

# **Inequality and the Syndetic Structure of the Authority File: a case of the “Lost Cause” myth of the American Civil War in a Name Authority Record’s References**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Name Authority Records (NARs) can perpetuate inequity and institutionalized inequality not merely via the choice of authorized access points but in the relationship between authorized access points and references. A salient example relates to the “Lost Cause” myth of the American Civil War, a distorted, ahistorical and harmful view of the conflict. A cataloger needed an NAR for the Wilmington Light Infantry, a unit of the post-Civil War North Carolina State Guard, yet the only NAR currently in the NACO file ambiguated this corporate body with a Confederate States Army unit of the Civil War. An investigation of the historical circumstances of the corporate bodies involved revealed that the relationship between the authorized access point and the references in this NAR in effect implicitly yet strongly promoted Lost Cause ideals. This example offers useful insight for LIS educators teaching cataloging and information organization.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Cataloging; Metadata; Social justice; Critical librarianship.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Corporate body name authority records; NACO; military history; Civil War; Lost Cause myth

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Scholars of information organization and practicing catalogers have over the last few decades examined and confronted issues of equity in cataloging. Among the best known are efforts that focus on how power differentials along race and gender lines are embedded in subject vocabularies and other ontologies; salient examples include Berman (1971) and Olson (2002).<sup>1</sup> More recently scholars and practicing catalogers such as those in Sandberg (2019) have addressed other areas, including specifically how inequity affects name authority records.<sup>2</sup>

One aspect of inequity in name authority files that has not received much explicit attention, however, lays with not just the terms themselves but the relationships between them, or the syndetic structure. Systems of inequity and harmful power relations can be inadvertently built into not merely the choice of access points themselves. They may also be implicitly and strongly embedded into relationships between access points and between access points and references; that is, the syndetic structure of authority records and the authority file as a whole.

A particularly illustrative case study comes from an area of cataloging that rarely receives much concentrated attention: cataloging of military history subject materials. As Choemprayong and Wildemuth (2009, pp. 52-53) have recognized, case studies are useful in library and information science research. Although analysis of a single case does not provide generalizable conclusions, it can nevertheless serve as an exploration to identify issues for further research. The subject area from which the present case is drawn – cataloging of military history materials – is also of interest. Military history is a broad field but of vital importance to those concerned with improving the human condition, given the long and tragic relationship between organized violence and institutionalized injustice. One particular aspect of American popular memory that is particularly damaging to the cause of equity and justice is the persistence of the “Lost Cause” myth of the U.S. Civil War. This understanding of the Civil War, despite its lack of basis in fact, remains pervasive in modern U.S. culture and society. The central elements of this myth include the assertion that slavery was not the main motivation for secession and not the cause of the war, a downplaying of the evils of slavery, the glorification of Confederate soldiers and leaders, and assertions that the Confederacy’s rebellion was a noble continuation of the spirit of the American Revolution (Nolan, 2000; American Battlefield Trust, 2023).<sup>3</sup>

Although Lost Cause mythology manifests in American culture in many ways that perpetuate harm, one of those ways is the distortion of American military history. This distortion extends to the cataloging world, including into the creation of corporate body name authority records for U.S. Army and Confederate States Army military units of the Civil War. Creating NARs for any American military units is difficult enough but establishing former-name/later-name relationships and “see” references are particularly challenging elements, owing to the very complex and extensive succession of name changes of the many individual units of the U.S. Army over two and a half centuries (see McKenney, 2007 and Mahon and Danysh, 1972, *History of the Organization of the Infantry*, pp. 3-121 for examples).<sup>4</sup> Current RDA and NACO cataloging practice directs catalogers to prefer the form of a corporate body name found in “manifestations associated with the corporate body” (RDA NACO Program Training Workshop Task Group, 2024, slide 22) which for practical purposes often means the item in hand being cataloged. Oftentimes a cataloger may lack sufficient information in the sources in hand to identify the corporate body and construct its access point. In the case of U.S. Army units, given the complexity of their name changes over time, a cataloger may often find it useful to consult the Army’s own official documentation (called unit “lineages”) about names, name changes and identities of units of the U.S. Army. A unit’s “lineage and honors” is an official statement by the Army agency responsible for documenting the official changes in unit names and designations, the Center of Military History’s Force Structure and Unit History Branch. (See Force Structure and Unit History Branch, n.d.-a).<sup>5</sup>

In January 2025, the author was consulted by a colleague for advice revising a particularly challenging name authority record (NAR) for a unit of the North Carolina militia, the Wilmington Light Infantry, that later became a unit of the North Carolina Army National Guard and the U.S. Army. Analyzing the case of the Wilmington Light Infantry NAR is useful because it illustrates how Lost Cause mythology is embedded strongly but subtly in the very structure of the existing NAR for that unit as corporate body. The analysis that follows in no way suggests any ill-intent on the part of the cataloger(s) who originally made this NAR. Rather it simply provides an example of how an ideology of inequity may become (however unintentionally) embedded not merely in the choice of term for an access point but in the relationship between authorized access point and variant access point (i.e., reference).

