

Lyman G. Willcox: The Life and Lexis of the Lesser Known

by

Julia A. Cramer

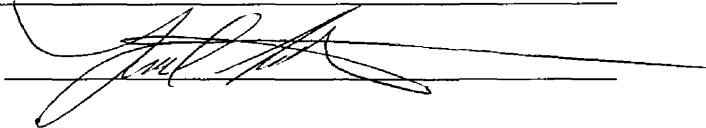
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First Reader (Dr. Bruce A. Rubenstein)

Handwritten signature of Bruce A. Rubenstein in black ink, written over a horizontal line.

Second Reader (Dr. Frederic J. Svoboda)

Handwritten signature of Frederic J. Svoboda in black ink, written over a horizontal line.

CONTENTS

<i>DEDICATION</i>	iv
<i>ILLUSTRATIONS</i>	v
<i>TABLES</i>	vi
<i>GLOSSARY</i>	vii
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	viii
Chapter One	
UNCOVERING THE COMMON SOLDIER	1
Chapter Two	
INTERPRETER TO ENFORCER	8
Chapter Three	
ACROSS THE BLOODY CHASM	17
Chapter Four	
THE MADNESS OF THE HOUR	44
Epilogue	57
ENDNOTES	60
DOCUMENTS	69
WORKS CITED	72

I dedicate this work to my mother

MARY JANE FRASER

whose love, support, and encouragement
remain . . .

Thank you, Mom!
Thank you for teaching me
that with God's anointing and perseverance
I could achieve my heart's desire.

Although I dedicate this work to my mother,
I extend a special thank you to my good friend

Chad Allan Swett;
his love for the American Civil War
inspired the same within me.
Thank you, Chad!

I also thank the rest of my family and friends
for allowing the voice of
Lyman George Willcox
to be part of our daily conversations.

In all things, "George," I sought to be faithful
to the retelling of your story.
May you rest in peace,
and may the words you penned so many years ago
move our minds, stir our hearts,
and kindle our passion for peace.

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Clinton Literal Institute Building, <i>A sketch drawn by Lyman G. Willcox, 1855</i>	3
2. Azubah Willcox, <i>Wife of Lyman G. Willcox, 1899</i>	6
3. Minnie B. Willcox, <i>Daughter of Lyman G. Willcox, 1881</i>	6
4. Elizabeth Willcox, <i>Daughter of Lyman G. Willcox, 1921</i>	6
5. George B. Willcox, <i>Son of Lyman G. Willcox, [1910?]</i>	6
6. Map of the battle of Iuka, <i>September 19-20, 1862</i>	12
7. Third Michigan Cavalry Flag	56
8. Lyman G. Willcox, 1864	59
9. Promotion Document, <i>Captain Lyman G. Willcox, 1861</i>	69
10. Promotion Document, <i>Major Lyman G. Willcox, 1862</i>	70
11. Appointment Document, <i>Grand Army of the Republic, 1906</i>	71

TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Battles of the Third Michigan Cavalry	46
2. Third Michigan Cavalry Records	56

GLOSSARY

- Battalion:** A military unit which is made up of a group of companies and commanded by a major or a lieutenant colonel. A battalion contains from five hundred to twelve hundred men.
- Company:** The basic unit of the army that normally consisted of 50-100 men, and was commanded by a captain. Ten companies made up a regiment, and most companies had colorful names and mascots.
- Corps:** The word derives from the French word “corps d’armee,” and was composed of two or more divisions. General George McClellan established the corps unit in 1862.
- Despotism:** The absolute power of any kind.
- Fratricide:** The act of killing one’s own brother or sister.
- Furlough:** Any leave granted to a soldier by his superior. A soldier on furlough left his arms and accoutrements behind. He carried furlough papers detailing his leave dates, assignment, and date of return to duty. Since photographs were rare and expensive, the papers gave a physical description of the soldier.
- Major:** An officer who ranked one step above a captain.
- Quoit:** A game in which the players throw rings at a peg in the ground in order to circle it or come the closest. It is much like our present day horse-shoes.
- Reconnaissance:** The act of obtaining information from the enemy.
- Regiment:** A regiment is made up of 2,000 to 3,000 or more men and is normally under the command of a colonel.
- Secesh:** A slang term referring to the states that seceded from the Union.

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans consider the Civil War the greatest emotional experience to confront the United States. Perhaps that explains why so many books, speeches, and videos are written, delivered, and produced respectively every year concerning this period in the nation's history. Americans long to understand what forces drove brother to fight against brother and section against section. The Declaration of Independence lacked the power to bind the Union together because Southern politicians and Northern emancipationists interpreted the meaning of the Constitution in light of their particular ideologies. The Constitution became an avenue of national identity. Whose interpretation was right? Did the Constitution condone or sanction slavery? If the democratic system was built on a capitalistic ideology would *true* equality destroy the democracy? What were the real issues surrounding the War Between the States: slavery, states rights, socio-political or economic factors, the struggle for freedom and equality, or a combination of several dynamics? What compass should present-day scholars and historians follow in order to find direction concerning their questions?

In order to move closer to an understanding of the war and its causes, this thesis will explore the life of Major Lyman George Willcox, a soldier and citizen who lived from 29 April 1831 to 17 September 1918. Major Willcox served in the Union army in the Western theatre as commander of Company B, Third Michigan Cavalry. Although he was not a major figure of the American Civil War, he delivered a powerful speech during the midst of the Civil War that has the capacity to contribute significantly to an understanding of a complex and diverse era in the nation's history.

The context of Major Willcox's speech entitled "The South in War Times" will be thoroughly examined, for it is the crux of this research project. His oration was delivered to a packed crowd of Confederate soldiers and civilians at a courthouse in Lexington, Tennessee, and, according to him, it was the *first and only* instance where a Union officer spoke directly across the *Bloody Chasm*. The major's speech lasted two and one-half hours and addressed six major points: 1) every country must establish some form of government; 2) the first New England government was a failure; 3) nationalizing the government would strengthen it; 4) the South had not prospered because it held to the institution of slavery; 5) rebellion and secession always result in negative consequences; 6) the South must stop fighting and reunite with its Northern brethren.

Willcox builds a large portion of his speech on equality, the Constitution, and the credibility of America's founding fathers. Some present-day historians refute Willcox's claim of Constitutional equality on the basis that the founding fathers were men who either held slaves or were willing to join hands with those who did. Therefore, several opposing viewpoints held by present-day historians will be examined in an attempt to either substantiate or invalidate Willcox's claim.

The Union cavalry officer viewed the Constitution as a binding contract that justified forcing Southerners to surrender. He did not believe the Constitution held any loopholes to support the act of secession. Therefore, he despised men such as Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee. Because of his strong convictions, the major spoke until his dying day to various literary and philosophical societies concerning the war, its leaders, the state of the Union, and the future of the republic.

The life and role of cavalymen, especially men of the Third Michigan Cavalry, will also be examined. The Third fought in twenty-two battles, but because they were involved in the western and not the eastern theatre, their battles and officers have not received wide attention. Nevertheless, the western theatre played a major role in the outcome of the war. When the Confederate army lost its strength in the West, the tide began to turn in the East.

Two western battles that will be closely explored are Iuka and Corinth. Many accounts were written about the battle of Iuka, and in every account Willcox is given credit for leading his men in a proper and professional manner. Likewise, one of the hardest fought battles in the western theatre took place in Corinth, Mississippi, on 3 and 4 October 1862. Once again Major Willcox and the Third Michigan Cavalry performed their duties admirably. These two battles reveal much about the war and the soldiers who fought for the Union and Confederate armies. Further understanding will be strengthened by examining excerpts written by Major Willcox for newspapers such as the *Advertiser & Tribune*, *Corinth Newspaper*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News*, and the *Detroit Tribune*.

A discussion of the western battles will include several letters Willcox wrote to his wife Azubah. These letters are invaluable because in them Willcox reveals a side of himself and the war that speeches and newspaper articles could never capture. His letters discuss areas such as camp life, boredom, hunger, behavior, reconnaissance, disappointment with leadership, and loneliness.

The role of cavalymen has been romanticized, but Willcox's letters to his wife expose the fallacy of that image. The movements of cavalymen were often dangerous

and exhausting, and they were expected to ride in every imaginable form of weather for hours and sometimes days without a break. Major Willcox, who felt the hard physical effects of the cavalry, had to take leave from the Union army on 2 April 1864 because he suffered a severe attack of inflammatory rheumatism and for several weeks was not expected to live. The major never fully recovered and was forced to resign from Union service on 12 September 1864. He spent the rest of his days roaming from state to state and occupation to occupation in vain effort to find relief from his physical disabilities.

As the silenced voice of the unknown, yet intellectually inspiring Willcox is unearthed, existing knowledge and presently held perspectives on issues surrounding the War, the Constitution, society, slavery, racism, and equality may be increased or altered. Nevertheless, a single soldier cannot serve as a stereotype for the entire Union army or Northern mentality. His writings reflect a segment of the population, but what percentage of the population Willcox represents will be difficult to determine.

Yes, more stories have probably been written about the Civil War than any other period in American history. So, why another Civil War story? There is another story to tell; the story of Major Lyman George Willcox. In one sense, this is his story. In another sense, this is America's story, for Americans continue to live in the shadow of its pages. The purpose of telling this story is two-fold: first, to gain knowledge and insight into the life and ideologies of mid-nineteenth century America as seen through the eyes of a minor cavalry officer, rather than a well-known general; second, to discover inspiration through the life and writings of a civilian-soldier who loved and served his country until the "Wisdom of Death" called him home.

CHAPTER ONE

UNCOVERING THE COMMON SOLDIER

Our country as it was is passed away forever, but in the agony of her travail she will give us a more perfect heritage of liberty and security.

Lyman G. Willcox
2 April 1863

When Southern batteries attacked Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861, many Americans were surprised even though drops of dissension had sprinkled on the divided land for many years. According to historian Bruce Catton, the surprise came because Southerners had been talking secession for a long time and “most people in the North had come to look on such talk as a counter in the game of politics.”¹ Raising of the Confederate flag over Fort Sumter indicated the South had indeed spoken. The Declaration of Independence, the contract that bound the states of the Union loosely together, lacked power to bind the two sections as a nation. Southern politicians clung to the Constitution as a tool that could be used to extend the idea or principle of slavery, while Northern emancipationists expected the Constitution to eventually insure all people, regardless of race or status, equality before the law.² The Constitution became an avenue of national identity. Whose Constitutional interpretation was right? Do the answers lie within the writings of the famous or the lesser known? For years the quest for knowledge

surrounding the complexity and diversity that characterized mid-nineteenth century America has been partially satisfied through words penned by great generals, prominent politicians, and key presidents; perhaps a deeper understanding and greater satisfaction may be derived by digging deep into the silent graves of unknown soldiers and unearthing fresh and original reflections.

The time has come to open the silent grave of Lyman George Willcox. Willcox, who preferred to be called George, was born a twin, along with Randall, to Lyman J. and Hopey (Greene) Willcox. He had one brother, Elliot, and four sisters: Mary, Marion, Emma, and Angeline. His father, one of the early settlers of Rochester, Michigan, had walked through Canada from New York in 1830. His grandfather, Shethuia Willcox, was an officer in the War of 1812, and his great-grandfather, Gershon Willcox, was an officer in the Revolutionary War. In keeping with family tradition, therefore, it seemed destined that Lyman Willcox would emerge as an officer in the American Civil War.

Lyman G. Willcox was born in a log cabin in Rochester on 29 April 1831. He loved nature and often talked fondly of the wild deer and turkey that roamed his area. He also enjoyed gathering wild honey by what he called “the tubful.”³ His mother died on 31 October 1833 when he was only two years old. Until the age of fourteen, he worked on his father’s farm in Rochester while attending the local district school. He also worked at his father’s paper mill for two years while attending the local academy. The remainder of his secondary education was received at an academy in Romeo, Michigan. After graduating from Romeo he worked at his father’s mill for one more year before traveling, in the fall of 1851, to Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; and St. Louis, Missouri. Once he reached St. Louis he walked across the entire state and back. From there he

traveled by boat up the Illinois River to Ottawa and Chicago. After his little adventure, he returned to Rochester and taught school for one year before entering Hamilton College in New York to study law under Professor Theodore W. Dwight, who was respected by all his students and pushed them to work hard. He was never idle and always made himself available to his students. Dwight was a loyal member of the Republican Party, which may have had an impact on young Willcox.

