Aside from the *Morro Castle* and Asbury Park fire, *Hidden History* concludes with the worst railroad accident in state history. One February 6, 1951, 85 people were killed and hundreds more injured when the Pennsylvania Railroad’s “The Broker” left the rails and careened down the embankment, landing on Woodbridge’s Fulton Street. I am currently writing a book about this event and was able to help the authors with this chapter.

Overall, *Hidden History of New Jersey* is a quick and entertaining read. The bite-sized chapters make it excellent bedtime reading and even longtime New Jerseyans will likely learn some new little tidbit they didn’t know before.