The unit’s official lineage according to the U.S. Army is currently ambiguous regarding whether the unit or its successors have a connection to any previous Confederate unit.<sup>6</sup> This has been challenged and revised only in more recent years. In 2020, the Army and the entire Department of Defense began a process to repudiate all commemorations of personnel who voluntarily served in the Confederate States forces. This was the work of a specially-formed government panel called the Naming Commission. One result was that the Army removed campaign participation credits for Confederate service from modern National Guard units who had formerly carried those battle honors in Army records. (Naming Commission, 2022, p. 13).

Although there was no explicitly documented decision to alter also the lineage part of the official lineages and honors records, since the implementation of the Naming Commission's recommendation the Unit History and Force Structure Branch has revised some lineage and honors statements so that they no longer validate Lost Cause mythology and the unit's service in the Confederate States Army *against* the United States.<sup>7</sup>

## **A Name Authority Record that Endorses the “Lost Cause” Myth**

Despite the U.S. Army's recent repudiation of the Lost Cause myth, some NARs for National Guard units from Southern states in the NACO authority file still, through their cross-reference structure, privilege the identity and ideals of the Confederacy. This was evident in the case that the author's colleague brought to the author's attention with the Wilmington Light Infantry. The author's colleague was seeking an NAR for the Wilmington Light Infantry as a corporate body. Searching the OCLC authority file for the corporate body name “Wilmington Light Infantry” revealed “Wilmington Light Infantry” as only a “see” reference (MARC 410 field) on the NAR for the access point:

110 1\_ Confederate States of America. |b Army. |b North Carolina Infantry Regiment, 18th. |b Company G

(no2012021247) (See Figure 1 for full NAR)

The first 670 field in the NAR is for the following work:

Cantwell, Edward. *Oration: Delivered Before the Wilmington Light Infantry, On Their Twenty-Fourth Anniversary, May 20th, 1877.* [Wilmington? N.C.]: P. Heinsberger, 1877. (OCLC #7233657; digital surrogate described in OCLC #928791513)

Yet that work is in actuality about a unit of the post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction militia of North Carolina, that was also named the Wilmington Light Infantry.

Prior to the American Civil War, the militia of the State of North Carolina did indeed have another unit called the Wilmington Light Infantry. Originally organized in 1853, that militia unit after several redesignations eventually by 1861 became Company G of the 18th North Carolina Infantry Regiment of the Confederate States Army (the unit described in NAR no2012021247).<sup>8</sup> It fought against the United States with the rest of its regiment until that unit surrendered as part of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox in April, 1865 (Dozier, 1992).

In 1877, however, following the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, North Carolina reorganized its state militia. An act of the state legislature passed March 12, 1877 revoked all previous commissions, founded a new militia organization with a different name, the North Carolina State Guard, and created new units for it (North Carolina Adjutant General, 1878, pp. 5-6). This action was likely associated with “Redemption” in North Carolina; that is, the end of Reconstruction and the return of ex-Confederates to political power in the state.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary records of this reorganization, even though made at the behest of a state government sympathetic to the ethos of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause make clear that the units created by virtue of the 1877 act were new entities. One such unit was a company designated the “Wilmington Light Infantry”, and it was this unit whose personnel were addressed by Edward Cantwell and the subject of his *Oration* cited above and described in OCLC #7233657 and OCLC #928791513. Like the other units of the new State Guard, it might have the same name as an earlier unit, but it was a different, newly-constituted organization created on a new legal authority. The records of even a “Redemptionist” state government make that clear (North Carolina Adjutant General, 1878, pp. 5-6). A present-day NACO cataloger would, therefore, be justified in considering the 1877 Wilmington Light Infantry a new corporate body calling for its own NAR.