The first LL.B.s (Bachelor of Law Degree) were conferred at Hamilton in 1855, and Lyman G. Willcox, a slender man who reached the mature height of five feet eight inches tall, was among the first graduates. When Willcox set aside his books at Hamilton in order to relax, he would often be found drawing. Following is a sketch drawn by Willcox of the Clinton Liberal Institute:

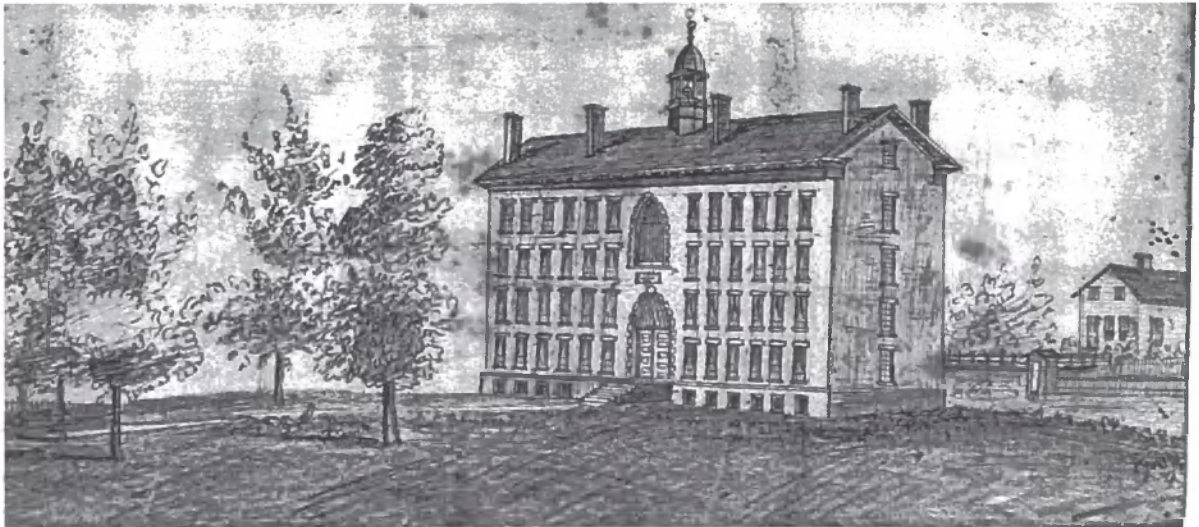


Figure 1: A sketch of the Clinton Liberal Institute Building drawn by Lyman G. Willcox
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center

It can only be surmised why Willcox would have drawn this particular building, but he probably boarded in the village of Clinton (where Professor Dwight conducted his law classes) and he may have found the historical or religious significance of the building to be fascinating, for in 1831 the Universalists decided to “open a school as a protest against the narrowness and intolerance of the sects dominating the other schools.”⁴ The Clinton Liberal Institute, a boarding school, was opened under the direction of Reverend Stephen R. Smith to teach young people who, because of their religious beliefs, were socially ostracized. (The building was torn down in 1903 and its stones were purchased by Hamilton College to be used in the construction of one of its dormitories, Carnegie, which is still in use.⁵) While studying law in New York, Willcox also took time to study elocution at Poughkeepsie under Professor J. W. Fowler. This training undoubtedly equipped him with the excellent oratorical and writing skills he exhibited before, during, and after the war.

Willcox was further equipped to converse and compose comments on issues surrounding the war because in 1856 he traveled to Kansas to study the causes of conflict between the pro-slavery and free state factions. It was here that anti-slavers and settlers who wanted to remain neutral on the issue of slavery had drafted a constitution that banned both slaves and freed blacks from Topeka. They applied for admission to the United States in order to be recognized as a state, and they elected their own governor and legislature. This decision prompted brutal fighting, which fell short of nothing less than a miniature civil war. A mob of slavers “sacked Lawrence, a free-soil town, blew up the Free State Hotel with five cannon, burned the governor’s house and tossed the presses of the local newspaper into the river.”⁶ The ruthless event provoked the fanatical free-

soiler John Brown and others, including his four sons, to slaughter five men in cold blood. Over 200 people had been murdered in “Bleeding Kansas” by the end of 1856.

While studying the events in Kansas, Willcox took up residency in Omaha, Nebraska, where he practiced law and wrote for the local newspaper. After one year he returned to Detroit, Michigan, where he resumed his law practice. On 22 August 1857, he married Azubah Bingham of Detroit (Figure 2). She bore him three children: two daughters and one son. Mabel died in infancy, Minnie Bell passed away at an early age, and George Bingham went on to become a mechanical engineer and patent attorney at Saginaw, Michigan (Figures 3,5). George had three children; Stuart, Elizabeth, and George. His daughter Elizabeth married William Wallace Crapo II, the great-grandson of the illustrious Henry Howland Crapo, who was elected mayor of Flint in 1860 and served as governor of Michigan from 1865 to 1869 (Figure 4). Willcox himself was not a prominent politician, but he held a distinguished position as a lawyer in Detroit when he was mustered into Union service as Captain of Company B, Third Michigan Cavalry, on 7 September 1861 at the age of thirty (Figure 10). (Months earlier, before joining the Third Michigan Cavalry as captain of Company B, Willcox had been approached by Colonel Broadhead to raise the First Regiment of Michigan Cavalry. He refused because Broadhead had a drinking problem and Willcox did not use liquor himself and “did not approve of it.”⁷⁾

Willcox enjoyed making bold and predictive statements, and in 1858, three years before the outbreak of the American Civil War, he gave his first public address on the probability of war breaking out in America just as it had centuries ago in the ancient republic of Rome. His speech, entitled *Filibustering*, was presented to a hometown



Figure 2: Azubah Bingham Willcox, 1899
Source: Geness Historical Collections Center



Figure 3: Minnie B. Willcox, 1881
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center



Figure 4: Elizabeth Willcox, 1921
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center



Figure 5: George B. Willcox, 1910[?]
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center

crowd in Rochester, Michigan. His words were intended as a prophetic statement to the American people, warning them that the justification of slavery in the name of religion would lead America down the same path as the Romans. Willcox was determined to do whatever he could to steer his beloved country in another direction, but his efforts failed. Three years later, in 1861, America took its first steps down the Roman road.

When Colonel Elisha S. Kellogg approached the disillusioned but determined Willcox and asked him to join the Union army and raise a company of men to serve as the Third Michigan Cavalry, he accepted the challenge. His efforts to ward off war had failed, but the Union effort to preserve the Union must never fail.

*CHAPTER TWO***INTERPRETER TO ENFORCER**

The American Civil War officially began on 12 April 1861, and Captain Lyman George Willcox, Company B, Third Michigan Cavalry, joined the Union ranks on 7 September 1861. On 1 January 1862, almost four months after he was mustered into service he wrote his wife Azubah, whom he referred to as Susie, that he was no longer an interpreter of the law (lawyer) but had become an enforcer of the law (Union soldier). From the “logic of reason, I have gone to the logic of the sword. Whether it will prove successful, time will determine. That it will be successful I hope, that it may not be possible and so long as failure is possible, we must feel somewhat uneasy.”⁸ Willcox felt uneasy about a government which seemed to be operating on unstable grounds. At the close of his letter he stated: “One day it is determined at Washington to disband a portion of the army, the next there is a call for volunteers to fill up all the regiments not full.”⁹

On a closer note, Willcox informed his wife on 6 July 1862 that Major Gray, a fellow officer, was on leave at his home in Detroit recuperating from a drinking problem. He insisted that Gray should stay in Michigan because “he is no soldier, has done no service and carries an asses head on his shoulders.”¹⁰ In another letter written on 28 July 1862 he told Azubah how his regiment met with disaster, and once again he blamed it on weak Union leadership. Major Moyers had gone into the mountains with three

companies and was attacked and defeated severely, losing sixteen men and twenty horses. “It was a miracle that all was not lost. The rebels came down from the mountains, in hundreds, when the fight began. They fought like tigers. We must have better generals and colonels,” writes Willcox, or “not a soul of us will ever see Michigan again.”¹¹ He continued to inform his wife that General Thomas, who was in charge of the regiment, was allowing citizens who had not even taken the oath to support the Union (in fact, they were admitting they were secessionists) to pass “in and out of our lives at any and all times without moderation.”¹² His letter ended by saying that Confederate soldiers knew the Union position and exact strengths, leaving them vulnerable to an attack at any moment by an overwhelming force. He reported that his regiment had lost forty men in the last month, either killed or taken prisoner, and at the present rate they would “all be gone in two months more.”¹³ The preceding comments reveal that Willcox was disappointed with Union leadership at the military and political level in both the Western and Eastern theatres.

Willcox appears to have been a capable and exemplary leader who proved himself worthy of a promotion in the battle of Iuka, fought on 26 September 1862 in Mississippi. The captain took eight companies with him and left four companies at the camp. After moving two miles down the road he realized the Rebel cavalry was near so he sent twenty men into a nearby woods and twenty more into a nearby cornfield. There was a sharp skirmish, lasting about fifteen minutes, before the Rebels were driven from the woods, leaving one man and one horse killed. Nevertheless, the Rebels quickly rallied together and a number of shots were fired into the head of the column. Willcox immediately “wheeled the cavalry into line on the roadside and uncovered a column of infantry, which

moved to the front and deployed on either side of the road, and drove the enemy from the cover of some buildings behind which they were shelved.”¹⁴ Moments later he formed his men behind the brow of a hill, had several of them dismount, then ordered them to fire at the enemy. Twenty-two Confederate soldiers were killed before they began to fall back. The Third Michigan Cavalry continued to drive them back until they reached a point about a mile and a half from Iuka. The rapid-fire continued at this point and other regiments from both sides joined in the fight. The battle of Iuka was “sanguine, the firing heavy and rapid, and the ground was being hotly contested, when night, coming on, became master of the field and closed the scene at carnage.”¹⁵ The contest commenced late in the afternoon and lasted for about two and one-half hours.

In *The Darkest Days Of The War: The Battles Of Iuka & Corinth*, author and historian Peter Cozzens notes that Colonel Edward Hatch was engaged in a brief skirmish that seemed superfluous to that of Major General William Stark Rosecrans and his men. “Of far greater moment was a clash shortly before noon on the Tuscumbia road, one-half mile west of Barnett’s Crossroads, between eight companies of the Third Michigan Cavalry under Capt. Lyman Willcox . . . Willcox brushed the Southerners away and pressed on toward Cartersville”¹⁶ Cozzens continues to describe the valiant effort of Willcox as follows:

Captain Willcox and his Michigan cavalymen were having a grand time. Since swinging into the saddle before daybreak, they had brushed aside every Rebel trooper who dared confront them. Riding north now along the Jacinto road, ahead of Sanborn’s brigade, they had no reason to expect anything less. On the far side of Barnett’s Crossroads the Michiganders made contact with a squadron of General Armstrong’s Confederate cavalry under the command of Lt. E. B. Trezevant. They drove the Southerners handily to within four miles of Iuka before matters took an abrupt turn for the worst. Drawing rein at a shallow rivulet known as Moore’s Branch, Willcox’s scouts scanned the horizon. Four hundred yards up the road, on a commanding knoll, stood an attractive, whitewashed

house belonging to Mrs. Moore, the widowed matron of a prominent Iuka family. Around her home Rebel cavalymen were dismounting and hurrying into line. It was nearly 1:30 p.m. Without pausing to reconnoiter, Captain Willcox sent forward at the gallop his lead element, Company K under Sgt. H. D. Cutter. Cutter's troops splashed across the streamlet and charged up the road. The Rebels scattered into the timber behind the Moore house, but they returned—a full squadron strong. The Michiganders wheeled their horses and made for Moore's Branch. A hail of bullets hurried them along.¹⁷

At that moment Brig. Gen. Charles Smith Hamilton arrived with his men. Willcox passed to the rear and the Confederates fell back firing. According to Horace Greeley, there were 2,800 Union men against a Rebel force of 11,000.¹⁸ The Yankees only lost 100 men in the battle, compared to a loss of 1,000 Rebels. James M. McPherson notes that “in a short, sharp contest the outnumbered Yankees gave a good account of themselves and inflicted more casualties than they received.”¹⁹

Many accounts were written about the battle of Iuka, and in every account Willcox is given credit for executing his men in a proper and professional manner. J.K. Mizner, chief of cavalry, wrote about Willcox and the Third as follows:

The 3rd Michigan cavalry, under the command of captain Willcox (with the exception of four companies employed in escorting trains), formed the advance of general Hamilton's division, which moved east on the Tuscumbia road. Soon the armies became engaged and a terrible conflict ensued. Four companies of the 3^d Michigan cavalry, under captain Willcox, were sent to the right wing, on the right of Constable's Ohio Battery. Two companies were sent to the northeast, and the remaining two to the northwest. During the advance, engagement and pursuit, the officers and men of the cavalry division displayed great zeal, enterprise, and gallantry, and are all entitled to great credit. Captain Willcox . . . performed [his?] duty with great energy.²⁰

At the close of the battle of Iuka, on 1 October 1862, Captain Willcox was promoted to Major (Figure 12).

