

# Fallen Soldier

David Abraham Okes  
22 June 1816 - 4 July 1883  
Private, Union Army 2nd Ohio Militia Infantry, 1862

By Ellen Notbohm  
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The dates on my great-great grandfather David Abraham Okes' grave marker are facts that bracket his life. Everything else we knew about him was family legend: that he had come to America from Bavaria in 1838, that he and his wife Mary had lost six children to a Cincinnati diphtheria epidemic in 1853, that he had died in a fall from a window while watching a 4th of July parade. His 90-year-old granddaughter had added some detail to this portion of David's story: "He was cheering on his regiment as they passed in the parade, which might mean that he was in the Civil War." David Okes was sick that day, or so the legend goes. That's why he wasn't marching.

It was another 30 years until internet research helped us firm up the details: David Okes had enlisted as a private in the Union Army, 2nd Ohio Militia Infantry on September 3, 1862 "at the age of 40,"



David Abraham Okes

according to one online record. He was actually 46, but men over 45 were considered too old to serve. He had already lost enough for one lifetime, and the city of Cincinnati, his home of 25 years, was under threat of attack by Confederate forces. It makes sense that the call of duty was strong enough for this German Jewish immigrant to lie and make himself younger. According to a history written about his regiment, the 2nd regiment served picket duty - a scattered line "in sight of the enemy" in advance of the rest of the troops. Picket duty was considered one of the most dangerous positions and one of the most likely places a soldier would be killed. But not David. Further research confirmed the family legend. The stark entry on an obscure index card in the University of Cincinnati Archives cites cause of death: "Fall. Shock."

## April 2025 update.

A couple of decades have passed since I published the story of David Okes. In that time, facts from other sources have come to me, illuminating how family legend can take on a life of its own, being neither entirely true nor untrue. My great-aunt's version of David's death, that he fell from a window on July 4 while "cheering on his regiment as they passed in the parade" has been proven only partially true. He did serve in the Civil War and he did die in a fall from a window on July 4—but in the earliest hours of the morning, long before any parade would have taken place. This fact came from both a newspaper account and the first-hand account of a grandchild.

The tragedy of David and his wife Mary losing six children in six weeks to a diphtheria epidemic may also have been only partially true. I can document three children who died within thirty days of each other in 1853, though I can't document the cause of their passings. I can document that Mary gave birth to nine children, only six (possibly seven) of whom I can account for. The other three may have died of diphtheria, possibly here and gone between censuses, but working with the Cincinnati public library archives and a private historian, there doesn't appear to be any evidence of an epidemic in Cincinnati in 1853.

And although it appears that David's age was misrepresented in his enlistment record, there's no evidence he lied about it. Perhaps he did. Or perhaps the army, needing soldiers, waived the age limit, perhaps they knew but looked the other way, perhaps they assumed based on appearance or demeanor.

"It makes a good story." The urge to embroider or romanticize a family legend has long been irresistible to many. But I'm a much more careful storyteller than I was in my earlier days, thanks to Great-great-grandfather David's story, and others since. The whole truth and nothing but the truth is almost always a good enough story just as it happened. Lacing it with speculation, possibilities, and wondering-pondering—identified as such—can be fun and keeps us busy as genealogists. David's story proves to me that every family history is a perpetual work in progress.

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