The NAR for Company G of the 18th North Carolina Infantry, the former Wilmington Light Infantry of 1853 (no2012021247) cites Cantwell’s *Oration* in its first 670 field. Because NACO practice and policy instruct catalogers to cite in the first 670 field the work being cataloged that caused the need for the NAR (Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs Division, 2025, 670 section, p. 2), that authority record seems to convey that Cantwell’s *Oration* is about the Confederate States Army unit Company G, 18th North Carolina Infantry. And even a cursory reading of Cantwell’s *Oration* and its subtitle alone make clear that Cantwell was speaking as if the people before him – including the members of the post-1877 Wilmington Light Infantry – were the direct successors of the Wilmington Light Infantry of 1853. He is quite pointed in his proud assertions that they were the inheritors of what he saw as the traditions of the Confederate States Army and the American Revolution. Cantwell clearly spoke as if the 1853 Wilmington Light Infantry, Company G of the 18th North Carolina Infantry and the unit of the North Carolina State Guard named Wilmington Light Infantry were all the same entity. He talks about all of them as if they are the same organization with different names and statuses changing over time, and does so with effusive pride and direct references to the supposed glory of the Confederacy and how it was the alleged embodiment and noble successor to the traditions of the American Revolution (Cantwell, 1877, pp. 7-11, 13). Cantwell’s oration before the newly-reconstituted 1877 unit was a thorough and zealous paean to the Lost Cause.<sup>10</sup>

For many years, the modern U.S. Army, as evidenced and documented through its published unit lineages, also took the position that the Wilmington Light Infantry of 1877 and the subject of Cantwell's *Oration* was indeed a successor to North Carolina infantry units of the Confederate States Army. The official lineages of the twentieth-century successor units, the 119th Infantry Regiment and 120th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army, have not been updated since 1953 (Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953, pp. 340-347; Force Structure and Unit History Branch, n.d.-b). If, however, they were updated according to the same criteria and apparent policies in force since the Naming Commission report, they would not likely validate and endorse as legitimate any of the units' Confederate heritage (factual or not).

The NACO authority file, however, validates Cantwell's Lost Cause nostalgia – not through choice of access point alone but through the choice of references. The very structure of the NAR, by virtue of making “Wilmington Light Infantry” only a 410 “see” reference, renders any entity named “Wilmington Light Infantry” subordinate in importance to the Confederate States Army. Although it is unlikely this NAR was purposefully created with such an intent, the authority record implicitly endorses the “Lost Cause” view of the Civil War in clear contravention to the documentary record.<sup>11</sup> It is as if the NAR conveys that the Confederacy and its legacy somehow have primacy. It does so not through the choice of access point, where catalogers are so accustomed to finding inequality, but in syndetic structure. A new NAR for the post-1877 Wilmington Light Infantry merits creation and no2012021247 merits revision to clarify that it documents only the Confederate States Army unit named in its 110 field.<sup>12</sup>

## **Implications for Library and Information Science Education**

This case draws attention to the importance of the concept of concept of catalogers' judgment and raises questions about the importance of specialized subject knowledge in name authority work.<sup>13</sup> When constructed according to the information in the item in hand, the NAR for the 18th North Carolina is not “wrong” per se but it does, as shown above, incorporate and validate a pervasive falsehood about a pivotal event in American history. Yet well-intentioned catalogers might not realize the falsity of Cantwell's claims in the first place unless they consulted sources outside Cantwell's *Oration*. Whether and when a cataloger should go beyond the source in hand when seeking information about a corporate body is a matter of judgment. Catalogers' judgment, although often cited and discussed, has only begun to become of subject of scholarly study in the field. Diao (2018, p. 311) has shown how the concept of “situation awareness” is relevant to catalogers' judgment. Perhaps that dimension of catalogers' judgment might apply not just to interpretation of rules but to decisions about the management of time and resources required for authority work in the first place – including judging when and why an authorities cataloger might go beyond the source in hand for information about a corporate body. Future studies on catalogers' judgment might usefully examine that aspect.

Not every cataloger of military history materials need be a scholar of military history, just as not every cataloger need be a scholar of the subject of any of the materials they catalog. Catalogers nevertheless benefit from a consciousness of the importance of the subject field of the materials they catalog. If LIS faculty inculcate (or continue to inculcate) that consciousness into future catalog librarians, they will be better attuned to judge when to question what the materials they have in hand say about themselves.<sup>14</sup> By doing so, they will be better equipped to look critically not just at the terms that are chosen for access points, but at what the very structure of an authority record conveys (or does not convey) about the entities that it documents. This critical view of authority records advances equity and justice.

