The Grand Army of the Republic or GAR was a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the U.S. Army; the U.S. Navy; the Marines and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service who served in the American Civil War between 1861 and 1865. At the end of the war, various state and local organizations were formed for veterans to network and to maintain connections with each other. The organization’s rituals were based partly on the Freemasons and partly on military tradition. Many used their shared war experiences as a basis for fellowship. After all they had seen and done ... the bitter sacrifices and severe hardships, the loved ones they had lost and best friends that they had grown up with. The GAR meetings gave them a chance to rekindle friendships and form relationships that honestly lasted their lifetime.

Groups of men began joining together, again, first for camaraderie and then later for actual political power. The GAR formed on April 6th, 1866, in Springfield, Illinois, on the principles of “Fraternity; Charity and Loyalty”. Dr. Benjamin R. Stephenson was the founder and the very first “GAR Post“ was formed in Decatur, Illinois. The first Commander in Chief of the GAR was General John A. Logan. Under his General Order No #11, dated May 5th, 1868, Logan declared May 30th to be Decoration Day or as we know it, Memorial Day. Logan called upon the GAR membership to make the May 30th observance an annual occurrence which of course, we still celebrate today.
In the 1880s, under new leadership, the GAR saw renewed growth and advocated for Federal pensions for the veterans. The GAR was organized into *Departments* at the state level and *Posts* at the community level. There were posts in every state of the United States. Posts were signed a sequential number based on their admission into the GAR organization. Most posts held informal names which honored comrades, battles or commanders.

The GAR's political power grew during the latter part of the 19th century and it helped elect several U.S. presidents, beginning with Ulysses S. Grant, president #18, and ending with William McKinley, president #25. For a time, candidates could not get Republican presidential or congressional nominations *without* the endorsement of the GAR veterans voting block.

Now, the GAR reached it’s largest enrollment in the year, 1890, with 490,000 members. It held a “National Encampment” every year from 1866 to 1949 which is a span of 83 years. The encampments were elaborate multi-day events. There were parades, campfires, formal dinners, ceremonies and memorial events. Often, the encampments were held on former battlefields.

And, something I had never read about but found very interesting and endearing, the GAR members would cut branches from “witness trees” which had survived the battles. In other words, they cut tree branches from trees that stood in or along the actual battlefields. These branches were then made into walking sticks or canes. At one time, all GAR men carried a walking stick with the name of their post and number carved into the wood. Sometimes, the battles that they had fought in were engraved, also. Sometimes, the caps of the walking sticks
were made of silver and were beautifully and elaborately engraved. And, I believe how this got started was in honor of those men who had lost their leg or legs in the war and were using canes and walking sticks in their everyday life. Please look closely at our pictures of our GAR as many are holding these walking sticks! The final encampment was held in Indianapolis, Indiana. And, in 1956, the very last remaining member, Albert Woolson, passed away. At this time, the GAR was formally dissolved.

It is important to note that in the year 1889, Onarga boasted the oldest living GAR member. His name was Robert Teeter.

Onarga’s Post was #416 and was founded on March 11, 1884. Our Post was named for Dr. William Avery Babcock, our Civil War Surgeon. Babcock was born on September 4th, 1817, in North Stonington, Connecticut. In 1845, he graduated from the University of New York with a degree of Doctor of Medicine. In 1846, Babcock married Miss Harriet Coates, also of Stonington. In January of 1857, a company was organized in New London County, Connecticut, with the view of emigrating to Illinois and settling upon the lands of the great Illinois Central Railroad, which had just been completed. William Babcock was part of this enterprise who purchased land in the vicinity of Onarga which became known as the “Connecticut Settlement”. His land was located nine (9) miles west of Onarga. It did not take long in this area for Babcock to become known as an eminently safe, reliable and successful physician. Dr. Babcock was frank but honest when it came to health issues ... he did not deceive or fill with false promise or hope and relied heavily on nature for healing. He continued his busy practice in Onarga and the surrounding area until the great Rebellion began.
At the age of 47, he entered the Army as an assistant-surgeon in the 76th Illinois Volunteer Infantry ... the first regiment of the state to be enrolled under the call for 600,000 men. Dr. Babcock used his influence to fill up the ranks of the Union Army. He served for three years ... three very, very long years. He was in Galveston at the close of the war; August of 1865. He was promoted from assistant surgeon to surgeon and then division surgeon, which was a great honor. This information is actually engraved on his tombstone.

At the beginning of the Civil War, there were very few surgeons and surgical assistants. The Civil War surgeons learned “on the job”. After all, what medical experiences could have readied them or anyone for that matter, for the bloodshed of the Civil War?!! Of the nearly 3 million soldiers, 618,000 died. 218,000 died in battle or from wounds. The rest died of disease; dysentery, typhoid, malaria and tuberculosis. The lack of knowledge about infection resulted in the absence of basic hygiene and sanitary principles. Doctors seldom washed their hands or instruments. First, there was no time and second, they did not always have fresh water or adequate surroundings. Patients were overcrowded. Food and water were contaminated. The surgeon used the fastest way to help the greatest number of wounded and that was amputation. The work of the surgeon was brutal and getting the wounded to the surgeon was slow, which you can well imagine. Sometimes, the surgeons went to the battlefields during the battles and worked on the ground or literally carried the wounded back to their camp. The only forms of anesthetic were chloroform and ether. Morphine and Laudanum were in short supply and not always available. The surgeons had to be careful NOT to ingest too much ether or they would become sleepy and of course, not be able to perform the surgery or do it well. The Civil War doctors became known
as “sawbones” because of the amputations. But, it is good to know that 75% of the amputee soldiers survived the surgeries. I think that is a testament to the skill of the surgeons.

After the war, Dr. Babcock returned to Onarga where he resumed his practice and took an active part in political matters. His influence always being given to the Republican party. In 1874, Dr. Babcock suffered an attack of paralysis and hemorrhage of the brain. His health gradually declined until April 7, 1875 when he passed away at his home. He was only 57 years and 7 months old. His funeral ceremony was conducted by the Freemasons, the doctor having been an honored member of that fraternity. He left his wife, Harriett, and a daughter, Georgiana Babcock Durham, wife of Ezra Durham, local banker, to mourn his loss.

Judge Franklin Blades of Watseka, Illinois wrote a beautiful memorial for Dr. Babcock, having not only served with him in the war as a surgeon, but living in the same tent and eating at the same table and performing surgeries elbow to elbow ... his last few words went like this:

“I lament that this tribute I pay him is so inadequate and feebly expressed but I could not refrain from saying something. I could not bear that the dear old friend that I had known so long should be covered up in the ground without some expression of admiration for the man and of my sorrow, that he has departed, to be with us no more.”

I know that Dr. Babcock was highly regarded in Onarga and sadly missed. For many years, our Decoration Day or Memorial Day ceremonies began at Dr. Babock’s beautiful obelisk tombstone in our cemetary.