

# Soldier's story illustrates Civil War's best and worst

**GETTYSBURG'S UNKNOWN SOLDIER:**  
*The Life, Death, and Celebrity of Amos Humiston*, by Mark H. Dunkelman. Praeger. 272 pages. \$45.

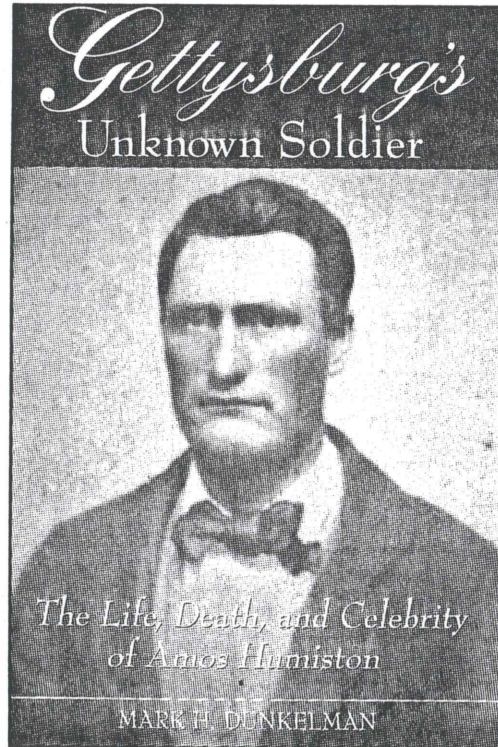
By LUTHER SPOEHR  
Special to the Journal

This is an intriguing little book, in a minor key. Providence-based writer Mark Dunkelman tells the life story of Sgt. Amos Humiston of the 154th New York Volunteers, an obscure Union soldier who achieved posthumous fame because of the way he died. In the process, Dunkelman adds to the growing list of works about the lot of the common soldier in the Civil War, a list begun a half-century ago by Bell Irvin Wiley. In addition, he provides a useful illustration of how history written "from the bottom up" can use evidence most scrupulously.

Born in 1830, Amos Humiston did not lead a prominent or well-documented existence. Before settling into his trade as a harnessmaker, he tried his hand as a sailor on a whaling ship that sailed out of New Bedford, a trip that Dunkelman narrates with particular vividness. When the Civil War broke out, Humiston was plying his trade in Portville, New York, with his wife, Philinda, and their three children.

Thanks to the 19th century's habit of relentless letter-writing (Humiston and many comrades wrote home almost daily), Dunkelman provides a well-textured description of Humiston's military career, from training camp through a narrow escape at Chancellorsville to his fatal encounter at Gettysburg.

Like most common soldiers, Humiston found his daily life comprised of long stretches of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. During Humiston's last earthly moment, however, as he lay dying on the battlefield, he did something that lifted him from anonymity to celebrity: When his body was found in July 1863, it was unidentifiable. No papers, no uniform markings — nothing except, clutched in his hands, an ambrotype of



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three young children.

A Philadelphia doctor, John Francis Bourns, initiated a campaign to discover who this anonymous soldier was. The search tapped enormous reserves of sentiment in the Northern public and eventually led to the door of Philinda and the three children.

Sales of reproductions of the children's portrait and of songs written about the children and their father raised money, at first for the family, and then for an orphanage, called the Homestead, that was built in Gettysburg itself. The widow and her children were among its

first residents. A society that revered both nationhood and the family had made Amos Humiston a hero, and his family celebrities.

Then the story takes a peculiar, perversely modern twist. Philinda and her children seem not to have been happy at the Homestead, and she found a new husband to get them out. Meanwhile, tarnished by scandals that included public allegations of child abuse, the orphanage closed in 1877.

Through all of this moved the mysterious Dr. Bourns. Was he a humanitarian or a con man, or perhaps a little of both? The Humiston family always claimed that he promised a lot more than he delivered, but Dunkelman's narrative allows room for other interpretations, too. Readers will have to make up their own minds.

This last point is not meant to criticize the book, but to praise it. Dunkelman does not push his evidence further than it can go. His knowledge of social history brings Humiston's pre-war and wartime doings to life, but he always distinguishes between what was going on with most "common men" and what probably was going on with Humiston. He never ascribes motives that he can't document. Words and phrases such as "no doubt," "perhaps," "apparently," and "possibly" appear repeatedly and signal the tentative nature of his findings. Would that other researchers were as discriminating.

I have only two reservations about the book. First, it is unfortunate that Dunkelman does not connect Humiston's sudden fame more explicitly and thoroughly to the nascent celebrity culture of the late 19th century. Second, it is even more unfortunate that the publisher is selling the book for \$45, a price that will undoubtedly drive away many prospective readers. That's a pity, because this carefully crafted, engaging little study deserves a wider readership than it will probably get.

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