

**The Church
One of the First Military Veterans Organizations**

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Abstract

Today, the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes well over 100 military veteran organizations including the American Legion, American Veterans (AMVETS), Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. But these assets, these associations, and these contact resources were not always available. I want to show you how the church—in this case the Baptist church—helped two veterans relocate from the battle trenches of the Civil War to the civilian world following General Robert E. Lee’s infamous surrender at Appomattox. The reintegration challenges faced by these two veterans and the assistance they received in addressing them demonstrates how, 150 years ago, the church served as one of our first military veterans organizations.

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The Church One of the First Military Veterans Organizations

I want to share with you stories of my relatives—two military veterans—and how they were steered back into society 150 years ago. You can refer to the primary work—the transcript of the Civil War diary of J. W. Ryland noted at the top of the veterans in society webpage—<https://veteransinsociety.wordpress.com/>

Today, of course, we have the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs and a wealth of military veteran organizations. The VA offers its prime shareholders—the veterans themselves—education and employment opportunities. For example, to encourage employment prospects, the VA encourages job seekers to prepare individual performance based interview profiles. Job candidates are encouraged to explain how the experiences they gained in the military will help them meet challenges in the civilian world.

As the VA says, studies have shown that “the way people behave in the past is probably the way they will behave in the future.” Today, the VA recognizes well over 100 military veteran organizations including the American legion, AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. But these assets, these associations, and these contact resources were not always available.

In this presentation, we will see how, 150 years ago, the church served as one of our first military veterans’ organizations by assisting veterans to reintegrate into civil society. I want to show you how the church, in this case the Baptist church, helped two veterans relocate from the battle trenches of the civil war to the civilian world after general Robert E. Lee’s infamous surrender at Appomattox.

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A graduate of Richmond College, a Baptist ministry school located in the capital of Virginia, my maternal great great grandfather John Ryland, a 24-year old farmer, had just met with his friends and neighbors at the community house. They had engaged in a rousing talk of

local pride, local governance, and how the homeland should always be defended against outside forces. Pivoting off of a firmament of strong community support, he and many of his relatives decided to join the cause. They enlisted in the newly established army of the Confederate States of America and Ryland received a pair of shoes and socks at this first muster. The year was 1861.

For the next four years, John Ryland used the lessons learned in college to support the spiritual needs of his company, part of General Robert E. Lee's army of Northern Virginia. This fresh recruit also kept that diary during his years of service. In June 1862, Ryland suffered severe injury at the battle of seven pines just along the outskirts of Richmond. Union bullets and exploding shells had levied significant casualties to the confederate forces. He convalesced at a hospital (this unit was located at his alma mater, Richmond College) in today's downtown Richmond. Following his recovery, his situation took him from Richmond by rail to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1863. In his diary, Ryland notes his train trip to Charleston was "delayed by the cars running off the tracks in North Carolina." But despite such mechanical difficulties, Ryland's company continued onward. When he reached Charleston, Ryland assumed the duty as spiritual leader of building classrooms and leading Bible study and Sunday School classes for the troops. This was a means to provide solace to his fellow soldiers engaged in the prolonged Charleston siege.

In his writings, Ryland also emphasized that hunger was a mean enemy for the men in South Carolina. Throughout his diary, in fact, he details the value of nourishment and cherishes those opportunities when he did enjoy good foodstuffs. Yes, today's military grub would have been welcomed. From Charleston, he returned to Virginia by rail and marched to Petersburg. Ryland wrote that during his trip into Petersburg, "Never in my life have I witnessed such confusion." In fact, his leaders had the company march back and forth through the town of Petersburg four times before camping. The confederate army and its mission were starting to crumble. In this place just south of Richmond,

however, Ryland again took the reins to provide religious comfort to the men – this time during the prolonged Petersburg siege, one of the most definitive struggles during the final months of war. Siege warfare, of course, was a favorite and successful strategy for the Northern forces during the civil war. And siege warfare magnified the need for John Ryland's expertise especially during those final days.

From Petersburg, Ryland traveled onward with his company to Sailors Creek in Amelia county where they suffered extreme casualties and logistics losses. Continuing to obey their orders, the men marched onward again to the South's final stand in Appomattox, Virginia. At the Appomattox courthouse, of course, came surrender and the confederate army was dismantled. The troops received their hard copy prisoner-of-war paroles – confederate walking papers. The confederate leaders, including General Lee himself, told the dedicated soldiers to give up their weapons and go home.

