

Carl Ahrendt: Biographical Sketch

Carl Ahrendt was born in 1842 in Bad Lauterberg, Germany, on the southern edge of Harz National Park. It was a difficult time in Germany; only two years before Carl's birth, rural Germany had suffered immense famine from the potato blight. Soon after that revolutions occurred in an attempt to unify Germany, and a forced military draft pulled many young men into the Prussian Army.

Although we don't know why the Ahrendt family emigrated, all of these factors may have contributed. What we do know is in April 1857, the 14-year-old Carl sailed with his parents and three younger siblings on the ship Duisburg from Bremen to Baltimore, Maryland. They settled near Canton Avenue in Baltimore, where his father Heinrich ("Henry") worked as an iron molder, and his mother Charlotte raised the children.



*Bad Lauterberg, Germany,
Carl Ahrendt's birthplace*

Civil War

In April 1861, the Confederates fired the first shots of the Civil War. President Lincoln called for 75,000 militiamen; within a week, the 19-year-old Carl enlisted as a Private in the 5th New York Regiment, Company H. He was a barber by trade, and described as 5' 7 ¾" tall with blue eyes, light hair, and a light complexion.

Duryée's Zouaves

Knowing Carl's later passion for theater, it's easy to see why this particular regiment appealed to him. Known as "Duryée's Zouaves" the 5th NY was founded by a wealthy Manhattan businessman named Abram Duryée, who was swept up in the fervor surrounding the French Foreign Legion, or "Zouaves."



*Uniforms from
Duryée's Zoaves*

The Zouaves were legendary, revered as the tough, dashing, heroes of many a hard-fought battle. They were colorful and exotic in their baggy trousers, tasseled fez, and braided jackets, and during the 1850's American militia units began to adopt the uniform and bravado of the famed Gallic warriors.

The 5th NY were considered the most smartly dressed of all the American Zouave regiments, with baggy red trousers, blue Chasser jackets, and tasseled red stocking hats for battle. Ultimately they became one of the most famous of all the volunteer regiments, known for their gallantry and discipline while engaging in several fierce battles.

Carl reported with the rest of the regiment to Fort Schuyler in the Bronx, where, according to the New York Times, the men were "subjected to very rigid discipline, and any one skilled in the science of war, who shall

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pay them a visit, will be surprised at the precision with which they execute some of the most intricate battalion movements."

On May 24, 1861 Duryée's Zouaves marched down Broadway past cheering crowds and boarded the steamship "Alabama" en route to Fort Monroe in Virginia. The troops had not yet seen battle, and the costumed warriors must have felt intoxicated with the pageantry.

Once ashore, Duryée's Zouaves set up camp about a mile and a half from Fort Monroe. Scouts were immediately dispatched, impressing the local people with their derring do and earning them the nickname "red-legged devils."

The Battle of Big Bethel

On June 10, 1861 Duryée's Zouaves were engaged in their first major battle, the Battle of Big Bethel. It was the first Civil War battle in Virginia, and possibly the first true battle on any land at all.

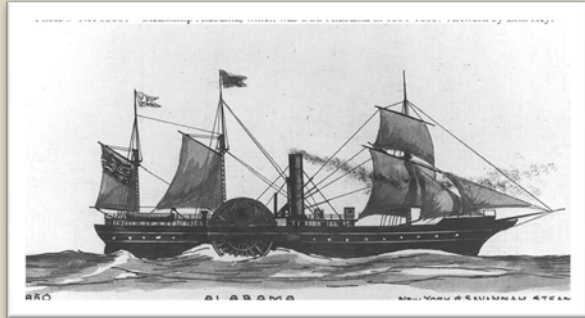
The Union forces had blockaded Chesapeake Bay. Fort Monroe was at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula; by controlling the fort, the Union was also able to occupy the towns of Hampton and Newport News.

Confederate forces had built a defensive line to block Union forces from advancing further into the Peninsula. But it wasn't just a defense; squads of Confederate troops were constantly harassing the Union soldiers. In retaliation, the Union commander attacked with 3,500 men in two converging columns, led by Duryée's Zouaves. Just as Duryée's men were to open the attack, the 7th NY Regiment mistakenly opened fire on the 3rd NY, who were wearing gray uniforms. Thinking they'd been cut off, Duryée's men withdrew, and the element of surprise was lost.

