

William Wood's Service File: From a Family to a Classroom

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Complexion...Ruddy
Drafted under Military Service Act
Struck of as deserter
W.O.R. (Detention)
Cause of death now ascertained to be influenza

Over the twenty years that I taught the world wars there was one strategy that remained constant even as most everything else changed. In our class we would try to write the stories of those who have experienced war. We wrote oral histories of grandparents who had experienced WWII as civilians, soldiers, internees, and children, taking the time to grapple with inconsistencies and other limitations in their testimony. We wrote soldier biographies using the letters in the Canadian Letters and Images project, and, with the digitization of WWI service records, we made inferences about service personnel using their service records. There is an authenticity in both purpose and practice in this approach that connects the building of competency to a genuinely interesting challenge, and as such was always worthwhile.

I model this strategy to students in Socials Methods courses using the service file of Private William Wood of St. Marys, Ontario. My interest in William came from a conversation I had with his great-nephew, Jim Fischer, who had sent away for the file by mail some years ago to understand who this relative was who had gone to war and never come home again. Jim writes:

My long project with William Wood began as an effort to answer a single question: how did he die? A gravestone in Southern Ontario sparked the original question. He was mentioned on his parents' gravestone, yet the stone inferred he was interred in Europe, in 1918, as a young man. A living relative from the era confirmed he had been a First World War soldier who had not returned. Nothing else was known. Primary documents that were sourced to answer this question led to still more questions. By aligning dates found in the archival material with specific current events it was possible to flesh out the larger story of the last year of William Wood's life. Archival records from Ottawa provided the answer to the initial question. He died of Spanish Flu.