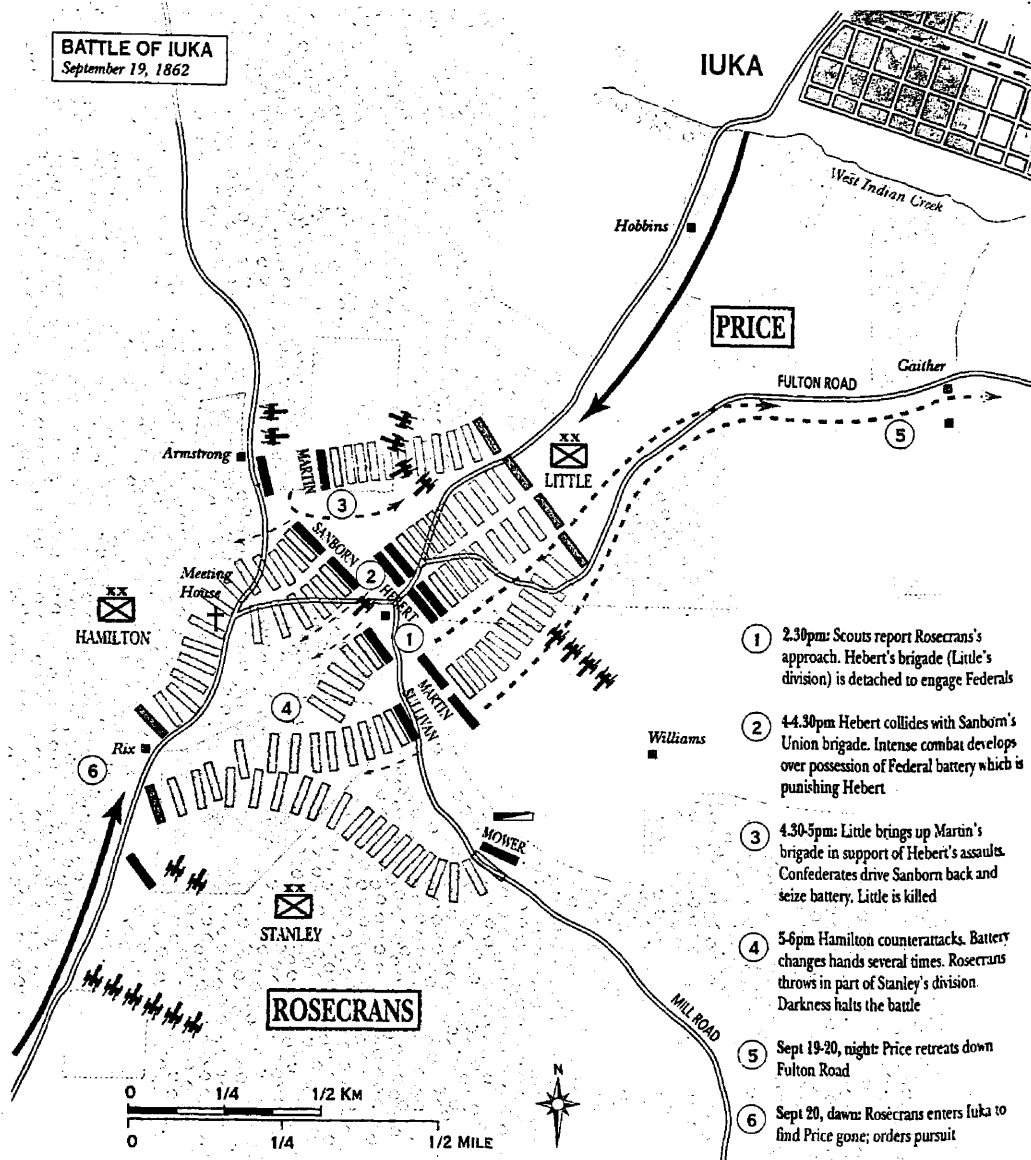


Figure 6: The Battle of Iuka, which took place on September 19-20, 1862

Source: Picture History of the Civil War
(Willcox's regiment, part of Hamilton's division, is located on the left-hand side)

One of the hardest fought battles in the western theater took place in Corinth, Mississippi, on 3 and 4 October 1862. For several days the cavalry soldiers were in their saddles all day and all night long. The *Record of Service of Michigan Volunteers in the Civil War* notes, “The Third Michigan Cavalry were constantly on their flanks and rear, capturing many prisoners. This pursuit extended over 75 miles into the heart of Mississippi. During the period it was under the command of Captain Lyman G. Willcox.”²¹ (The article does not reflect the recent promotion of Willcox from Captain to Major.) Speaking of the same battle, the Corinth reported the following information but correctly identified Willcox as Major:

The second day the march was resumed at daylight, the Third Michigan Cavalry ahead, and the second battalion in advance, under Major Willcox. The command had moved hardly three miles when the rebels opened a tremendous volley. The advance of the Third Michigan Cavalry captured during the day, thirty prisoners, including five commissioned officers. The next morning at daylight, just as the command was moving, attacked our rear guard, which was commanded by Major Willcox, of the Third Michigan. The attack was sudden and violent, but the rebels were repulsed with severe loss, and made no further hostile demonstration during the day. Our loss was one killed and three wounded. Major Willcox’s horse was shot and killed.²²

During the night, when they realized the enemy was moving up in two columns, Major Willcox and the second battalion found the Rebels rushing down upon them. Nevertheless, Willcox and his men met the Rebels with an equal spirit of determination. The ground was on Willcox’s side and he and his cavalry “undertook their work and kept their line in splendid order and when the charging column had nearly reached them gave them five successive volleys from their rifles, which threw the enemy into confusion, staggered the column, checked their advance, and even caused their flanking column to hesitate.”²³ This gave the Union men time to reload their guns and secure another position. The enemy returned, but cautiously the battalion rejoined the regiment with a

loss of only one man. The enemy had the advantage, with more than three times the number of Union men, and they knew exactly where the whole force was located as well as the ground over which they had to move. Amazingly, they failed to take a single Union soldier prisoner. The Corinth reported “the officers and men of the Third Michigan showed themselves worthy of their cause, and an honor to their state.”²⁴

Willcox’s most laudable and memorable accomplishment came during the winter of 1862-1863 when the Third Michigan Cavalry was serving in West Tennessee, about a mile or two south of Jackson. The Detroit lawyer turned Union soldier was presented with another opportunity to speak; only this time, his prognostic words would be directed toward Confederate rebels.

One day, around the middle of March, a delegation of Tennessee gentlemen called upon Willcox to take care of some personal business. In the course of their conversation the gentlemen began to discuss the war-at-hand. The Southern gentlemen, impressed with Willcox’s knowledge, believed the people of Henderson County would benefit in their understanding of the present state of the country if Willcox would explain the country’s present dilemma to them from his ideological perspective. It was obvious to the men that he was qualified for the task and several days later they sent an official invitation to Major Willcox requesting that he address the people of their community. The invitation read as follows:

Lexington, Tenn.
March 28, 1863

Major Willcox:

Dear Sir:--After consulting several citizens in this vicinity, I found it met the approbation of all, that you should address them, and, thereupon, Thursday, April 2d, 1863, was fixed upon for you to do so, and was so published throughout the county. I would be much pleased to have you call, and make my house your home, while you are among us. The citizens are all anxious for you to be here on that day, and I hope you will make it convenient to be present.²⁵

Very respectfully,
G. D. PENN.

General Nathan Kimball, the Union commander of the Jackson area, granted Willcox permission to address the Southern crowd, but warned him to take along a large force for he was entering hostile country and the invitation to speak was probably nothing short of a trap. Willcox refused to heed his commanding officer's advice and asked only eight men to accompany him; he felt the invitation was given in good faith and the people of Henderson County were eager to hear the truth. In response to their request he sent the following reply:

Camp near Jackson, Tenn.
March 28th, 1863

G. D. Penn, Esq., and others:

Gentlemen:--It will give me great pleasure to meet the citizens of Henderson County. I accept your invitation, not as a compliment to myself, but as an indication of patriotism, and an earnest desire on your part, to mitigate the calamity of this terrible war, and reconcile citizens, who are now in open conflict with each other.

I will lend my tongue as readily as my sword for the good of the cause; and I desire all, irrespective of political opinions, to be present, and assure you no person conducting himself peaceably at the meeting, whatever may be his sentiments or position, whether he be a Confederate soldier or a Union man, shall be molested, but will be permitted to depart as freely as he comes.

Let us have—a good old fashioned citizens' meeting, without an element of war about it.²⁶

Your fellow-citizen,
L. G. WILLCOX

It will probably never be known why Major Willcox was invited to speak instead of a high-ranking officer such as General Kimball. Nevertheless, Willcox's speech, entitled "The South in War Times," was delivered on 2 April 1863 to a packed crowd of Confederate soldiers and civilians at a courthouse in Lexington, Tennessee. According to Willcox, it was the first sign of mutual confidence and common citizenship manifested by both sides during the conflict. In 1894, looking back at the historical moment, Willcox stated: "It was, as to my knowledge, the first instance of a citizen's hand shake across the bloody chasm."²⁷

CHAPTER THREE

ACROSS THE BLOODY CHASM

G. D. Penn, who had served as captain in the Confederate army and was a slave trader before the war began, introduced the Union Major to the attentive and curious Confederate crowd. Numerous men, many of whom wore their Confederate uniforms, attended the packed meeting. Willcox approached the crowd as a soldier and invited guest who, for the first time in eighteen months, felt like himself: “War is not my element, I love peace, especially peace between brethern [*sic*].”²⁸ He addressed his listeners as *Fellow-Citizens of the State of Tennessee, and of the United States of America*. Willcox set the stage for his speech by promising his listeners that he would only speak the *truth* and would not sugarcoat anything; to do so would insult their intelligence and mock the present calamity they all faced.²⁹ According to Willcox, it was probably the first time that many in the audience had heard free speech on the topics discussed, and he was pleased with the outcome for it resulted in “strengthened Union sentiment and enlistments in the Union army.”³⁰

Willcox spoke for two and one-half hours and addressed six major points: 1) every country must establish some form of government; 2) the first government, the confederate government, was a failure; 3) nationalizing the government would strengthen it; 4) the South had not prospered because they held to the institution of slavery; 5) rebellion and secession always result in negative consequences; and 6) the South must stop fighting and reunite with their Northern brothers.

Looking closely at the major’s first point, that every country must establish some form of government, Willcox began by saying that in 1776 the people of this country

fought to establish a government that would protect the rights of all and oppress none.³¹ His first move, therefore, was to lash out at the powerful and ambitious country of Great Britain for bathing two continents in a pool of blood. They demanded of Americans, serfdom; and of liberty, death. In the end, however, their military power, which was superior to any the world had ever seen, failed to withstand the American colonists who stood “strong in the justness of their cause, and in their integrity of purpose, braved the storm, and, after a terrible struggle, broke the chains which would have bound them, and erected the statue of liberty upon the pedestal of representative law, wherein all were parties to its creation, and all were equally bound by its obligations.”³²

Willcox, along with many Americans, realized the founding fathers sought a society where the dream of equality would one day be a reality. Even though Thomas Jefferson owned 170 slaves, he still embraced the notion of a nation that would one day protect all and oppress none. Americanism was an experiment in freedom and individualism. Jefferson believed in the autonomy of the individual and “pondered the conflict between American freedom and American slavery.”³³ The author of *American Visions*, Robert Hughes, points out that Jefferson denounced slavery as an abominable crime, but it was slaves who “underwrote his leisure and wealth, and though he had the deepest qualms about slavery, he would not abandon the system”³⁴ It is obvious that Jefferson was stuck in a no win situation. He opposed the system of slavery, but he supported the right of individuals to freely choose, which included the right to possess slaves if it was economically necessary.

Willcox continued his speech by informing the people of Henderson County that the founding fathers embraced a unified country in order to defend themselves against a

common enemy. Nevertheless, the Confederate government proved to be entirely inadequate when faced by European pressure. National pride and national interests gave way to local ambition and prejudice until the “whole fabric of confederate government began to crumble and totter, threatening to bury an entire people beneath its ruins.”³⁵ According to Willcox, America was plagued with state pride, sectional bias, prejudice, and unfriendly legislation, and the statesmen of the day “heard the muttering thunder, and saw the red cloud of civil war rising above the horizon of their national sky, threatening to overwhelm in a deluge of anarchy, their temple of hope.”³⁶ Willcox’s second point was simply that the Confederate government had failed.

The need to strengthen the government by nationalizing it became Willcox’s third line of reasoning. The new structure of the national government would rest directly on the people themselves. States and sections would be subservient to the will of the people, and in a spirit of conciliation and amity, the Constitution of the United States of America for the purpose stated in the preamble of the Constitution was established.