Ryland and his fellows then began the long trek back home. For most in the company, this was a 140-mile walk from Appomattox to King and Queen County. After all, most horses had either been eaten by hungry troops or confiscated by Union forces. The defeated soldiers trudged past Richmond and on to King and Queen near the Chesapeake Bay. John Ryland and his fellows, just from the trenches of Petersburg, must now face their next challenge. How can they re-enter civilian society on their own after surrendering their rifles? After all, Ryland thinks, my officers have been issuing step-by-step orders and directions for me to follow since I joined up. Where do I go from here?

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During his four years of service, Ryland had learned how to reach out to the troops and provide spiritual comfort during especially stressful days. But had just fully realized that the Southern cause involved more than just a brief military encounter as had been spelled out during those first days of recruitment.

During his years of service, Ryland learned that he did have the capacity to speak the voice of leadership before an audience of young men eagerly looking for direction.

After spending years standing picket in the rain, building Bible-study classrooms, and introducing his fellows to the Lord, he himself now needed to be re-introduced to his community. What skills would society expect to see from this veteran? What talents would he bring back? Who could help him find his way back? Yes, there were so many questions. He could return to his former occupation – that of a farmer. Or he could become a local builder and help reconstruct infrastructure lost during the war between the states.

But John Ryland reached out to the local church and the neighbors back home. The advice he received told him to reemploy those specialized skills he had practiced as soldier. With the help of his local parish, he re-entered society as a Baptist preacher. He would use the talents he honed in Charlestown and Petersburg as his vehicle. And yes, those abilities in the military did help him build a highly respected place at several Baptist churches in Virginia. He served as the man his community could rely on and consult with during those tumultuous days of reconstruction.

Just as he had served with the confederate army from its inception up until its demise at Appomattox, Ryland served as a dedicated, reliable preacher in his community until his very last day on earth in 1905. He and his wife, Lucy, are buried in a family section at the hermitage Baptist church cemetery in Virginia just outside the place of his birth.

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In his diary, John Ryland pointed out that, during his long walk back home he passed by the property of one family member near Richmond, Charles Hill Ryland. Charles and John were first cousins. Like John, Charles also served with the Confederate army, primarily as treasurer with the Colportage Board – division charged with distributing Bibles to the troops. Following the South's surrender, Charles decided he could best support Virginia's society by helping rebuild the institute of higher education.

Reflecting back to 1830, Robert Ryland, Doctor of Divinity and uncle of both Charles and John, had initiated Richmond college, a ministry school, in cooperation with the Baptist

church. Based in downtown Richmond, this college, like most of the South's capital city, had been decimated during the war. As another veteran returning to society, Charles assumed the task of breathing life back into this college—that institution known today as the University of Richmond. Charles had attended Richmond College in the 1850s and had studied Latin, Greek, French, and Mathematics along with a faculty of five professors.

When federal troops occupied Richmond in 1865, they commandeered the college grounds. The main building became a living quarters. Despite the material losses, Richmond College officially re-opened in October 1866 even though it had neither a library nor an endowment. From 1874 – 1914, Charles most notably served as college treasurer. And as treasurer, Charles saw to it that the college endowment grew to \$640,000 – today's money, \$15 million. The college awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1882.

Charles passed away in 1914. He and Uncle Robert Ryland are both buried in Richmond's Hollywood cemetery. Today, the images of Charles and Robert Ryland both rest on the wall of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, an institute seated on the University of Richmond's Westhampton campus. Today, the department of English and the department of History are housed in UOFR'S Ryland Hall.

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The journeys of John and Charles Ryland provide us with case histories of how the church served the function of a military veteran organization 150 years ago and how the church helped two confederate army veterans re-enter society following our nation's costliest war. The church – a central social meeting venue – helped both of these men directly apply lessons learned during military service to the civilian world. John took lessons learned being a spiritual advisor to the troops and applied them to become a community Baptist preacher. While Ryland reached out to a single primary resource (the church) for help re-entering civilian society, today's veterans—facing increasingly complex challenges—can reach out to a far greater number of support resources. Reflecting on the case histories of these two military veterans and their past struggles, today's veterans may learn lessons directly applicable to their own challenges.

About the Author

Stuart V. Price is an industry writer who graduated from Virginia Tech. After kicking off his career as a technical writer at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant, he moved on to design environmental and energy outreach programs in New Mexico, New York City, and Washington, DC. After working in the corporate, government, and association sectors, Price currently uses lessons taken from his career as a private investor. He also sits on Virginia Tech's English Department's Distinguished Alumni Board, and in this role, he helps students kick off their own careers and advocates for the cooperative education/internship program. Price lives with his wife, Melissa, on a wildlife refuge in Amelia, Virginia, just outside Richmond.