The battle continued as the Confederates fell back to entrenchments behind Brick Kiln Creek, with Union troops in pursuit. Carl Ahrendt himself was quoted as saying, "There were dead and wounded all around, arms and hands lying on the ground, maimed bodies, horrible scenes." Only one Union regiment made it across the creek, though, and soon the disorganized Union forces retreated, returning to Hampton and Newport News. The Union suffered 79 casualties, with 31 (seven of them killed) from Duryée's Zouaves. The Confederates suffered only one killed and seven wounded.



The 5th New York marching down Broadway on their way to the front, May 24, 1861. (From a sketch by Frank Vizitelly in "The Illustrated London News.")



The steamship Alabama, a 1261-ton wooden side-wheel steamer. (Watercolor by Erik Heyl for use in his 1948 book "Early American Steamers", Volume I.)



The charge of Duryée's Zouaves at the Battle Of Big Bethel. (Source: Harper's Weekly; June 29, 1861)

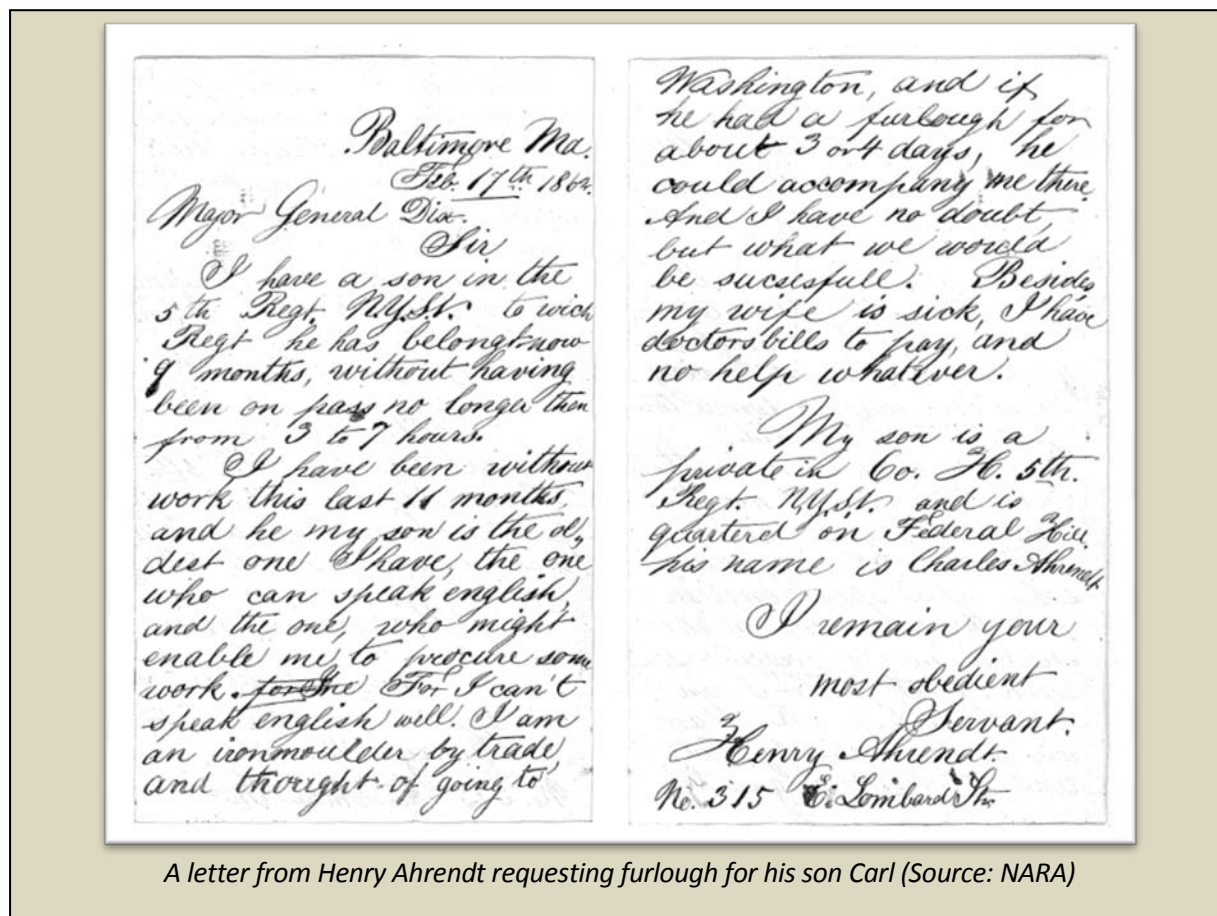
Garrison Duty

At the end of July, Duryée's Zouaves were transferred to Baltimore for eight months of garrison duty on Federal Hill. Colonel Duryée himself was promoted to command another brigade, and the new Zouaves commander used the opportunity to intensify training and tighten discipline. The Zouaves built an elaborate earthwork on Federal Hill and learned to operate the fort's big guns; they mastered the complex bayonet exercise, and practiced battalion maneuvers, becoming one of the most tactically accomplished regiments in the Union.