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, secure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

In a spirit of nationalism, Willcox proclaimed that the “history of the world does not furnish a more brilliant example of patriotism, nor a more triumphant vindication of the right and qualification of a people to govern themselves.”³⁷ The Constitution was unanimously ratified by the people of every state and within its arms rests the virtues of faith and honor. It shuts out the right of violent change or revolution because Americans do not live under an arbitrary system; their government represents them. As a result, the

Constitution has been the envy and admiration of the world because it offered an “asylum to the oppressed and down-trodden of all lands.”³⁸

This may have been true for white males, but Willcox failed to acknowledge or address the problem of discrimination and exploitation among African-Americans, Mexicans, Asians, and Native Americans. It cannot be denied that the American Civil War was fought, at least in part, over inequality. The abolitionist movement will attest to that fact. The Civil War can be directly linked to the Constitutional ideology of equality, but its actual practice never existed.

According to Ronald Takaki, current Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, American inequality can be linked all the way back to the eighteenth century. In 1782 Virginia had 567,614 inhabitants, 270,762 slaves and 296,852 “free inhabitants,” a ratio of nearly ten to eleven.³⁹ He admits that the Chinese were viewed as intelligent, not ignorant and brutish like the blacks, but none-the-less, they were considered heathens, morally inferior, savage, childlike, and lustful.⁴⁰ The Professor also reminds us that in 1803, when Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory, he sought to remove Native Americans by shipping them westward or forcing them to assimilate into white society.⁴¹ Unlike Native Americans who were removed beyond the Mississippi River or sent to reservations after our government confiscated their land, Takaki reminds us that Mexicans had their land annexed and incorporated into a “labor-repressive system.”⁴² Does this sound like an asylum for the oppressed and downtrodden?

As Willcox stood before the Confederate crowd in the midst of the Civil War, he boasted about a nation that offered hope to the oppressed and downtrodden. Ironically,

the Union soldier was fighting, in part, to free African-Americans from the tyranny of slavery. How could an intelligent man be so deceived? Willcox, a common man and soldier, represents the mentality of men and women in every age. Americans have always wanted to believe they lived in a country where all have equal opportunity, whether it be racial, socio-political, or economic. Takaki's statistics make a strong and valid point; America was founded on the principle of equality, but, unfortunately, the proposition has never been a reality; in failing to nurture the birthright of equality, maturity has been denied access to fruition, thwarting the realization of America's Constitutional genius.

Willcox continued to brilliantly paint an ideological portrait of America for the people of Henderson County by explaining that states, as if by some magical force, had built cities, endowed institutions of learning, invented railways, steamboats, telegraphs, cotton gins, and reapers; in fact, he said the imagination cannot comprehend the height to which American power and greatness has aspired. The problem, however, is that through all the rapid development some states prospered and others did not.⁴³ Why? Willcox was ready to articulate his fourth point.

The states of the South adopted the institution of human slavery while those in the North rejected it. "One section respected labor, the other despised and trampled upon it."⁴⁴ Willcox sought to strengthen his fourth point by arguing that people who lived in free states were also inclined to reject slavery. They believed slavery to be a "political and social evil (that) hangs like a shadow of death upon the spirits of the people."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Willcox admitted that the American Iliad was a "defensive war, and was

entered into on the part of the Union men for the single purpose of preserving the National Government, under the Constitution, which is being assailed.”⁴⁶

In *Battle Cry of Freedom*, published in 1988, distinguished historian James M. McPherson echoes Willcox’s sentiments: “The North did not at first fight to free slaves.”⁴⁷ Author and historian Bruce Catton maintains the position held by Willcox and McPherson by agreeing that the Confederate States of America fought for independence while the North fought for the re-establishment of the Union.⁴⁸ It was not until Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address in November 1863 that the North began to fight for a “new birth of freedom.” Present-day scholars are quick to substantiate this theory by reminding Americans that Abraham Lincoln once stated: “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists.”⁴⁹ Lincoln personally opposed the practice of slavery; Southern opposition to his election to the presidency will attest to that fact, but his first priority was to preserve the Union and keep the nation intact.

Willcox’s opposition to slavery appears to have been stronger than most Northerners’, which is why he fought with the sword as well as the tongue. He wanted soldiers and citizens alike to recognize that enslavement does not address itself to the intelligence of men but rather to their cupidity or greed.⁵⁰ He saw Southern citizens as deceived little puppets being manipulated by the hand of Southern leaders. He came to this conclusion because he had met many Southern citizens who were praying for the day when peace would visit their land. Willcox observed that even in the state of Mississippi, home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Union soldiers were greeted with kindness and rebel soldiers “begged permission to accompany us northward leaving

home and competence behind them for that liberty they loved more than life and which was denied them by traitors at home.”⁵¹ Therefore, he continued his speech to the people of Henderson County by boldly informing them that citizens of Louisiana were not only forbidden to teach slaves to read and write, but they could not so much as use signs or actions that might foster discontentment. The punishment for such an offense was imprisonment or even death. Willcox reminded his audience that they were blessed with a government that allowed every man a part in the law-making process. It is, however, “thought to be essential that he should be sufficiently intelligent to understand the necessity of law, the kind of law required, and the manner of making and executing it. To do this it is necessary to prepare the mind by education, and then leave it free to discuss all matters relating to it.”⁵² Willcox expanded his point of view with this affirmation: “General intelligence and freedom of discussion, slavery does not permit. It prohibits discussion, smothers investigation, and tolerates no opposition. All other interests must succumb to its blighting power.”⁵³ In other words, he claimed there could be no compromising. Is a touch of irony apparent in Willcox’s assertion or does he naively believe that slaves would be granted the same rights as whites if they were educated?

After the Civil War, in 1881, Jefferson Davis, former President of the Confederate States of America, painted a very different portrait from that of Major Lyman G. Willcox. He argued that the preamble to the Constitution insured “domestic tranquility” and insisted that the North was depriving the South of its Constitutional right. Before Abraham Lincoln was elected president he announced that the Union could not permanently endure “half slave and half free,” which meant the Union could not continue

to exist in its present condition--but the condition Davis argued for was, according to his interpretation, in agreement with the Constitution.⁵⁴

The Causes of the Civil War written in 1991 by Kenneth M. Stampp indirectly speaks to Davis' claim by stating: "Post-Civil War Southern historians, who rarely agreed that slavery was a fundamental cause of the Civil War, found the real cause in conflicting interpretations of the Constitution."⁵⁵ They maintained that the South seceded in order to preserve states rights, not slavery. South Carolina's "Declaration of the Causes of Secession," declared that "fourteen of the States have deliberately refused for years past to fulfill their constitutional obligations . . . Thus the constitutional compact has been deliberately broken and disregarded by the non-slaveholding States."⁵⁶

Recent historians continue to debate why the South went to war and the debate will, undoubtedly, continue indefinitely. Willcox knew many Northerners did not go to war over the issue of slavery, but he was determined to do his part in seeing it abolished. He warned his listening audience that their barbaric practice would lead to their downfall because slavery stood in the way of progress and education. He had marched more than 5,000 miles in Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee, conversing with the rich and poor, black and white, young and old, male and female, but in all the places he visited, he found only one solitary school. Furthermore, he noted that in the state of Georgia there were 60,000 white adults who could neither read nor write. "What a commentary," he maintained, "on the barbarism of slavery."⁵⁷ According to Willcox, these staggering statistics paved the way for the American Civil War. Was Willcox right? If more people had been educated in the 1860s would war have been avoided? Is education a key to

solving conflict and avoiding violence or does education only intellectually equip persons to clothe their deceit and violence in robes of purity and truth?

In addition, he stated that people of free States observed what was happening but decided not to interfere because they were prone to obey the law and desired peace with all men. Instead, they allowed each State to decide how it would handle the issue of slavery. They recognized slavery as an unfortunate inheritance and sympathized with those who inherited the dreadful practice. Slavery was a “moral and political wrong” but they were “not disposed to dictate its suppression, nor even its restriction within the States permitting it, believing with Jefferson, that error of opinion may safely be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.”⁵⁸

Willcox alleged that Northerners disliked slavery and longed for the practice to come to an end, but, in spite of their longing, they obeyed the laws believing that “restriction and emancipation should come through the regular, legitimate channels, by the peaceful and constitutional action of the people of the slave States themselves.”⁵⁹ Northerners submitted to the fugitive slave law which, in their eyes, was a harsh and cruel punishment that broke every principle of justice and humanity. The fugitive slaves were given back to their Southern masters because Northerners had a “legal obligation to return them, believing that the good sense and justice of the American people would in time lead them to remove the necessity for the law or change it so as to comply with justice. Our determination to obey law was so settled that the streets of Boston were dyed with the blood of her citizens in its enforcement.”⁶⁰

Willcox noted that many of the slaves given back to their masters had skin much whiter than his, and he continued to inform his listening audience that if a slave came to

his door and asked for bread he would not refuse to give it to him. Nevertheless, his act of kindness would make him liable to receive a fine and possible imprisonment. To make his point clear, he reported the following story:

You have among you men who are slave traders by profession, whose business it is to buy and sell men, women and children; you despise them and will not associate with them. If a planter wishes to deal with one of this class, he takes him under the cover of the night, into his garret or into an out-building, secure from observation, and in whispers that blister his tongue and smother conscience, hurriedly transacts chattel to the trader, and with a sense of shame and humiliation returns to his family.⁶¹

Willcox continued to inform the assembly that the men of slave States demanded that Congress, by virtue of its power under the Constitution, should become the “patron of slavery in the Territories of the United States” and make all the rules and regulations.⁶² Their demands, however, were met by a counter party in the free States who said that Congress, by virtue of its power under the Constitution, should prohibit slavery in the Territories. It should merely be tolerated in the States as a municipal institution. A third party believed that the best and proper course for Congress would be to allow the people of the Territories to determine for themselves whether they would adopt the institution of slavery or not. This was the position held by the political parties of 1860. With the triumph of the Republican Party, Congress acted upon the people’s expressed will and the Territories were free to choose for themselves. According to Willcox, the Republican triumph and consequent overthrow of those who would nationalize slavery “precipitated a crisis which has long been foreseen, and even desired by many of the leading men of the slave States, who hoped by the destruction of the National Government, to establish a more consolidated one, the basis of which should be slavery, and which should include all the slave holding States, and such Territories as they might possess.”⁶³

Within the free States, however, there was a party whose primary objective was to destroy the National Government in order to emancipate slaves. Their idea was embodied in a resolution that abolitionists should work to dissolve the American Union. They alleged that the “only exodus to the slave to freedom must be over the remains of the American church and the grave of the present Union.”⁶⁴ Here was an example of two extreme parties who disagree on everything around the slavery question, but agree that the destruction of the Union would be the country’s best answer to the problem.

How fortunate for America, noted Willcox, that the great mass of people, North and South, were not concentrated in either extreme. The hearts of the people were loyal; they wanted to preserve the Union, the only safeguard to their liberties. No matter how much some people longed to see the removal of slavery from their land, they were not inclined to secure it by unlawful means. The major was outraged over the practice of slavery, but in order for twenty-first century Americans to fully understand the barbarism of slavery in America, its roots in colonial Virginia must be examined.

The founding fathers from Virginia led the fight against British oppression, wrote the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, as well as the first ten amendments, and Virginians were elected to the presidency of the United States for thirty-two out of the first thirty-six years. Ironically, however, “the men who came together to found the independent United States, dedicated to freedom and equality, either held slaves or were willing to join hands with those who did.”⁶⁵ In light of this information, how did the rise of liberty and equality rise with the practice of slavery?

In the late 16th century a compassionate Englishman, Richard Hakluyt, became concerned about poor men and women of England who could not find work. He argued

that poverty and desperation had driven them to crime; England's crime problem would be cured if the idle found work. England sent their unemployed to America where they came in to contact with what they termed *idle* Native Americans. Obviously, "it was a formula for disaster."⁶⁶

The situation in Virginia was desperate before 1624; the colony was nothing but a death trap because the inhabitants failed to produce enough food to survive. Everything appeared to change, however, with the tobacco boom of the 1620s. Virginia was thriving and planters could not find enough servants to work the land. Although later generations of servants would tend five or six times more tobacco plants than the servants of the 1620s, the work seemed "more onerous and more unrelenting than the intermittent labor of the English farmer; and masters bent on profit 'corrected' their laggard, hungry, and diseased servants with barbarous punishments."⁶⁷ Servants became machines. Private enterprise operated without check and greed thrived like tobacco plants as Virginia moved toward a "system of labor that treated men as things."⁶⁸ Slaves were present in Virginia almost from the beginning (1619), but during the first half of the century it was more advantageous to purchase indentured servants because there was a high mortality rate among servants and slaves cost double that of a servant. It made sense, therefore, to hire servants rather than purchase slaves.⁶⁹

As time marched on the situation was reversed. Purchasing slaves became profitable, so it was easy to convert from a system of servants to a system of slavery because it was "not necessary to enslave anyone. Virginians had only to buy men who were already enslaved."⁷⁰ The "substitution of slaves for servants probably increased productivity and almost certainly increased the profitability of the plantation system."⁷¹

As a result, Virginia developed contempt for blacks, as well as Indians, and the status of lower-class whites began to rise.

