

### The Chicago Board of Trade Battery in the Civil War

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## Review

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**Belcher, Dennis W.** *The Chicago Board of Trade Battery in the Civil War*. McFarland, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$49.95. ISBN 9781476683911. 388 pages.

Over 150 years after the end of the Civil War, unit histories remain in production as a compelling way to understand individual and shared experiences, and to comprehend how competing societies raised, equipped, maintained, supported, and remembered their experiences of the war. While the more famous units, including the Twentieth Maine and Hood's Texas Brigade have attracted their share of attention, works such as Lesley Gordon's on the Sixteenth Connecticut remind us that we still have much to learn much from less-heralded units, and Dennis Belcher's work on the Chicago Board of Trade Battery is no exception.<sup>1</sup> In most ways a traditional accounting of the men who served in the unit and a record of their experiences in camp and combat, Belcher's work also sheds new light on artillery units, a topic of recent interest among military historians of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Though his professional training is in entomology, Belcher has produced a half dozen books on other regiments and cavalry organizations in the western theater, which undoubtedly led him to the Board of Trade Battery. His topic is well chosen, as the battery played a vital role in the major campaigns of the western theater after 1862, beginning with their central role in halting the Confederate attack at Stones River. After being one of the first batteries in the West to convert to "horse artillery," which included mounting its individual members so that it could operate alongside cavalry units, the battery participated in the Chattanooga campaign and the battle of Chickamauga, the Atlanta campaign, the defense of Nashville and subsequent pursuit of Hood's defeated army, and Wilson's famous cavalry raid through Alabama and Georgia at the end of the war. The provision of effective artillery for the mounted arm also helps explain the

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<sup>1</sup> John Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957); Susannah Ural, *Hood's Texas Brigade* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2017); and Lesley Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16<sup>th</sup> Connecticut's Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Earl Hess, *Civil War Field Artillery: Promise and Performance on the Battlefield* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2022).

increasing effectiveness of the cavalry branch in the Western theater. A too-brief introduction fails to fully illuminate the important connections between the growing city of Chicago and its Board of Trade that sponsored and maintained the battery alongside several regiments of infantry.<sup>3</sup> However, the extensive biographical data does highlight the many clerks and other professionals affiliated with the board who volunteered for service in the unit. The battery initially benefitted from the leadership, discipline, and training of Capt. James Stokes, a 1835 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy who had served in the Seminole Wars. Stokes struggled to make the transition to leading volunteers instead of regulars and eventually gravitated to a role in the quartermaster department, leaving the battery in the hands of Chicagoans who became equally competent at their task but better understood their charges. Though his archival research is comprehensive and a notable strength of the book, in too many places Belcher provides too much detail and context on the surrounding military strategy and engagements, allowing the spotlight to slip off the battery and requiring heavy sifting to collect the pearls on its employment (though the latter chapters are much better in this regard). The appendix, containing a complete descriptive roster of the roughly 250 members of the battery, will be of great value to genealogists.

The work is primarily descriptive, and benefits from several excellent diaries and memoirs (including that of John Nourse housed at the Chicago History Museum) undoubtedly a result of the higher class of men attracted to artillery service, as Earl Hess confirmed in his recent work. Unfortunately, in many places it lacks the detailed analysis that might advance our understanding of artillery's still contested role in the war. The battery's performance at the center of the U.S. line at Stones River challenges the perception of the relative unimportance of Civil War-era artillery. While technological limitations, especially with fuses, limited artillery's role as a long-range weapon, its greatest value came in studding defensive lines with guns that could be double-shotted with canister, making a single discharge from a six-gun battery almost the equivalent of an extra full-strength infantry regiment (or, later in the war, almost a full brigade) at a critical point. This helps explain both the strength of the defense throughout the war and why it was so difficult to break an opponent's lines, as well as the U.S. Army's eventual success on the battlefield. The side with a greater ability to both design and produce technologically

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991).

advanced field pieces and to raise and equip artillery units was far more likely to have them available at the critical point, whether at Stones River or at Gettysburg, and therefore more likely to prevail. Belcher's work demonstrates that, while the Board of Trade Battery was certainly not a "modern" organization, capable of massing and controlling devastating indirect fires, it was able to help determine the outcome of several battles, including at Stones River and at both Noonday Creek and the battle of Decatur during the Atlanta campaign, which certainly makes artillery and its role in combat worthy of further study. Historians who tackle this task will benefit from essential building blocks, such as Belcher's study, alongside other recent works from McFarland Press focused on artillery units (including Robert Grandchamp's on a Rhode Island battery in the eastern theater) and both the author and the press are to be commended for bringing these valuable resources into the hands of future researchers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Grandchamp, *The Boys of Adams' Battery G: The Civil War Through the Eyes of a Union Light Artillery Unit*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).