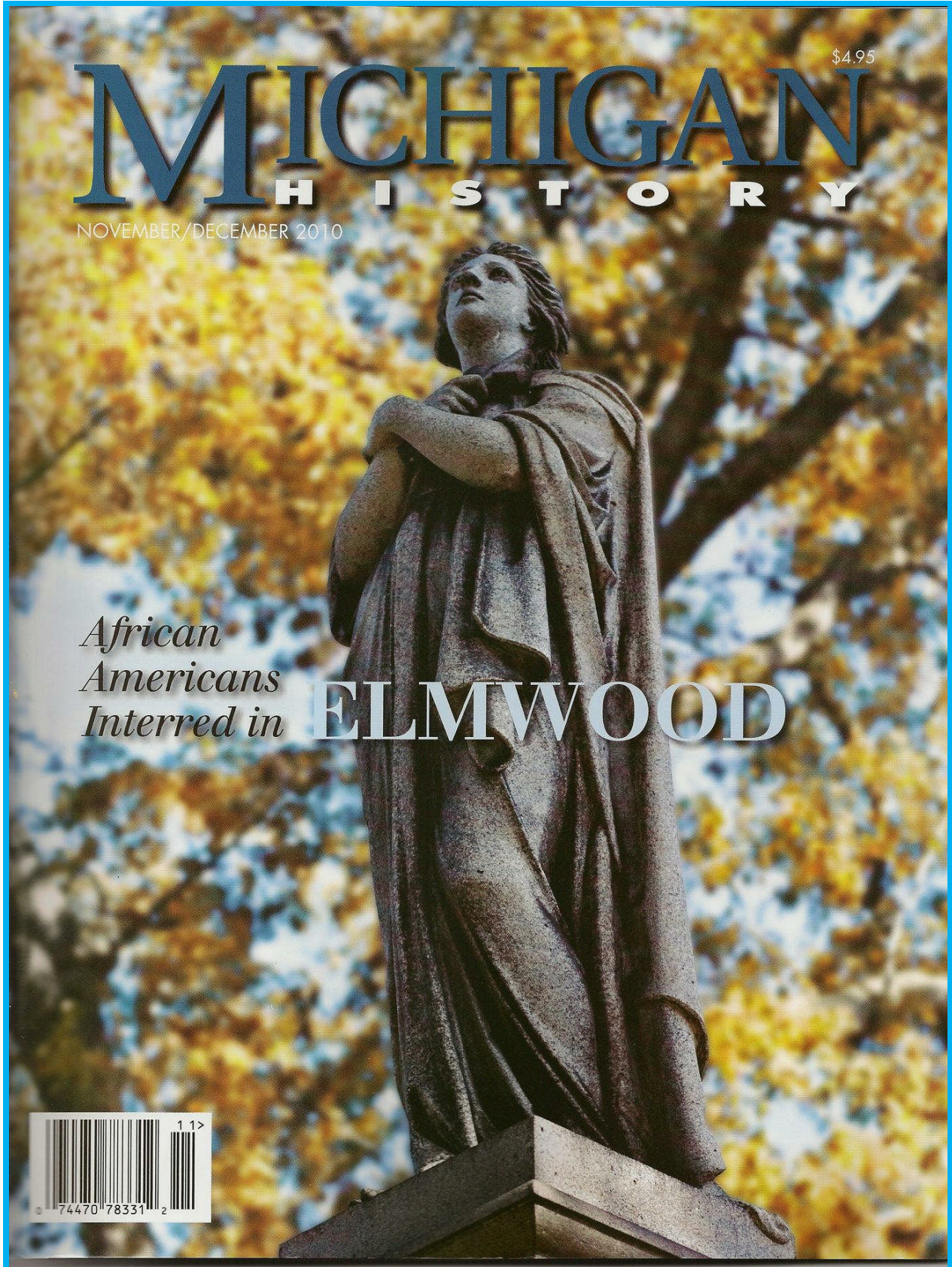


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CONVERSATIONS

Keith Harrison

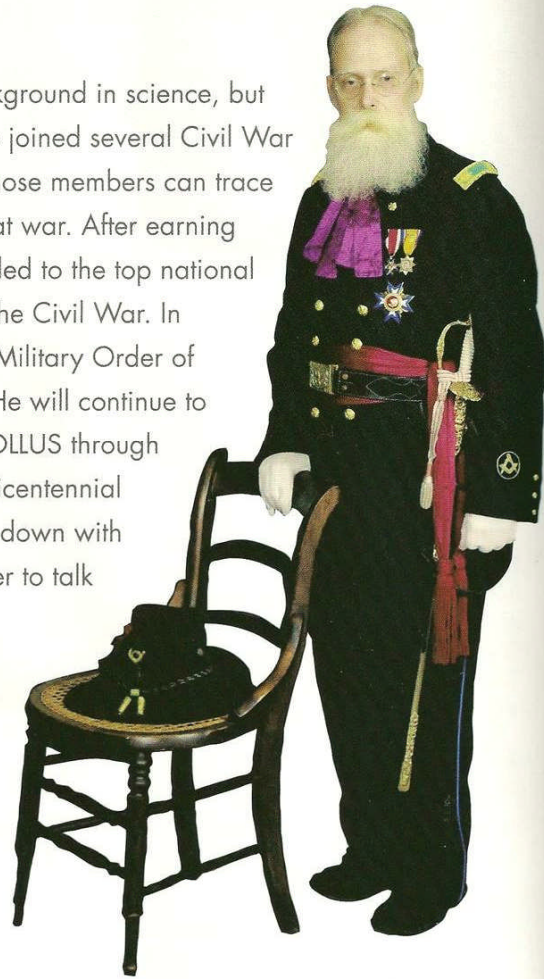
Keith Harrison has a professional background in science, but his passion is history. In the 1980s, he joined several Civil War “hereditary organizations”: groups whose members can trace their lineage back to combatants in that war. After earning his stripes on the state level, he ascended to the top national post of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. In 2009, he did the same thing with the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. He will continue to serve as the commander-in-chief of MOLLUS through the critical first year of the war’s sesquicentennial commemoration. Harrison recently sat down with *Michigan History* Editor Patricia Majher to talk about his role.