Virginians developed a special appreciation for freedom because they saw, on a daily basis, what life could be like without it. In the republican way of thinking, zeal for liberty and equality went hand in hand with contempt for the poor and plans for enslaving them.⁷² “Poverty . . . was as much a threat to liberty as the ambition of monarchs and of over-rich landlords. And some British republicans thought it better to enslave the poor than be enslaved by them.”⁷³ They reasoned that the keepers of republican liberty must be careful not to extend a share of freedom and liberty to men who were incapable of defending it and might develop the power to destroy it. After all, “if the poor were already enslaved, would it not be wise to keep them so?”⁷⁴ Racism became an essential ingredient of republican ideology, and it allowed Virginia to lead the nation forward.⁷⁵ This information is essential to a thorough understanding of the events that led to the American Civil War.

In the midst of the War Between the States it was Virginians, such as Robert E. Lee, who once again played a major role in leading the nation forward, only this time it was to dissolve the Union. Major Willcox’s speech reminded Southern sympathizers that the present-day “chiefs” of the rebellion were once men who were loyal to the Union; he specifically focused on three men: General Robert E. Lee, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and General John C. Breckinridge. These men were all loud in their professions of loyalty to the Union, and bitter in their denunciation of those who would assail it. In *R. E. Lee*, written by prominent author and historian Douglass Southall

Freeman, a touch of Union devotion to which Willcox was referring is uncovered in the following description:

[Lee] felt that the citizens of every state had equal rights in the territories, he had no regard at the time for the South as a section, much less a confederation. His mind was for the Union; his instinct for the state, Virginia. He felt powerless to help in preserving the Union, but with the religious faith that had been growing steadily since the Mexican War, he could not believe a beneficent Providence would permit its destruction.⁷⁶

Likewise, in a letter written to George Washington Parke Custis, Lee's father-in-law, on 14 December 1860, he said, "I hope . . . the wisdom and patriotism of the country will devise some way of saving it, and that a kind Providence has not yet turned the current of His blessings from us. It is . . . my only hope for the preservation of the Union, and I will cling to it to the last."⁷⁷ He continued to tell Custis that he resented the aggression he felt from the North in denying Southern citizens equal rights of common territory.

Another letter written home on 23 January 1861, probably once again to Custis, reveals a profoundly confusing side to Lee's personality:

As an American Citizen, I take great pride in my country, her prosperity and institutions, and would defend any State if her rights were invaded. But I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation. I hope, therefore, that all constitutional means will be exhausted before there is a recourse to force. Secession is nothing but revolution. The framers of our Constitution never exhausted much labor, wisdom and forbearance in its formation, and surrounded it with so many guards and securities, if it was intended to be broken by every member of the Confederacy at will. It was intended for 'perpetual union' so expressed in the preamble, and for the establishment of a government, not a compact, which can only be dissolved by revolution, or the consent of all the people in convention assembled. It is idle to talk of secession. Still, a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me. I shall mourn for my country and for the welfare of progress of mankind. If the Union is dissolved, and the Government disrupted, I shall return to my native State and

share the miseries of my people, and save in defence [*sic*] will draw my sword on none.⁷⁸

History proves that Robert E. Lee not only drew his sword, but he has secured a place in military history as one of the greatest generals the world has ever known. Major Willcox hated Lee because he used the nation's strength to rescue his "native state" from the grasp of John Brown and his twenty-two invaders at Harper's Ferry just before he drew the sword against the nation that had nurtured him.⁷⁹ When war ensued between the two sections of the country it was Lee who was offered command of the Union army; a command which he refused. There is some discrepancy as to whether the offer came straight from President Lincoln or Simon Cameron, Secretary of the War Department.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, he refused the offer.⁸¹ At the close of the war it was, ironically, Lee, Commander-in-Chief of the rebel army, who was forced to surrender his troops to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. Lee's inner desire was to remain faithful to the Union, but his boundless love for Virginia overrode his better judgment.

Even though Willcox despised Lee for his Virginia, rather than Union, loyalty, he regarded Jefferson Davis, the Confederate President, as the archfiend of the bloody tragedy. Davis, contended Willcox, was compelled to wear a mask of patriotism in order to hide the hideous deformity of his naked soul; he assumed a "smooth dissimulation, skilled to grace, a devil's purpose with an angel's face."⁸² To drive home his argument, he made reference to a political speech given by Davis on 4 July 1848. The speech was as follows:

This great country will continue united. Trifling politicians in the south, or in the north, or in the west, may continue to talk otherwise, but it will be of no avail. They are like the mosquitoes [*sic*] around the ox—they annoy, but they cannot wound, and never kill. There is a common interest which runs through all the diversified occupations and various products of these sovereign States; there is a

common sentiment of nationality which beats in every bosom; there are common memories sweet to us all; and though the clouds have occasionally darkened our political sky, the good sense and good feeling of the people has thus far averted any catastrophe destructive of our Constitution and Union. It was in fraternity, and an elevation of principle, which rose superior to sectional or individual aggrandizement, that the foundations of our Union were laid; and, if we, the present generation, are worthy of our ancestry, we shall not only protect those foundations from destruction, but build higher and wider this temple of liberty and inscribe perpetuity upon its tablet.⁸³

The Major continued to condemn Davis as the “most ungrateful and shameless of any in the long list of traitors who have attempted to ruin their country.”⁸⁴ Davis was born, educated, protected, supported, and honored by the people of the federal government, but he deceived the Union as he sat “daily in Senate chamber with falsehood on his lips and treason in his heart, and with a solemn baseness, unparalleled in the annals of crime, labored to effect his country’s ruin.”⁸⁵ Willcox blamed Davis and his fellow conspirators for the nation’s tears. They betrayed the very homes they pledged to protect and plunged the country into a “cruel, bloody, fratricidal war, which has desolated American hearthstones, and bathed every woman’s face in tears.”⁸⁶ Southern leaders took a nation at peace, honored and respected as no other people on earth had ever been before, and undermined public virtue and respectful obedience to the law. Their actions cultivated sectional prejudices and State pride and they sold their people on the idea of a “divided country . . . an absurd idea—for a great government cannot fall without crushing all beneath it.”⁸⁷

Another rebel leader to warrant specific mention by Willcox was John C. Breckinridge. The former U. S. vice president (1857-1861) and an 1860 presidential candidate was from Kentucky, a state that remained loyal to the Union. He had a noble career as a state legislator and U. S. congressman. As a member of the U. S. Senate in

1861, he was accused of secretly being a Confederate. When he discovered that he was about to be expelled from Congress and arrested, he headed south and joined the Confederate army. Major Willcox reminded his listening audience of a speech Breckinridge gave on 26 June 1860 in Washington, a portion of which stated:

Is there an American who will deride his country's laws, pervert her Constitution, or alienate her people? If there be such a man let his memory descend to posterity laden with the execrations of all mankind. Let us devoutly trust then another Senate, in another age, shall bear to a new and larger chamber this Constitution, vigorous and inviolate, and that the last generation of posterity shall witness the deliberations of the representatives of American States, still united, prosperous and free.⁸⁸

In a spirit of condemnation, Willcox went so far as to say that Breckinridge, Davis, and Lee would be remembered as “synonymous with goblins of hell” because they deceived the people into believing that secession would bring security and a better way of life to the South.⁸⁹ Willcox continued his critical analysis by stating that for the last thirty years these conspirators, along with others, had diligently labored to undermine public virtue and respectful obedience to the law. They cultivated sectional prejudices and State pride. They told Southerners that their first allegiance was to State governments, contrary to the express provisions of the National Constitution, and that the general government had no restrictive power over a State. States who withdrew from the Union could do so peacefully. What motives burned beneath their rebellious actions? According to Willcox, they wanted slavery to be the foundation of a new empire.

Willcox held that wars were common and social convulsions frequent throughout the world but none had been so extreme, so radical, so thorough, or so complete as the American Civil War. It left no portion of the social fabric untouched. Every individual from high to low throughout the country was touched by its power.⁹⁰ The war, according

to Willcox, erupted because of greed on the part of upper class Southern leaders, not discontentment of slaves. It was the “ambition and greed of despotism that raised the hand of strife. It was constructed by the intelligence and misrepresentation of one class upon the ignorance and cruelty of another. Had the people of the South been better informed, they could not have been led to the work of the fratricide.”⁹¹ Willcox set the stage for his fifth point; rebellion and secession always lead to negative consequences.

Major Willcox reminded the people of Henderson County that the rebellion came at a time when the nation was at peace, property was secure, and slave property was the most secure of all. The heinous fugitive slave law was enforced in all northern states, even Illinois, which contained Chicago, the strongest Republican city in the country. There was not a country in the world whose inhabitants were prouder than those in America. Our flag was respected throughout every land as a national emblem of power, liberty, equality, and justice. Nevertheless, Southern conspirators persuaded their people to attack Fort Sumter; an act Willcox referred to as “a banquet of death.”⁹² His compelling narrative was heard in the following manner:

The national flag was assailed by armed treason; the flames of civil war circled around it. I heard the traitor guns of Charleston at my northern home on the banks of the beautiful Detroit. You heard them, and as the terrible sound vibrated among your hills, your hearts sunk within you, as at the second fall of man, and a whole people stood appalled, and for the moment breathless at the enormity of the crime. The conspirators had so far succeeded. The temple was on fire, and they hoped to profit by its destruction, but a nation sprang to arms, and treason was throttled.⁹³

War was destroying the nation; Willcox advised his audience to return to their plantations and start obeying the laws of the land. Peace would come at once, he predicted, if those who had taken up arms against the government would return to the condition they were in in 1860. Unless this was done, the only road to peace would be

through war, and “War is violence, and the more active and determined that violence, the sooner peace is found, and the more real humanity is shown.”⁹⁴

To support his point, he shared a personal experience; an episode he had with a plantation owner from Mississippi. He relayed that a slaveholder had told him that if Union boys would only whip Negroes when they came into Yankee camps and send them back to their masters the masters would, in return, place more confidence in the country. Willcox responded to the slavemaster by saying, “You mistake, sir, we are here not to whip your slaves, who have done the government no wrong, nor to catch them, but to whip their rebellious masters, and compel obedience to the laws.”⁹⁵ Wilcox’s statement, once again, provides insight into the confusing character of America. Slavery had roots in American society; deep roots that traveled all the way back to the beginning. What Major Willcox failed to recognize, however, was that Southerners wanted to return to their plantations, with their slaves, and obey what they believed was the law of the land; their right to own slaves. It is obvious that such conflicting interpretations of the Constitution are crucial to understanding the American conflict.

The conflict was strengthened by writings from men such as South Carolinian William J. Grayson, who alleged that the institution of slavery was guaranteed under the Constitution. Grayson’s poem, entitled “The Hireling and the Slave,” idealized the life of enslaved African-Americans. The author compared the life of a slave to the life of a hireling who lived and worked in northern factories. His poetic argument follows:

And yet the Master’s lighter rule ensures
More order than the sternest code secures;
No mobs of factious workmen gather here,
No strikes we dread, no lawless riots fear;
Nuns, from their convent driven, at midnight fly,

Churches, in flames, ask vengeance from the sky,
 Seditious schemes in bloody tumults end,
 Parsons incite, and Senators defend,
 But not where Slaves their easy labours ply,
 Safe from the snare, beneath a Master's eye;
 In useful tasks engaged, employed their time,
 Untempted by the demagogue to crime,
 Secure they toil, uncursed their peaceful life,
 With freedom's hungry broils and wasteful strife,
 No want to good, no faction to deplore,
 The Slave escapes the perils of the poor . . .

And yet the life, so unassailed by care,
 So blest with moderate work, with ample fare,
 With all the good the pauper Hireling needs,
 The happier Slave on each plantation leads;
 Safe from harassing doubts and annual fears,
 He dreads no famine, in unfruitful years;
 If harvest fail from inauspicious skies,
 The Master's providence his food supplies;
 No paupers perish here for want of bread,
 Or lingering live, by foreign bounty fed;
 No exiled trains of homeless peasants go,
 In distant climes, to tell their tales of woe;
 Far other fortune, free from care and strife,
 For work, or bread, attends the Negro's life,
 And Christian Slaves may challenge as their own,
 The blessings claimed in fabled states alone—
 The cabin home, not comfortless, though rude,
 Light daily labour, and abundant food,
 The sturdy health, that temperate habits yield,
 The cheerful song, that rings in every field,
 The long, loud laugh, that freemen seldom share,
 Heaven's boon to bosoms unapproached by care,
 And boisterous jest and humour unrefined,
 That leave, though rough, no painful sting behind;
 While, nestling near, to bless their humble lot,
 Warm social joys surround the Negro's cot,
 The evening dance its merriment imparts,
 Love, with his rapture, fills their youthful hearts,
 And placid age, the task of labour done,
 Enjoys the summer shade, the winter's sun,
 And, as through life no pauper want he knows,
 Laments no poorhouse penance as its close . . .

