

Museum Notes

for the week of December 14 – 20, 2025
by Kristen Parrott, curator

Working on an exhibit for the U.S. 250th recently, I chose a piece of sheet music just for the brightly-colored picture of the flag on the cover and for the title, “Hymn to Old Glory: The Star Spangled Flag of the Free”, thinking that this would be a background object. But then I saw that the words to the song were written by William Enoch Minshall. “Minshall” is a Vernon County name, and a little research revealed an interesting story.

William Enoch Minshall was born in Ohio in 1844 and moved to Viroqua with his family when he was 12. As a young man he worked as a typesetter and printer for the *Northwestern Times* newspaper, which was founded in 1856 and later became the *Vernon County Censor*.

Minshall served as a soldier throughout the Civil War, first in Company I of the 6th Wisconsin, a Vernon County company, enlisting in June of 1861. Other soldiers in the company included Earl Rogers and Francis Waller. He contracted typhoid fever, and was discharged in May of 1862 because of disability, but then re-enlisted a few weeks later, now in Company F of the 20th Wisconsin. Minshall fought in multiple battles during the war and suffered several injuries, including losing his left eye. He mustered out in July of 1865.

William married Emeline Rivenburgh of Sparta in 1867, shortly after the end of the Civil War. They moved to Chicago, where he worked for the *Chicago Times* newspaper. He eventually lost the vision in his other eye, and came to rely on his wife to be his “eyes”. But William continued to work, writing poetry and song lyrics, giving speeches and teaching elocution. He published the “Hymn to Old Glory” in 1915, the words recalling both Washington and Lincoln: “By Washington founded, by Lincoln safeguarded, We hail thee, Old Glory, flag of the free.”

Newspaper articles referred to Minshall as the “blind soldier”, the “blind veteran”, and the “blind vet of ‘61”, because of his Civil War experience. In earlier photographs, he sat turned to the left, so that his missing eye was not apparent. Possibly he got a glass eye when he was older, because he faces the camera in later photos.

Emeline died in Chicago in 1925. William then went to the soldiers’ home in Milwaukee where he died three months later. They are buried at Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago.

During the Civil War, Minshall had become friends with Rufus Dawes of Mauston, who was initially captain of Company K of the 6th Wisconsin, but rose through the ranks to become a lieutenant colonel for the whole regiment. Rufus’ son Charles Gates Dawes grew up to become Vice President of the United States in 1925, and Minshall’s obituaries mention his connection to the family. Charles Dawes won the Nobel Peace Prize later that same year, after Minshall’s death.

You can see William Minshall’s music on the second floor of the museum in a new exhibit about the U.S. 250th.