On November 14, 1861 the 5th NY went on an expedition through Accomac and Northampton Counties, Virginia. On the first day of the march, though, Carl Ahrendt was injured by a Baltimore street car, severely bruising his right side. He continued on, though, for the entire eight-day march.

Furlough

While stationed in Federal Hill, Carl's father Henry wrote a letter to Major General Dix requesting a furlough for his son Carl, so they could travel together to Washington D.C. Henry had been out of work for eleven months and his wife had been sick for quite a while; since Carl was fluent in English, he needed his help to find work. Carl followed up with a letter of his own, noting that he was the only means of support for his family, and the furlough was granted.



A letter from Henry Ahrendt requesting furlough for his son Carl (Source: NARA)

The Battle of Yorktown

After months of drills and training, the 5th NY Regiment was eager for action. So they were only too happy to receive orders in April 1862 for a campaign against Richmond, Virginia that would become known as the Battle of Yorktown.

With over 121,000 Union troops facing only 13,000 Confederates, the battle should have been decisive. Unfortunately the Union General, George McClellan, was the victim of faulty intelligence, and believed there were closer to 40,000 Confederate troops. His confusion was underscored by the Confederate General, John Magruder, who'd been an amateur actor before the war. He now used his stage skills to move the infantry and artillery with great noise and chaos to make the Confederate force seem larger. McClellan and his scouts bought the act. After days of artillery fighting and successful advance, Union commanders believed they'd found a weak spot in the Confederate line. But McClellan and his scouts, deceived by the Confederate general's theatrics, disagreed and ordered the Union troops to stop. To the amazement of the Confederates, and the dismay of President Abraham Lincoln, McClellan chose not to attack and ordered his army to entrench and besiege Yorktown. For the rest of April, McClellan's men dug trenches and moved massive artillery batteries, while the Confederates steadily received reinforcements while also preparing for defeat by moving their supply wagons back toward Richmond.

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Escaped slaves told McClellan about the supply wagons and that the Confederates' preparations for defeat, but McClellan refused to believe them, still thinking the Confederate troops numbered about 120,000. On the evening of May 3, the Confederates launched a brief bombardment and then fell silent. Early the next morning, a Union scout reported that the Confederate earthworks were empty. McClellan was stunned by the news, and sent the Union troops in pursuit.

We can only guess what Carl's role was in this battle; in fact, he may have missed the entire thing. On May 8, he was in Patterson Park Hospital in Baltimore, where he was diagnosed with epilepsy and said to have been unfit to perform his duties for the previous month. At that time epilepsy was also called "falling sickness" and was defined simply by the presence of a seizure or sudden fainting. Within two weeks Carl was discharged.

Civilian Life

The records fall silent for several years, but we do know that Carl made his way to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he married the Swiss immigrant Rosa Siegenhalter in 1869. He was 27 years old. The next year, he started a St. Paul hardware business with another German immigrant named Ferdinand Knauft. But according to the book *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota*, Ahrendt "had too much theatrical ability about him to suit Knauft, who dealt in matters of fact." In 1874, Knauft bought out Ahrendt's share of the business, which became known as Knauft & Son.



2017 Bank St.; Baltimore, MD
Carl & Rosa Ahrendt lived here from at least 1889 to 1900. In 1890, Carl's father Henry was living with them. After Henry's death, Carl's sister Bertha lived with them.
(Courtesy of Google Maps)

The young couple returned to Baltimore, where Carl joined the stock theater company of John T. Ford, the manager of Ford's Theater, site of President Lincoln's assassination. There he earned the nickname "Bismarck" due to his amazing resemblance to Germany's Prince Otto van Bismarck. By 1877, though, he was back in the Midwest, this time in St. Louis, Missouri and then Cleveland, Ohio, acting with a stock company.