Other wealthy slaveholders from Mississippi and Alabama told Willcox they believed slavery or the Constitution must fall before the war would end. They were right. What concerned Willcox, however, was that there were three hundred thousand new graves in our land, prematurely filled by the “unholy rebellion.”⁹⁶ How are dead men to be returned to their families? Willcox’s harsh voice suddenly turned soft as he spoke passionately to his adversaries:

Oh, my friends, our country as it was is passed away forever, but in the agony of her travail she will give us a more perfect heritage of liberty and security. She will rise from her labor a dignified matron, and a more loving and watchful mother. We may save the Constitution as it is, but not the country as it was, with treason gnawing at her vitals. When this agony is passed no cause of danger or relapse must be permitted to remain. The blood now being shed must drown the force which causes it to flow. The Union men of this nation are determined to transmit the National Union and Constitution unimpaired to their children, or they will transmit to their children’s children, and to their posterity, an eternal war.⁹⁷

Because the Union was determined to win the war, Willcox shifted his tone of voice claiming Yankee forces would crush rebel forces using any available means to accomplish the task, including arming the blacks. “Rebel chiefs” were outraged at this Union prospect, but Willcox reminded the crowd that the South was the “first to call the negro into military service.”⁹⁸ Now that the weapons were being reversed, rebels referred to Yankee tactics as barbarous. In the major’s opinion, however, the only evidence of barbarity found in using black soldiers was that rebels were utilizing them as well. He reasoned that what will kill a Yankee ought to be equally fatal to a rebel. After all, a “rebel dead is one traitor less.”⁹⁹

Willcox immediately pulled back and tamed his tongue as he told the people of Tennessee that there had never been a civil war or national war since the creation of the world that had been conducted so gently. Persons and property have been respected on

the part of the national armies and there has been no display of personal animosity. To support his assertion, he shared the following story:

During our advance on Corinth, when the place was invested and the hostile lines approached each other, a Confederate captain, who was on picket with his company, discovered some Union soldiers opposite, and called out to the Federal captain, "What are you doing there?" "I am on picket," was the reply. "Do you shoot pickets?" was asked. "No," said the Yankee. "Let us talk then," said the Confederate, and both parties advanced to a rail fence midway between them, and leaning upon the fence the two captains shook hands, and stood talking with each other for half an hour, while their men played poker together on the fence rails. The two parties then separated in the same spirit of personal amity in which they had met.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, the rebellion originated with deceit and perjury and the war rested on their premise. When Willcox asked Confederate soldiers to give him the meaning behind the war they responded: "It is the rich man's war and the poor man's fight."¹⁰¹ Willcox proposed that wily traitors convinced good and honest men that their homes were endangered and it was their patriotic duty to defend the land of their birth. Rebel leaders resorted to every means to drive men into the fields. ". . . every passion and bias of the mind was appealed to, to inveigle young men into the army. And when once secured by military chains, they were as unscrupulously used by those who had deceived them, as they had been in being taken from their homes."¹⁰² The Union would eventually emerge as the victor, boasted Willcox, and he was willing to sacrifice his life, if necessary, to secure that victory.

On 19 February 1863, approximately a month and a half before he gave his Southern speech, he had sent a letter to Zachariah Chandler, a U. S. Senator from Michigan and Radical Republican who worked staunchly for the protection of slaves. (Radical Republicans were an extreme faction that came into being during the war to advocate immediate emancipation of the slaves. They believed that "slavery poisoned

the whole situation. It was the issue that could not be compromised, the issue that made men so angry they did not want to compromise.”¹⁰³ In Willcox’s letter to the senator he boldly asserted that it was not in the field alone but in Congressional Halls that people looked for promptness, determination, and action. Willcox knew the government was firmly rooted in the affections of the people, even those who were in a state of rebellion, so he addressed Chandler in the following manner:

Threatened as we are with open violence on the one hand and subtle political dissention on the other, duty calls for action, energetic and determined. The weapons needed are the Constitution with its guarantees and protection to the well disposed, and the sword for traitors. The Constitution is broad enough to protect liberty but too narrow to shield treason. It is the star which gives oppressed humanity hope and it is an instrument exemplification of the capacity of man for self government. With this Chart to direct us and the sword of national life in the right hand of a mighty and determined people to enforce its obligations, this rebellion will soon be crushed and America’s atmosphere be renovated from the taint of treason.¹⁰⁴

Willcox reminded Chandler that it was the Rebels of the South who had abandoned reason, rushed into war, and submerged the entire nation in blood. The only road back to peace was to crush the South. After citing several examples from history to support his case, he confidently proclaimed that “war is the argument of force of violence: the rebels resorted to it and force must be met with force, violence with violence, and he wins who strikes the hardest.”¹⁰⁵ Willcox did not end his argument here, but continued to strike home his point that we should use “long guns and short guns, large guns and small guns, steamboats and sail boats, gunboats and flatboats, white men and black men, red men and brown men, in fact anything that can kill, crush, subdue, or conquer this rebellion in the shortest time.”¹⁰⁶

Time and again Willcox saw the jaws of death snatch away the life of a young, unsuspecting soldier. He wanted to end the war so the nation could once again live in

peace. Speaking from personal experience, he testified to the men and women of Henderson County that he “saw a whole brigade thrown en masse upon our batteries. The men moved steadily and splendidly to their work, but were doomed to destruction. The engines of death opened upon them, and in a moment they passed into eternity; in a moment that mass of living valor was crushed into horrible deformity and lay a bleeding corpse.”¹⁰⁷ Major Willcox recalled many dying soldiers who cursed the men who brought this calamity upon their country and forced them into treason. Many soldiers on the bloody battlefield told him they had been drawn into the army against their better judgment; they felt they had been cruelly deceived.

Deception implies a misleading of truth or a belief in something that is not true. To be deceived, soldiers would have misunderstood the ramifications of war. Were Confederate soldiers deceived? Were they misinformed? Did they fail to realize that war results in pain, loneliness, death, and destruction? How about Union troops? What about immigrants who came to America to fight for the Union? Over 160,000 Irish born soldiers fought in the Union army during the Civil War.¹⁰⁸ Men from the Irish Brigade were found wherever the fighting was thickest. Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, and other battles gave them a second-to-none reputation for their bravery, gallantry, and strict discipline. Their reputation cost them dearly, however, and the Irish Brigade alone lost 4,000 killed and wounded.

Impoverished New York City Irishmen viewed the war as a “poor man’s fight” and rioted against conscription in July 1863. Irish priests who feared depopulation of their parishes denounced emigration from their pulpits. Irish newspapers carried horror stories depicting the fate of Irish soldiers fighting for the Union. *Paddy’s Lamentation*

(Irish lyrics set to a traditional melody) reflects anti-war sentiment. The powerful words to the song are as follows:

And its by the hush, Me Boys
 I'm sure that's to hold your noise
 And listen to poor Paddy's lamentation
 I was by hunger pressed
 And by poverty distressed
 When I took the thought I'd leave the Irish Nation

So I sold me horse and plow
 Sold me sheep, me pigs, and sow
 Me little farm of land and I we parted
 And me sweetheart Biddy Magee
 I'm afeared I'll never see
 For I left her on that mornin' quite broken hearted

And here's to you Boys, do take my advice
 To Americay I'll have you not be comin'
 For there's nothin' here but war
 Where the murderin' cannons roar
 And I wish I was back home
 In dear old Ireland

So me and a hundred more
 To Americay sailed o'er
 Our fortunes to be makin' we were thinkin'
 But when we landed in Yankee-Land
 They stuck a musket in me hands
 Sayin' "Paddy, you must go and fight for Lincoln."

General Meagher to us said
 "If you get shot, or lose your leg
 Every mother's son of you will get a pension"
 But in the war I lost my leg
 And all I got's a wooden peg
 Oh, Me Boys, it is the truth to you I mention
 Now I'd have thought meself in luck
 To be fed an Indian buck
 And in Ireland the land that I delight in
 But by the Devil I do say
 Curse Americay
 For I'm sure I've had enough of your hard fightin',¹⁰⁹

Even though *Paddy's Lamentation* warned young Irishmen to stay home, they kept coming to America and enlisting to fight. Why? Were they deceived into believing that America was an asylum for the oppressed and downtrodden of all lands? Was Willcox deceived into believing that America offered freedom to all? Yes. America was not perfect, egalitarianism did not grace its walls, but the Constitution offered hope that one day equality would reign. As long as the hope of perfection existed, the reality of equality could be justified. A perfectionist mentality held by many Americans, such as Willcox, would become a principle of Transcendental thought.

Unfortunately, however, in the midst of the fighting, the American Civil War delivered only death and deception to many who were seeking life and security. Willcox's sixth point called Southerners to stop the death and deception and unite, once again, with their Northern brothers. He contended that the success of the existing government was the only hope of the Southern people and passionately moved into his final point:

Fellow-citizens, take your noble State from the slough of treason into which she has fallen, and place her again amidst that splendid assemblage of sister States that made our country great. Like an erring, but misguided sister, she will be welcomed back to the family circle which she so hastily and inconsiderably deserted. Rescue her from the thieves and ruffians who have seduced her, before the last vestige of virtue has departed, and while there is yet room for her at the national fireside. In loyalty there is security, peace and happiness; in persistent treason there is death.¹¹⁰

Only two years earlier, American citizens felt a sense of pride greater than the citizens of Rome. Now the nation burned with shame because treason has disgraced it. Willcox insisted that the act of rebellion and treason had left the South with only one hope; they needed to let the smoke of the battle die so the Union could once again rest in peace. Willcox clung to the hope that war would pass and peace would prevail. "When

she (our country) emerges from this cloud of civil war, and her skirts are cleansed from the bloodstains of the strife, our country will appear clothed in robes of liberty and virtue, and resume her place among nations of the earth, more powerful and glorious than her most sanguine friends dared to hope.”¹¹¹

To many Americans, such as Willcox, human bondage seemed incompatible with the ideology of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. To others, the right of the state to decide what was constitutionally correct superseded federal imposition. To complicate matters, the line between one cognitive approach and the other was not clearly defined by the geographical boundaries of North and South. Nevertheless, Willcox predicted that one day soon the banner of freedom (an emblem of mutual peace, liberty, and union) would fly in the clear sky above and the American people would wonder at the madness of this hour of war.

Willcox was right. It has been one hundred and thirty six years since the Civil War ended and Americans continue to wonder at the madness of the hour. Perhaps, however, as Willcox confessed to his wife, as bad and barbarous as war appears, “there is a pleasant excitement about it.”¹¹²

*CHAPTER FOUR***THE MADNESS OF THE HOUR**

Private George W. Butterfield, long-time friend of Major Willcox, was a brave soldier from Shelby, Michigan, who enlisted with the Twenty-second Infantry Regiment at the age of nineteen. With the enemy encamped on every side, someone needed to step forward with the flag, mount the platform, and signal (through a coded message done by waving the flag in a specific pattern) the next station for reinforcements. This act of bravery was almost certain to bring death. When no one volunteered to meet the challenge, a private suggested to Colonel Baird that he draw straws. Straws were drawn, and Butterfield won the honor. Butterfield, who would turn twenty years old on the following day, was new to the battlefield. In fact, Willcox noted that it was nearly the first time that Butterfield had even heard bullets whistling through the air. Nevertheless, he took the platform and performed his chosen duty. Willcox describes the miraculous event as follows:

Taking off his coat and seizing the flag, he mounted the platform and was greeted with a storm of lead. But he waved his flag, received a response, then signaled the message, though before its conclusion a battery had joined the musketry fire and was hurling shells at the station. As the last words were delivered by the waving flag, the messenger fell in a faint from the platform and was picked up by his comrades as dead. An examination showed, however, that his body was unscathed. Four bullets had passed through his trousers, two through his sleeve, and the top of his cap was shot away. The flag used by him was struck by 142 bullets. It was more than a week before Comrade Butterfield recovered from the nervous shock he had sustained, but he was consoled by the fact that he had delivered the message without a single mistake, and that timely help arrived and drove Forrest from the field. Even the enemy recognized the heroism of the deed, through the vigorous expression of a prisoner who was brought in during the evening, and whose first words were, "I want to see the man who waved that flag. He is the bravest man this side of hell."¹¹³

Unfortunately, many brave soldiers were not as lucky as Butterfield; they answered the call of death prematurely; one such man was Oscar Bingham.

