

The Grand Army of the Republic

In the decades after the Civil War, there was no separate organization representing disabled Union veterans. Instead, like many other veterans, they joined the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The GAR became very effective in pressure politics, especially in its promotion of veterans' pensions in the late nineteenth century. It was, in effect, both a fraternal organization and a political advocacy group.

Fraternal organizations were popular in nineteenth-century America. These included Temperance societies, Freemasons, the Odd Fellows, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, and the Knights of Columbus. These gave men a place to socialize and to get support during a time of great changes in society. Under the slogan, "Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty," the GAR met similar needs for Union veterans.

Founded on April 6, 1866, by Major Benjamin F. Stephenson, a surgeon with the 124th Illinois Infantry, the GAR grew rapidly in the 1880s and reached its height in the 1890s, with 450,000 members and 7,500 Posts nationwide. It sought to recreate the comradeship of military service, and its organization mirrored military hierarchy, including a national "commander-in-chief." Local posts modeled meetings and initiations on the rituals of Masonic lodges.



GAR Post 1 Members, New Bedford, Massachusetts, Digital Commonwealth.
<https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:rr1733969>

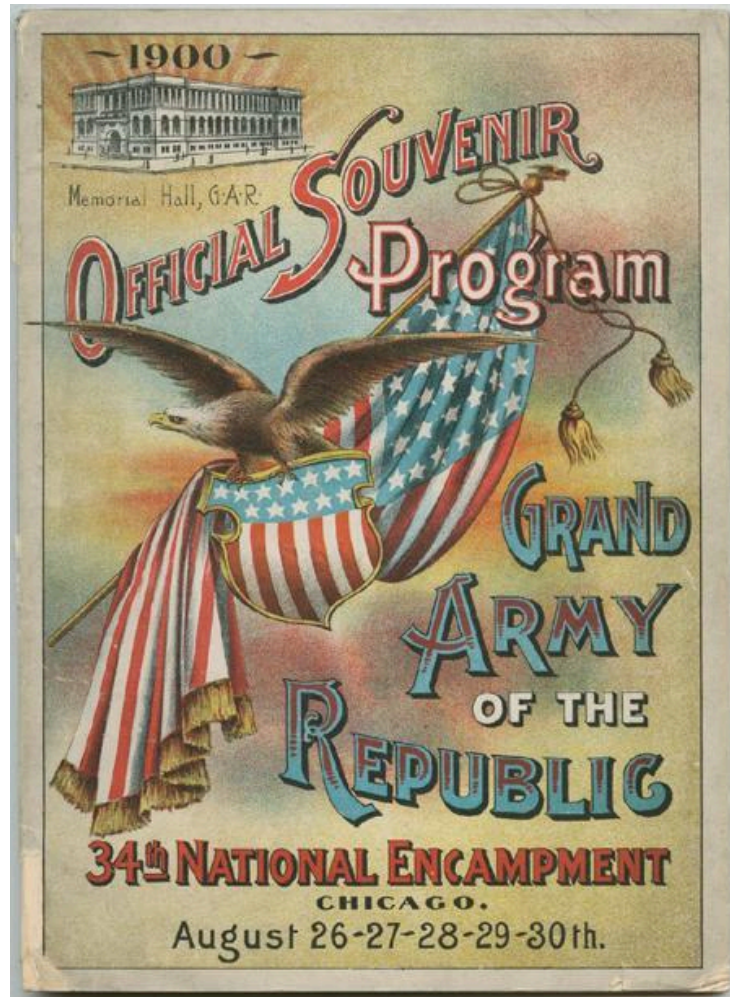
If GAR Posts provided opportunities for comradeship and shared memories at the local level, the national organization quickly became a powerful political force, especially within the Republican Party. They established soldiers' homes, helped make

Memorial Day a national holiday, and lobbied effectively for larger pensions for Union veterans. Five Presidents (Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley) were GAR members.



Grand Army of the Republic service certificate, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.45606/>

One of the biggest benefits of the GAR were many annual encampments. These gatherings lasted for days and included camping out, formal dinners, speeches, and ceremonies. The encampments brought economic benefits to host sites. They are an example of how memorializing the Civil War made money for some in the late nineteenth century.



Grand Army of the Republic National Encampment bulletin in 1900, Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Army_of_the_Republic#/media/File:GARProgram-cover.jpg

The Grand Army of the Republic did help disabled veterans but often used amputees, or “living monuments,” as symbols leveraged to ensure more generous pensions for all Union veterans. The stress on amputation as the quintessential Civil War disability meant that those with less visible, and more common, disabilities received far less sympathy, attention, and assistance.



USE <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017660647/>

Sources:

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