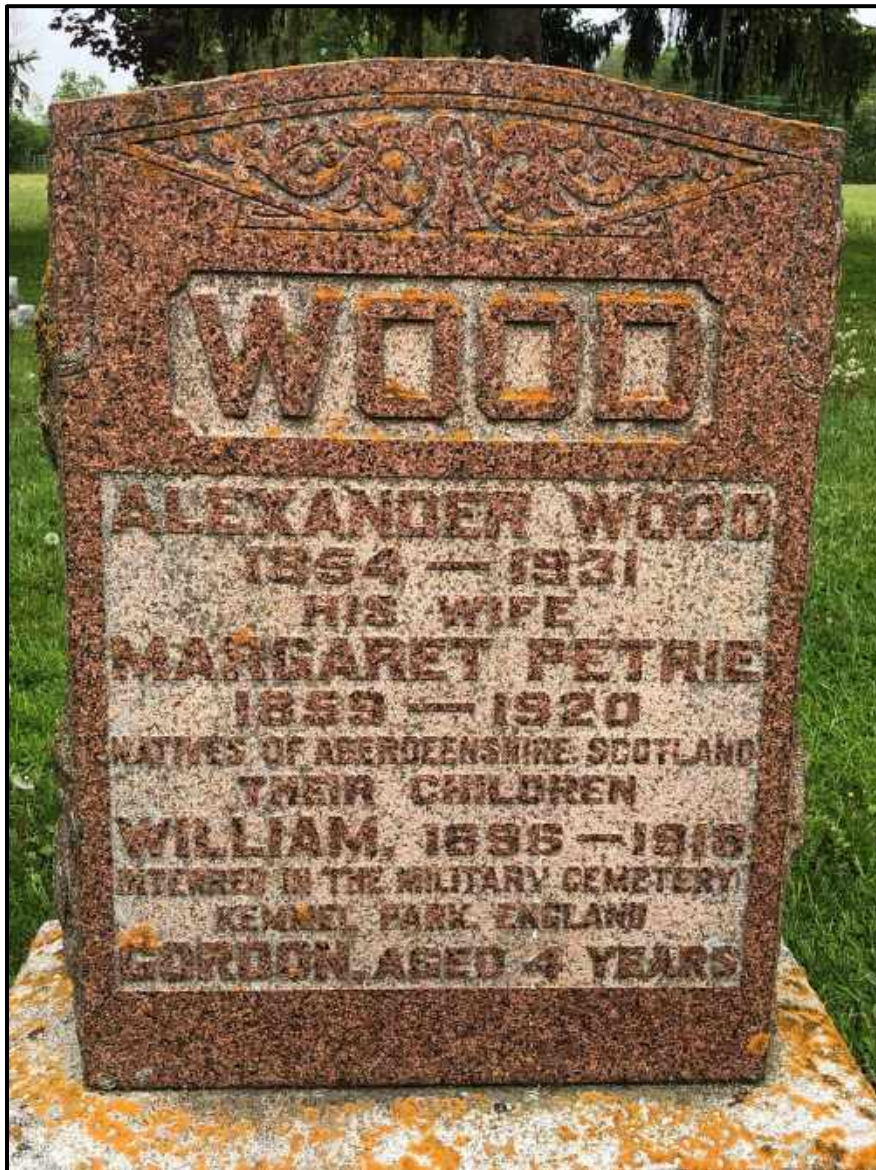


Figure 1. Family plot that inspired the William Wood project

I introduce this file by telling students about Jim’s starting question, and I offer them the provocation of “who was William Wood” and process scaffolding inspired by Jim’s initial approach to examining the documents. Each time I do this with youth or adults, the next 45 minutes unfolds in a similar way. After I model strategies for reading one document, the students pull apart and divide pages within their group and begin reading. Soon someone complains that they cannot read the handwriting or understand an acronym, but then the pages are spreading across the table, students are helping each other decipher words, and calling out dates and details to be recorded on the timeline. Confusing inconsistencies such as the spelling of “Wood” or “Woods” have hands waving me over for a conversation.

The documents provided much more information than just the cause of death. A systematic analysis allowed his larger story to be pieced together. His records showed he had died at Kimmel Park, which was in North Wales. The Ontario gravestone citing Kimmel (sp) Park in England was

close, but not accurate. Engravers of stones simply follow instructions from loved ones. Therefore, spellings, dates, or associated facts are not necessarily authoritative.

PROCEEDINGS ON A SOLDIER BEING STRUCK OFF AS A DESERTER OR ABSENTEE.

(When forwarded for confirmation these proceedings should be accompanied by the documents specified on the fourth page.)

No. <i>3131221</i>	
Rank <i>Private</i>	
Surname <i>Woods</i>	
Christian Name <i>William</i>	
Corps (Squadron, Battery or Company) <i>1st Depot Batta WOPR.</i>	
Date Struck Off <i>20th May 1918</i>	
Place Struck Off <i>London Ontario</i>	
1. DESCRIPTION AT THE TIME STRUCK OFF. <small>TO BE TAKEN FROM M.F.W. 23 AND M.F.B. 313.</small>	
Age <i>21</i> years <i>5</i> months Height <i>5</i> feet <i>5</i> inches Complexion <i>Ruddy</i> Eyes <i>Blue</i> Hair <i>Brown</i> Trade <i>Laborer</i>	Descriptive Marks. <i>None</i>
2. The above man is struck off in consequence of <i>being illegally absent since 28-3-18</i>	
(a) Date to be struck off <i>20-5-1918</i> <small>N.B.—Date soldier is to be struck off must be clearly stated by Court of Payday M.F.B. 304.</small>	
3. Conduct and character while in the service have been, according to the records, etc. <i>Struck off as a Deserter</i>	

M. F. B. 479.
 175-4-11.
 175-49-138.

Figure 2. William Wood's service record

Certain phrases stand out as illuminating or interesting. I'm often asked about "ruddy" complexions, the W.O.R. (West Ontario Regiment), or what it means to be "struck off". When students discover key moments in William's story, there is stress in their voices as they report their findings. William Wood has started to become a real person who experienced an extraordinary sequence of events.

William was an ordinary Southern Ontario boy who wanted to live his life out on the farm but had the misfortune to live in extraordinary times. He was conscripted. Looking at the specific date of his attestation and comparing it to current events proved insightful. The day he reported happened to be the day before riots in Quebec occurred over the Borden government's decision to conscript. William Wood disappeared at this point. In the almost two months he was unaccounted for, farmers also gathered to protest in Ottawa over the decision to send farm workers to war. The documents included dates of his "desertion", arrest, conviction, immediate return to the army and eventual posting to Europe in the summer of 1918. Putting William Wood's chronology of events side-by-side with current events helped flesh out his story, but it also led to broader insights about the war experience. At the time he died of the flu, he was imminently about to be sent on the battlefield.

Digitized service files are now available online for members of the WWI Canadian Expeditionary Force through Library and Archives Canada, so the first part of the William Woods activity can be applied to other soldiers. The educational value of this service file is enhanced by the accompanying narrative that Jim wrote after doing further research into the events and places related to William's experience. Analyzing the choices Jim made in writing the narrative enhances the potential of this activity as a form of cognitive apprenticeship.⁶⁸ The process of building a plausible narrative from primary sources is made more explicit to students through modeling and scaffolding within the activity, and the real-world nature of the task provides an engaging situated context to student thinking. Not only was William Wood a real person, the process of piecing together his story was an authentic problem with value to Jim and other members of William's family.

Bibliography

Fischer, J. & Waatainen, P. (2016). *William Wood's War: A WWI Historical Thinking activity*. <https://www.bctf.ca/classroom-resources/details/william-wood's-war-a-wwi-historical-thinking-activity>

⁶⁸ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).