Just shy of one month after Willcox delivered his powerful speech to the people of Henderson County his brother-in-law, Oscar Bingham, was not only killed, but murdered. The Advertiser and Tribune carried the following article concerning the death of Willcox's brother-in-law:

The Third Michigan Cavalry, encamped in this vicinity, has recently missed one of its most efficient officers, Lieutenant O. H. Bingham, of Co. B, under circumstances which have led his friends to believe that he was murdered by a gang of guerrillas. Major Willcox, brother-in-law of Bingham, went out with an escort of two companies and searched the country in every direction for his whereabouts. All white residents denied knowing anything about the situation but several colored men described a party of seven guerrillas and two Union soldiers as prisoners. Major Willcox traced the footsteps about a mile and a half through the woods across low and wet places but could not trace the steps any further due to the rain that had fallen. Further inquiry revealed that Bingham was seen with the guerrillas ten miles from the tracks Willcox had traced. That Bingham was murdered was conjectured from the fact that Negroes in that area heard shots being fired.¹¹⁴

Major Willcox tragically lost a member of his family, but in the face of loneliness, death, and uncertainty, he found a sense of family through the camaraderie of fellow soldiers. Their common purpose bound them together in a spirit of love and patriotic hope. Sometimes their patriotic spirit spilled onto civilians and vice versa. This was certainly the case with Willcox and his men from the Third Michigan Cavalry.

The Michigan Third was raised under the superintendence of Colonel Kellogg at Grand Rapids and had 1163 officers and men listed on its muster rolls.¹¹⁵ Their first engagement with the Confederates took place at New Madrid on 13 March 1862 where it commenced a "most credible career, giving rebels a lively idea what Michigan cavalry were composed of, and what they might expect from them in the future."¹¹⁶ The Detroit

Free Press stated: “Probably no regiment of cavalry has ever been raised on the continent whose preliminary instruction has surpassed the Michigan Third.”¹¹⁷

The Third Michigan Cavalry fought in twenty-two battles from 13 March 1862 until 24 December 1863. With the exception of three battles, Willcox and the Third Michigan Cavalry spent their time fighting in Mississippi. Only three of the twenty-two battles lasted for more than one day. The longest battle took place in Missouri, Island No. 10, and lasted twenty-four days. Following is a table which supplies a list of the Third Michigan Cavalry’s actual service in the American Civil War:

TABLE 1

New Madrid	Mo.	Mar. 13	1862
Siege of Island No. 10	Mo.	Mar. 14 - April 7	1862
Farmington	Miss.	May 5	1862
Corinth	Miss.	May 10 - May 31	1862
Spangler’s Mills	Miss.	July 26	1862
Bay Springs	Miss.	Sept. 10	1862
Iuka	Miss.	Sept. 19	1862
Corinth	Miss.	Oct. 3 - Oct. 4	1862
Hatchie	Miss.	Oct. 6	1862
Holly Springs	Miss.	Nov. 7	1862
Hudsonville	Miss.	Nov. 14	1862
Oxford	Miss.	Dec. 2	1862
Coffeerville	Miss.	Dec. 5	1862
Brownsville	Miss.	Jan. 14	1863
Clifton	Miss.	Feb. 10	1863
Panolo	Miss.	July 20	1863
Grenada	Miss.	Oct. 13	1863
Ripley	Miss.	Nov. 29	1863
Orizaba	Miss.	Nov. 30	1863
Ellistown	Miss.	Dec. 3	1863
Purdy	Miss.	Dec. 22	1863
Jack’s Creek	Tenn.	Dec. 24	1863

Table 1: Battles of the Third Michigan Cavalry
Source: *Third Michigan Cavalry Civil War 1861-1865, vol. 33*

The Third Michigan Cavalry was involved in several skirmishes, but because they were stationed in the western theatre, they were not engaged in the larger, well-known battles of the war. The larger battles were all held in the eastern theatre, close to Washington, D. C. and Richmond. Nevertheless, the western theater played a major role in the outcome of the war, for when the Confederate army lost their strength in the western theater, the tide began to turn in the east.

Willcox loved being part of the cavalry, but the life of the cavalryman was not all charm and grandeur. As author Stephen Starr notes, “Glamor [*sic*] was the word for the cavalry when the Civil War broke out.”¹¹⁸ Nineteenth century writers such as Sir Walter Scott and Walt Whitman often created this romantic outlook. With few exceptions, the “literature--certainly the popular literature--on the Union cavalry has been of the ‘Boots and Saddles’ variety, permeated, as were the cavalry recruits in the early months of the war, with the supposed glamor [*sic*] of the cavalry service.”¹¹⁹ The “Cavalry Crossing A Ford,” written by Walt Whitman, exemplifies romanticized literature.

Cavalry Crossing A Ford

A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
 They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun,--
 hark to the musical clank,
 Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering
 stop to drink,
 Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person, a
 picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
 Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just
 entering the ford--while,
 Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
 the guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind.¹²⁰

Few of these literary visions could be translated into actual realities. The *Time Life History of the Civil War* explains how important it was for the cavalry trooper to learn that his ability to fight, perhaps to even survive, depended on his horse. Each man was “his own groom and veterinarian and maintained his own tack. He made certain that saddle and bridle fit properly to keep his mount free of sores, sprains, and even internal injuries.”¹²¹ Cavalrymen were exposed to hardship, hunger, pain, fear, primitive medical care, disease, disability, and death just like the rest of the soldiers. They often went hungry, but they always made sure their horses were fed.¹²² The cavalry were responsible for reconnaissance, protecting the infantry, acting as military police, attacking the enemy, and initiating raids. A regiment of cavalry performs “incessant and arduous service during a campaign, but its reconnaissance’s and scouts, its skirmishes and charges, are only a part of the main army and are seldom mentioned with the importance they deserve.”¹²³ During active service with his regiment, Willcox traveled more than twenty thousand miles through the Southern states. In 1861 he took a body of men into the army and in four years rode on horseback over and through eight “Confederate” States.¹²⁴ Major Willcox disclosed a lighter side of his personal cavalry experience through the following story:

It was a rainy day and both parties were patrolling, with rubber ponchos over their uniforms. Noticing a group of mounted men in the road a little in advance and observing one man nearest us with a carbine resting on his saddle bow and a skirt of gray under his poncho I clasped my spurs to my horse, jumped to his side and with my revolver to his face, exclaimed, What regiment Sir: “The 11th Mississippi. Don’t shoot I am a captain and a mason: I surrender.” I entertained him at supper, and while we were gathered around the campfire he took occasion to say “The South would never give up; they would die in the last ditch.” Captain, that is well for you to say, as anxious as you were this afternoon to surrender.¹²⁵

Willcox himself belonged to the Masons. In fact, he was promoted to Master Mason on 18 December 1863, during the war. Ironically, this group of men was devoted to the ideals of peace and equality. Shortly after the war, in a speech Willcox delivered entitled “Mason Hospitality” he boasted that the Masonic Order was “worldwide, and its charity as boundless as the sea! It is a part of civilisation [*sic*] and in theory at least as lovable as the home which it protects.”¹²⁶ Willcox informed his listeners that a good Mason makes a good husband, citizen, neighbor, and friend. When Willcox met the Confederate Mason during the war he must have felt a special bonding to this Masonic brother.

Cavalrymen would also have felt a special bonding to each other for they were “daily sent on dangerous scouting duty, either separately or by detachments.”¹²⁷ On these scoutings they often secured information that was of vital importance to the commanding General. A cavalry unit was the “most difficult force to organize, arm, equip, and instruct at the outbreak of the war”¹²⁸ A country weak in trained cavalry and utterly unprepared for war experienced numerous delays in receiving equipment for newly organized cavalry regiments. When saddles were not available, the cavalry would ride on the horses’ backs. Sometimes they would even drill bareback.¹²⁹ Many of the Union cavalry officers were “extremely precise in the matter of dress, paying equal attention to their horses’ equipment, in order to set a good example to their men.”¹³⁰ At the outset of the war, the volunteer cavalrymen were required to supply their own horses with an allowance given for food and maintenance. When Willcox’s horse was shot out from under him and killed during a skirmish, the government agreed to pay him two hundred dollars for his loss. On the morning of 29 November 1863 the Third Regiment Michigan

Cavalry was “attacked by the enemy near Ripley Mississippi and in the action which ensued a large horse, the Private property of L. G. Willcox Major 3d Regiment Mich. cavalry was shot and killed by the enemy, and was left on the field and that the said horse was of the value of Two Hundred Dollars.”¹³¹ Nevertheless, on 3 September 1870, five years after the war was over, Willcox was still writing the Treasury Department in an attempt to collect the money he had never received for his horse.¹³² As far as is known, he never received payment.

Author and historian, W. C. Storricks, remarks that the “cavalry has been well named ‘the eye of the army,’ since without it all movements are made in the dark.”¹³³ These movements, however, were dangerous and exhausting to the men who rode for hours and sometimes days without a break. The horses often became exhausted as well, for the cavalymen had to carry all their belongings with them. In addition to carrying his weapons, which were very heavy, a cavalymen had to carry a huge box of cartridges and another of percussion caps. From his shoulder he would carry a haversack filled with rations, and to this was attached not only a tin cup but a coffeepot. He would also carry a “canteen of water, a nose-bag of corn, a shelter tent, a lariat and picket, pin, extra horseshoes and nails, a curry-comb and brush, a set of gun-tools and cleaning materials, and saddlebags filled with extra clothing.”¹³⁴ A cavalymen had to add to these articles of equipment an “overcoat, extra blankets, additional boots, and the odds and ends of luxuries, which the recruit is wont to stow away surreptitiously, the result was a lame and broken-down horse, hundreds of troopers afoot, and the whole cavalry service rendered inefficient and almost useless.”¹³⁵

Fighting cavalymen were portrayed as living glamorous and exciting lives of luxury during the war, but, according to author and historian Stephen Starr, “no one studying the accounts of the Civil War as experienced by the officers and troopers of the Union cavalry . . . can fail to be impressed, and at times moved by their dedication and patriotism.”¹³⁶ On the other hand, living through dangers and hardships brought a twisted degree of excitement.

A soldier finds excitement generated in fighting, fighting yields itself to victory or defeat, and the result, positive or negative, offers a form of recognition. Willcox brought victorious recognition to his regiment many times. A good example is found in the words he penned to his wife on 27 May 1862:

The Michigan Third Cavalry has a great reputation in the army. We are thought to be perfect Tigers. Gen. Pope says it is the best regiment of cavalry in the army. Wherever we have been told to go we have gone and they think we are afraid of nothing. An infantry officer asked one of my men the other day to what regiment he belonged. To the Michigan Third Cavalry was the reply. Well, said the officer, "The Michigan Third are either very brave men or fools for you go anywhere without thought of danger." The officer was mistaken; we think of danger but have resolved to face it.¹³⁷

One of Willcox's greatest joys was knowing that his men loved him and would die for him and/or their country if need be. He proudly claimed that the Third Michigan Cavalry had gained a “better reputation within the past month than it ever had. It has done more service, riding and fighting, since I have been in command than it ever did with Mintz or Mojers. Officers and men all say that I have done more and better than any officer who has commanded the regiment. Officers and men would fight for me to their death.”¹³⁸

His tone of voice may sound arrogant, but men would fight for Willcox because he treated them with love and respect. An example of Willcox's devotion to his men can

be seen in the following story. One day while some soldiers from the Third Michigan Cavalry were playing quoits, Willcox, who was still a captain, asked if he could join the fun. (Quoits is a game where players throw rings at a peg in the ground in order to circle it or come the closest. It is much like the game of horseshoes.) When Colonel John K. Mizner observed Captain Willcox engaging in activity with the men he asked if he could have a word with him. Mizner addressed Willcox rather sternly by saying: "Captain Willcox, I noticed that you are pitching quoits with those enlisted men. That will not do sir." Willcox saluted the colonel and firmly replied, "Colonel Mizner, I enlisted those men. They are from as good of families as there are in Michigan. There (are) men in those ranks who are worth more property than your family and mine and besides, I think I am old enough to determine the character of my associates. I have an uncle, a cousin and a brother-in-law with those enlisted men." Willcox saluted the colonel again and returned to pitching quoits and never heard any more about it.¹³⁹ Willcox loved and respected his men and was willing to stand up for them even in the face of his superiors.