During the theater off-season, Carl worked as a reporter, poet, and editor. In 1877 he published *The song of the Nibelungen: Brunhild. An Analytic Sketch*, which coincided with the New York stage appearance of a German actress named Mme Janauschek. She was a huge talent, appearing in Brunhild and other German-influenced plays, and Carl Ahrendt was quickly drawn into her circle. He joined her company and performed with her for several seasons, before moving on to perform with noted actors such as Mary Mannering and Edwin Booth (the brother of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin).

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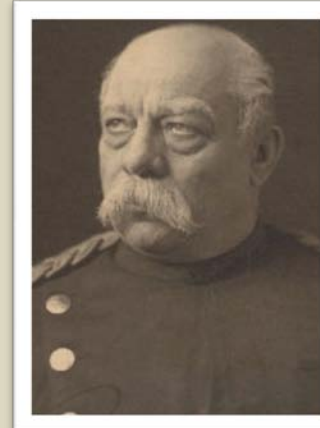
During this time, Carl Ahrendt worked in the off-season as a poet, reporter, and editor. He struck up a lifelong friendship with Frederick Raine, a fellow German immigrant and the founder of *Der Deutsche Correspondent*, a daily German newspaper. Such was the men's friendship that, in 1884, when President Grover Cleveland tapped the 61-year-old Raine to be the Consul-General at Berlin, Raine supposedly asked the younger Carl Ahrendt to go with him as his Vice Consul. Unfortunately, no records have been found to support this, although in 1892 Carl did apply for a passport for a 6-month journey abroad, with Frederick Raine's brother notarizing his application. It's possible that he was traveling in his role as a journalist for *Der Deutsche*, since he called himself an "editor" upon his return from Germany to New York two months later.

In 1900 Carl Ahrendt began a remarkable run of Broadway performances, often playing old men of various nationalities (including Native American) with a harsh German accent, and earning the nickname "Bismarck" due to his uncanny resemblance to the German Prince. His theater credits include:

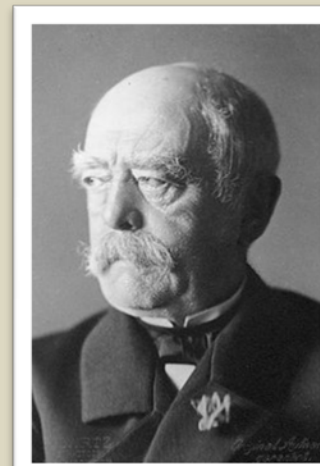
- *Janice Meredith*, a story about the American revolution (92 performances as Col. Rahl; Broadway, 1900)
- *The Pride of Jennico*, a romantic comedy set in England and Germany (111 performances as Janos; Broadway, 1900)
- *Julius Caesar*, a tragedy by William Shakespeare (50 performances as "Second Citizen"; Broadway, 1902)
- *John Ermine of the Yellowstone*, the tale of a white child raised by Native Americans (24 performances as Crooked Bear; Broadway, 1903)
- *King Richard III* by Shakespeare (Performer; Broadway, 1904)
- *The Crown Prince*, a romantic drama (17 performances as Prime Minister; Broadway, 1904)
- *The Daughters of Men*, a sociological drama dealing with the question of class hatred (59 performances as a cast member; Broadway, 1906)
- *The Toymaker of Nuremberg*, a children's play (24 performances as a cast member; Broadway, 1907)
- *The Prisoner of Zenda*, the adventure of an English traveler who looks just like an abducted monarch (Col. Sapt; Broadway, 1908)



Carl Ahrendt, 1885



Carl Ahrendt, June 1903



Prince Otto van Bismarck

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2200 Baltimore St.; Baltimore, MD

The final Baltimore residence of Carl and Rosa Ahrendt, who lived at the corner of N Collington Ave and E Baltimore St when he died in 1909. (Courtesy of Google Maps)

In late 1908, James Hackett took his theater company on a Southern tour. In Natchez, Mississippi, Carl Ahrendt became ill while playing the part of Captain Sapt in "The Prisoner of Zenda." After the show, the company headed about 200 miles north to Greenville, Mississippi, but the 66-year-old actor was quickly growing sicker, and clearly needed medical attention. Hackett sent Carl to the Greenville Sanitorium on Washington Avenue and wired Carl's wife, Rosa, in Baltimore. The telegram arrived Saturday night, and by Sunday morning Rosa was on a train with Carl's brother Robert. They arrived on Monday afternoon, and Carl Ahrendt died early the next morning, on January 12, 1909. He was buried in the family plot at Baltimore Cemetery.