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### **Figure 1**

*Existing NAR for Company G, 18th North Carolina Infantry and Wilmington Light Infantry (no2012021247)*

Type z	<u>Upd</u> status a	Enc <u>lvl</u> n	Source c
Roman ■	Ref status a	Mod rec	Name use a
Govt <u>agn</u> ■	Auth status a	Subj a	Sub use a
Series n	Auth/ref a	Geo subd n	Ser use b
Ser num n	Name n	<u>Subdiv</u> <u>tp</u> n	Rules c

005 20120214074543.0

008 120213n| acannaabn |a ana c

010 \_\_ |a no2012021247

035 \_\_ |a (OCoLC)oca09114254

040 Nc |b eng |c Nc

110 1\_ Confederate States of America. |b Army. |b North Carolina Infantry Regiment, 18th.  
|b Company G

410 1\_ Confederate States of America. |b Army. |b North Carolina Infantry Regiment, 18th.  
|b Wilmington Light Infantry

410 2\_ North Carolina Troops, 18th Regiment. |b Company G

410 2\_ Wilmington Light Infantry

670 \_\_ Cantwell, E. Oration, 1877: |b t.p. (Wilmington Light Infantry) p. 20 (On the 15th of June [1861], the company was united with nine others and formed the 18th Regiment of North Carolina Troops ... as Company G of the 18th Regiment)

670 \_\_ North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865, Infantry v. 6, 1977: |b p. 378 (This company known as the "Wilmington Light Infantry," was from New Hanover County and enlisted at Wilmington in April-July, 1861. It was accepted into state service ... on August 20, 1861. When the regiment was organized this company was assigned to it as Company G.)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the enduring importance of Berman's work see Knowlton (2005); recent useful examinations of the history of the field are found in Fox and Gross (2024) and Pettitt (2024).

<sup>2</sup> These areas are closely related in any case, given that many corporate body authorized access points are used as subject headings (Library of Congress, 2016). This paper uses "corporate body" in the sense defined by Original RDA (Original Resource Description and Access); i.e., "An organization or group of persons and/or organizations that is identified by a particular name and that acts, or may act, as a unit" (RDA Steering Committee, 2010-2024, Glossary). It uses the terms "authority record" and "authority file" in the senses found in Levine-Clark and Carter (2013, p. 22) who define "authority record" as "A record (1) that shows a heading (1) in the form established for use in a set of bibliographic records, cites the sources (2) consulted in establishing the heading (1), indicates the references (2) to be made to and from the heading (1), and notes information found in the sources (2) as justification of the chosen form of heading (1) and the specified references (2)." and "authority file" as "A set of authority records establishing the authoritative forms of headings (1) to be used in a set of bibliographic records and the references (2) to be made to and from the headings (1). Categories of authority files include name authority file, series authority file, subject authority file and genre authority file. Synonymous with authority list." [numerals in parentheses refer to other terms found in the overall work cited and are included here so that each quotation is given exactly as shown in the source cited].

<sup>3</sup> In the Lost Cause view of the U.S. Civil War, the rebellious Confederacy was defeated only by overwhelming numbers, as if never truly subjugated and supposedly remaining a tragic yet inspiring experiment in liberty. Additional useful scholarly examination of the Lost Cause myth is found in the now-classic Blight (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Clear illustration of this complexity is also easily gained from surveying the many NARs in the NACO file for these types of corporate bodies. See Library of Congress Authorities (2025).