Another instance in which Willcox showed his ability to stand strong and exhibit superior leadership was in a case involving Sam Shaw, a redheaded Irish boy who was approximately twenty years old. One day, after an extremely tense encounter with the enemy, Shaw wandered back to a Union infantry camp, got his hands on some whiskey, and became very drunk. He was arrested and put under the guard of two soldiers who sent him back to Willcox with orders to tie him up. Of course Willcox knew that no one had the right to tell him what to do as a commanding officer, but he did not communicate this information to Shaw. Instead, he gave him some fatherly advice and told him he was sorry that such a good soldier had acted in such an ill manner. Willcox instructed Shaw

to go to his quarters and tie himself up for one hour. The order alone almost sobered up Shaw. Did Willcox have any more trouble with Sam Shaw? “Not a bit. Had I tied him up I would have spoiled a good soldier.”¹⁴⁰ Speaking in general about himself on the issue of discipline and punishment, Willcox remarked: “I never during my connection with the 3d cavalry either as Captain, or as Commander of the regiment or as Major punished a man or even sent a man to the guard house. I never used an ungentle expression or had one used to me by a soldier.”¹⁴¹

In return for his loving but stern leadership, Willcox received love and admiration from his men. Proof of this is evidenced in the words penned by Captain D. T. Wellington. The captain wrote a letter to the men of the Third Michigan Cavalry who were gathering for a war reunion. Wellington referred to Willcox as a staunch man, a scholar, and a first-rate patriot whose hand and brain guided the Union men. “He was a commander, a comrade, friend and brother. The integrity of the man, the ability of the scholar, the courage of the soldier; these prerogatives were all his, and no man of his company, or battalion ever had cause to feel anything but respect and love for him.”¹⁴² He also wrote a personal letter to Willcox saying; "I have always remembered you with great love. You were to me an example and a help in those days of peril through which we passed and to me, today, they seem to have been more of peril to souls of men, than to their bodies. The integrity of your character, Sir; sustained unbrokenly, gave more to the cause of humanity than can ever see it so.”¹⁴³

Wellington was not the only admirer of Willcox. On 1 October 1911 Willcox received a letter from H. W. Marsh that expressed similar sentiments: “There are many of the comrades of the 3d Mich. Cav. I hold in pleasant remembrance, but not one that I

feel so kindly towards, and whose memory I shall cherish to my dying day, (and I hope beyond,) as I do for you.”¹⁴⁴

Henry Cooper, another soldier who served under Willcox, expressed words of admiration and respect in a letter he submitted to the Evening Post. “I was in Major Willcox’s regiment, the Third Michigan Cavalry and always found him a true friend to the men in the ranks and to the poor colored people of the South. He was always just and kind to the men in his regiment and behaved like a gentlemen always. He was trusted by the commanding officers and always picked out for any expedition which required courage, good sense and prudent management.”¹⁴⁵

Forty-nine years after the war ended, in 1914, the Third Michigan Cavalry gathered to reminiscence and renew old acquaintances. Among the first to arrive at the gathering was the “old commander, Major Willcox, . . . the way the Old Boy’s flocked around him and the glad welcome they gave him for three days was of that heartfelt esteem, respect and love that went to show that no officer of any regiment ever excelled him in the heartfelt love of every man in the regiment without exception.”¹⁴⁶ Willcox received from his men what he gave—love and respect.

Receiving recognition, reveling in the spirit of patriotism, and engaging in actual battle may bring a twisted excitement to war, but experiencing hunger, sleepless nights, loneliness, and lost lives through sickness and battle offers little excitement to the weary soldier. Willcox, who was continuously on and off the sick list, often mentioned to his wife how little there was to eat. On one occasion he and his Company had been on picket duty for four days and four nights straight; they had been sleeping on the ground without beds and were in sight of the Rebels at all times. When they finally returned to camp,

tired and sick, they had bad water and little food to eat.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, when Willcox reported that his health was good and he could eat almost anything, he was unable to find anything to eat.¹⁴⁸

Willcox, who felt the hard physical effects of the cavalry, had to leave the battlefield from time to time in order to recuperate. On 17 January 1863 he requested twenty days leave of absence to transact important private-business and recover from his health problems, Willcox had become impaired because of constant riding and exposure to hardship.¹⁴⁹ Sometimes Willcox's requests were granted and at other times they were denied; Willcox never quite knew why. This particular request was denied.

In March 1864 Willcox suffered a severe attack of inflammatory rheumatism and for several weeks was not expected to live. This particular request for sick leave was granted. The ailing major took leave on 2 April 1864 but failed to make a full recovery. The effects of the illness forced Major Lyman G. Willcox to resign from Union service on 12 September 1864. His letter of resignation follows:

I have the honor herewith to tender my resignation as major in the 3d Regiment Michigan Cavalry U.S.A. unconditional and immediate on account of sickness as per accompanying medical certificate. My health has become impaired by exposure and long continued service in the field. So much so that in the last six months I have been able to perform but two months light duty. I feel constrained in justice to myself and the government to tender my resignation knowing as I do that recovery is impossible while I remain in the service. I certify on honor that I am not indebted to the United States on any account whatever and that I am not responsible for any government property except what I am prepared to turn over to the proper officer on the acceptance of my resignation.¹⁵⁰

As the proceeding table indicates, Willcox was not the only soldier who was forced to take an early retirement. Three hundred and eighteen other men also had to resign from the Third Michigan Cavalry for disability reasons.

TABLE 2

Total enrollment	2264
Killed in action	24
Died of wounds in action	9
Died in Confederate prisons	8
Died of disease	333
Discharged for disability	319

Table 2: Third Michigan Cavalry Records
 Source: Record Third Michigan Cavalry



Photo by Peter Glendinning

Figure 7: Third Michigan Cavalry Flag
 Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center

EPILOGUE

Following an early retirement from active Civil War duty, Willcox returned to Detroit and resumed his law practice. His constant struggle to stay healthy prompted his physicians to suggest he try another climate. In 1866, therefore, he moved to Traverse City, Michigan, where he was appointed Register of U.S. Land Office. While in Traverse City he opened a law office with Edwin Pratt; they called their business “Willcox & Pratt.” He began a newspaper, which he and his partner Elvin Sprague called The Traverse Bay Eagle, and he was elected Prosecuting Attorney for Antrim and Emmet County.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, he continued to suffer with poor health. When his term as Register ended he moved his family to California with the hope that a change in climate would result in a change of health.

California did not prove to be the answer to his ills, so after only a few months on the coast he returned to Chicago, Illinois, and became a writer for an agricultural newspaper, The Western Rural. With no marked improvement living in Chicago and writing for a newspaper Willcox decided to change jobs and location once again. In 1871 he purchased a fruit farm in Centralia, Illinois, and in his spare time he became an active writer and speaker on various topics such as horticulture, fruit farming, politics, law, education, women’s issues, and mining. In addition to writing and speaking, he became director of schools, organized a public library, and worked on behalf of coal miners. In 1879 he moved back to Pontiac, Michigan, and joined his brother Elliot in the practice of law.¹⁵²

While in Pontiac, he edited the Pontiac Gazette and spoke at political functions throughout the county and state. A prominent Republican of the area, E. B. Fenton, credits Willcox with bringing the area over to the Republican side.¹⁵³ Fenton speculates that this accomplishment earned him the appointment of Receiver of Public Monies at Detroit, Michigan; a position he held for four years. In 1885 he became editor of the Bay City Tribune and in 1886 he was Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for Bay County.

In 1887 a devoted and patriotic Willcox continued to struggle with the aftermath of war. The disabled Union veteran moved restlessly from job to job and position to position struggling to find an occupation and environment that would accommodate his ailing body. It is difficult to determine if Willcox's restless spirit derived from mental or physical attributes, but either way, the promising lawyer was left fatigued from the conflict and on 9 September 1918 his steadfast voice was silenced. The Wisdom of Death called Major Lyman George Willcox home. His life passed, but his patriotic fervor and national devotion remain strong as an emblem of American nationalism and patriotism.



Figure 8: Lyman G. Willcox, 1864
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center

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²¹*Record of Service of Michigan Volunteers in the Civil War: 1861-1865*, Geo. H. Brown (Kalamazoo: Ihling Bros. and Everard Stationers, vol. 33), 2. (The report should have read Major Lyman G. Willcox because he was promoted to that position on 1 October 1862.)

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²⁹Ibid., 18.

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³¹Ibid., 18.

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³³John C. Chalberg, *The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints* (California: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1995), 12

³⁴Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 115

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⁴⁰Ibid., 217-219.

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⁴⁴Ibid., 22.

⁴⁵Ibid., 22.

⁴⁶Ibid., 33-34.

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⁵⁵Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 59.

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⁵⁷Idem, *The South in War Times: A Paper Read April 15, 1894*, 23-24.

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⁵⁹Ibid., 24.

⁶⁰Ibid., 25.

⁶¹Ibid., 25.

⁶²Ibid., 25.

⁶³Ibid., 26.

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⁶⁷Ibid., 127.

⁶⁸Ibid., 129.

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⁹⁷Ibid., 32.

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¹⁰⁰Ibid., 34.

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¹⁵³Ibid.



AUSTIN BLAIR,
GOVERNOR IN AND OVER THE STATE OF MICHIGAN.

To all who shall see these Presents, Greeting:

Know Ye, That reposing special trust and confidence in the Patriotism, Valor, Ability and Fidelity of *Lyman G. Willcox*, In the Name and by the Authority of the People of the State of Michigan, I do hereby appoint him *Captain* *Third* Regiment, *Cavalry* Brigade, *1st* Division, in the MILITIA of said State; to rank as such from the *Seventh* day of *September* eighteen hundred and sixty-*One*. He is therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the duties of *Captain* by doing and performing all things thereunto belonging.

And I do strictly Charge and Require all Officers and Soldiers under his command to be obedient to his orders as *Captain*. And he is to observe and follow such orders and directions, from time to time, as he shall receive from the President of the United States of America, from the Governor of the State of Michigan, or the General or other Superior Officers set over him, according to the rules and discipline of War. This COMMISSION to continue in force during the pleasure of the Governor of the State of Michigan, for the time being.

In Testimony Whereof, I have caused these Letters to be made Patent, and the Great Seal of the State to be hereunto affixed.

Given under my Hand, at Lansing, this *Seventh* day of *September* in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-*One* and of the Independence of the United States of America, the eighty *Fifth*.

BY THE GOVERNOR.

Austin Blair

Lyman G. Willcox
Secretary of State.

Amos Robertson
Adjutant and Quarter-Master General.

Figure 9: Appointment of Lyman G. Willcox to Captain of Third Michigan Cavalry
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint



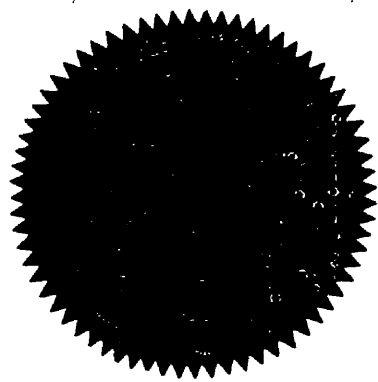
To all who shall see these Presents, Greeting:

Know Ye, That, reposing special trust and confidence in the Patriotism, Valor, Ability and Fidelity of **Lyman G. Willcox** in the name and by the authority of the People of the State of Michigan, I do hereby appoint him **Major** in the **Third** Regiment, Michigan Cavalry **VOLUNTEERS** to rank as such from the **First** day of **October** 1862. He is therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the duties of such office by doing and performing all things thereto belonging.

And I do strictly charge and Require all Officers and Soldiers under his command to be obedient to his orders. And he is to observe and follow such orders and directions, from time to time, as he shall receive from the **PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**, from the **GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF MICHIGAN**, or the **GENERAL** or other **SUPERIOR OFFICERS** set over him, according to the rules and discipline of War. This commission to continue in force during the pleasure of the Governor of the State of Michigan, for the time being.

In Testimony Whereof, I have caused these Letters to be made patent, and the **GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE** to be hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand, at Lansing this **Eighth** day of **November** in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and **sixty two** and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty **seventh**.



By the Governor:

Austin Blair

G. A. H. ... Secretary of State.

M. W. Robertson Adjutant General.

Figure 10: Promotion of Lyman G. Willcox to Major of Third Michigan Cavalry
Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint

Grand Army of the Republic



To Comrade: Lyman G. Willcox
 Greeting
 Reposing special trust and confidence in your Fidelity and Ability and in your Zeal
 for the interests of the Grand Army of the Republic and devotion to its principles
 I do by virtue of the power and authority vested hereby appoint you
Patrolie Instructor Post
#19 Dept of Mich G. A. R.

And I authorize and empower you to enter upon and perform the duties
 of said Office in accordance with the Rules and Regulations of the
 Grand Army of the Republic and for so doing this shall be your
 Commission



Given at the Headquarters of the Department at Lansing this 2 day of May 1876

Fayette T. West
 Major General
 Department Commander

Figure 11: Appointment of Lyman G. Willcox to the Grand Army of the Republic
 Source: Genesee Historical Collections Center, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint

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