MH: Would you give us a bit of context and describe the origins of MOLLUS?

KH: On April 15, 1865, as word of Abraham Lincoln’s death spread throughout the country, three Union Army officers met in Philadelphia to discuss the tragic news. Rumors of a conspiracy to destroy the federal government prompted the men to form an organization that would head off any insurrection. That organization was the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. Among its earliest members were men like Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, and David Farragut.

MH: How did MOLLUS differ from the Grand Army of the Republic?

KH: The GAR was open to anyone who served the Union during the Civil War, whereas MOLLUS was made up only of officers. Also, the administration of the GAR decided to let the organization die out and created a second organization—the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War—to succeed it in 1881. MOLLUS chose to create a hereditary component from the start, accepting sons then grandsons and nephews.



Most importantly, MOLLUS was and is focused on honoring the memory of Abraham Lincoln. To that end, we meet every February in Washington, D.C. to celebrate his birth and in Springfield, Illinois every April to commemorate his death. Because of our dedication to Lincoln, members of MOLLUS were involved in all phases of planning for the Lincoln Memorial and later its dedication.

MH: How did you establish your eligibility to join MOLLUS?

KH: I had to produce both genealogical and military documentation of my connection to a Civil War Union officer. The genealogy information was

not hard to gather—just looking back at my ancestors' generation in the 1850 and 1860 censuses. And military records are now readily available on the Web, including those that were kept by each state's adjutant general. In Michigan, they are called the "brown books."

MH: Tell us about your Civil War ancestors. Do you have a favorite person of whom you are most proud?

KH: I've been able to identify 47 soldiers related to me, getting down to the level of cousins. One of the most interesting is Captain Joseph Harper, who commanded Company A of the 12th Michigan Volunteer Infantry. Harper was 55 years old when he mustered in. The age range for soldiers was 18 to 45—that was the federal regulation. But exceptions were made. Harper was only in the war for a month though, before he resigned his commission due to a disability. He was my great-great-grandfather.

Then there was my great-great-grandfather, Elmore Lewis, who enlisted as a private at Constantine at the age of 16—two years younger than the enlistment limit. Lewis served in Company H of the 19th Michigan Volunteer Infantry and was part of Sherman's March to the Sea. I wondered why he was allowed to enter the war at such a young age, especially since two of his brothers had already died with the 4th Michigan Cavalry. Then I checked the census records; his parents were dead, so there was no one to stop him. No doubt he lied about his age to get in.

MH: Did such organizations form on the Confederate side, and do they still exist?

KH: Yes, the Confederates established the Military Order of the Stars and Bars for officers and what is now the Sons of Confederate Veterans for enlisted men. Interestingly, many members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War are also members of the SCV; they have ancestors on both sides of the conflict.

These Union and Confederate hereditary organizations also have their female counterparts.

MH: What are your goals as commander-in-chief of MOLLUS?

KH: My main focus is to bring the organization into the 21st century. I'm taking some of the ideas I introduced when I commanded the SUVCW to better administer the organization and to encourage the 19 state commanderies to get out and get involved with the public. The upcoming sesquicentennial [commemoration of the Civil War] is a great opportunity to showcase our activities and to recruit

new and younger members to join us.

[In recent years,] the average age of an SUVCW member has dropped from the 70s to the 40s. A typical MOLLUS member is in his 60s; we've got to bring that number down if the organization is to grow and prosper. The 7,000-member SUVCW and 1,000-member MOLLUS also have junior programs that reach out to young descendants of Civil War veterans; we need to embrace and expand those, too.

MH: You mentioned the sesquicentennial observance. What is MOLLUS planning for that four-year period?

KH: Each state is different. But the Michigan commandery will be very involved with the sesquicentennial. We've already met with the SUVCW, Civil War Roundtables, reenactor groups, historical societies, and genealogical societies, looking for ways to work together. Together, we number 2,000 people who are ready, willing, and able to do something.

There will be special events on the community level and "signature" events—like the Civil War Muster in Jackson and Civil War Days at Historic Fort Wayne—that will draw visitors from around the state.

A website is planned to promote all the commemorative events and establish a written record for the [planners of the] 200th anniversary.

MH: Will you continue for another term as commander-in-chief after yours ends in 2011?

KH: No, I'll step down. But I'll continue to be actively involved with both MOLLUS and the SUVCW in Michigan, serving as Civil War sesquicentennial committee chair for both organizations.