<sup>5</sup> Although the U.S. Army has a system, defined by regulation, for establishing a legal basis of these name changes (see United States Army, 2007, Chapter 5), that system was not written for catalogers. The Army's system therefore use concepts that it is possible for a NACO cataloger to translate into NACO terms (i.e. predecessor-successor relationships, etc.) although it is not always easy to do so; if the military unit for which a cataloger wants to create an NAR is a unit of the Army National Guard, the situation may become even more complex given that such units have an official status in both the United States Army and their home state's National Guard and therefore have lineages that may go back to nineteenth-century state militia units. On the complex history of how state militia forces of the early nineteenth century evolved to become state military forces with some degree of Federal recognition and eventually institutionalized as the Army National Guard see Mahon (1983) and Cooper (2002); although the status of National Guard units in the modern era is complex, it is clearly defined in law. Despite this, treatment of state militia units and Army National Guard units as corporate bodies in the NACO file is very inconsistent. For examples of NARs with notes that might serve as a model to clarify, see nr2004029808 and no2005066805 (Library of Congress Authorities, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> The most recent official published lineage statements (Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953, pp. 340-347) dates from the early 1950s, when Lost Cause mythology was still widely accepted and even embedded in the Army's understanding of its own history. Starting in 1925, the U.S. Army allowed Army National Guard units from Southern states to consider themselves as officially perpetuating units of the Confederate States Army; see Naming Commission (2022, p. 13).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the lineage of the 116th Infantry Regiment, a unit of the Virginia Army National Guard, documents that it is descended from Augusta County volunteer companies of the Virginia militia, which themselves were reorganized upon Virginia's secession into the 5th Virginia Infantry and 52nd Virginia Infantry of the Confederate States Army. An official lineage published by the U.S. Army in 1953 acknowledged the modern 116th Infantry Regiment's origin as a Confederate unit and referred to the unit's battle honors fighting against the United States by using the Lost Cause-laden euphemism of "Confederate Service" (Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953, pp. 329-330), the revised official lineage information dated December 13, 2024 accounts for the unit's time fighting against the United States by using the term "defected" – a term more historically and legally accurate to refer to the unit's treason and rebellion against the Constitution of the United States (Force Structure and Unit History Branch, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> North Carolina actually started raising regular forces in April 1861, prior to North Carolina's secession declaration of May 20, 1861. The Wilmington Light Infantry became one of the component companies of the 8th North Carolina Volunteer Infantry, a state unit first raised in April 1861 in Wilmington and its environs. That unit was in turn redesignated on November 14, 1861 as the 18th North Carolina Infantry, and by that time part of the Confederate States Army. The Wilmington Light Infantry became Company G of the 18th North Carolina Infantry (Dozier, 1992, pp. 2-9, 13-14).

<sup>9</sup> The exact origins of the act of 1877 are unclear, but the law reorganizing the militia as the North Carolina State Guard and creating new units, including the Wilmington Light Infantry, took place during the early months of the second gubernatorial administration of Zebulon Vance. Vance's election in 1876 generally marks the end of Reconstruction in North Carolina and the return to power of former Confederate leaders committed to the ideology of the "Lost Cause". Soon after the start of his second term in 1877, Vance led the reorganization of many state institutions; the reorganization of the militia and the renaming of it as the North Carolina State Guard might have been part of this broader effort (see McKinney, 2004, pp. 318-333 and especially p. 323)

<sup>10</sup> His motivation was very likely ideological. Cantwell, although having been educated as a lawyer in the North, was a zealous Confederate. He had first volunteered as a private soldier to serve in the Wilmington Light Infantry of 1861, later was commissioned as a Confederate States Army officer and served throughout the war (Allardice, 2008, p. 89; Trimpi, 2010, p. 32).

<sup>11</sup> The author contacted via e-mail catalog librarians currently listed on the webpage of the library who created in 2012 the NAR that is the subject of this case study to inquire whether anyone recalled creating this record (M. Danley, personal communication, August 11, 2025), but has received no reply as of the date of submission of this article. The author wishes to reiterate that the present analysis is not intended to attribute any mal-intent to any librarians who created or edited the NAR that is the subject of this case study.

<sup>12</sup> One objection might be that remedying the error is delving into the realm of "culture wars". The "Lost Cause" myth, however, is not merely one alternative among many plausible historical interpretations of a complex historical event, but rather clear historical falsehood that when validated by those in power has justified and rationalized inequality and brutality in the United States (Nolan, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Because the corporate body in this case was used as a subject access point, this case also provides an example of the challenges of applying the principle of objectivity in subject analysis. The Subject Headings Manual addresses the matter of objectivity in subject analysis and instructs catalogers to "Consider the intent of the author or publisher and, if possible, assign headings for this orientation without being judgmental. Follow stated intentions of the author or publisher in such matters as readership, audience level, treatment as fact or fiction, etc." (Library of Congress, 2016). It contains, however, no corresponding mandate to follow the author's stated intent or conform to the author's beliefs when constructing the vocabulary itself. Therefore, even though Cantwell claimed that the Wilmington Light Infantry of 1877 shared the same identity as Company G of the 18th North Carolina of the Confederate States Army, there is no obligation of a NACO cataloger to incorporate that historical falsehood into the syndetic structure of the NAR.

<sup>14</sup> This recommendation is not made with the insinuation that many LIS faculty teaching cataloging do not already take this approach; whether and to what extent this approach enters into cataloging classes would require another, different study outside the scope of the present paper. Rather, the intent is to use this case as an example (albeit a single one) of the value of such an approach.