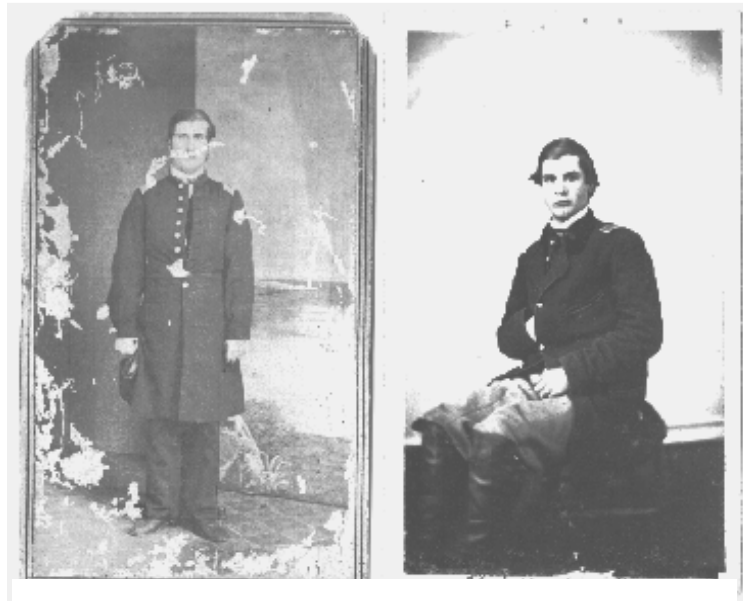


The Story of Captain Will



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This is the story of a man named Will - a hero in the Civil War who went on to do other great things. He was also a Mason. Not only is this a story of our hero's accomplishments during the Civil War and his accolades in later life, but it is also a story of why he became a Mason.

Will was born on January 29, 1843 in a small frame house in Niles, Ohio. He was the seventh of eight children and spent his first nine years in Niles and then moved to Poland, Ohio. Will was schooled in public schools until the age of 17, when he entered Allegheny College at Meadville, Pennsylvania. Despite his love of schooling and his gift of oration, Will had to drop out of college in his junior year for health reasons. When his health recovered he was unable to return to school because his family could no longer afford for him to go. Will decided that he would have to find work, so for awhile he taught children at the Kerr District School in Poland, Ohio, and then spent time as a clerk in the town post office. Then in 1861 President Abraham Lincoln made a plea for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the Confederate rebellion. Will heard his calling and readily signed up.

Will said later in life that he joined the Union Army not out of passion of the moment, but after careful consideration. He said *"I came to a deliberate conclusion and have never been sorry for it"*. In a speech that he made after the war was over about all of the volunteers, he stated, *"They enlisted in the army with no expectation of promotion, not for the paltry pittance of pay, not for fame or popular applause, they entered the army moved by the highest and purest motives of passion, that no harm might befall the Republic."*

On June 6, 1861, Will and his cousin, also known as Will, marched with 84 other members of the Poland Guards to a train station in Youngstown for their trip to Columbus, Ohio. It was reported that the volunteers were sent off with the accompaniment of a full brass band and some 700 well-wishers dressed in their Sunday best in a cavalcade of wagons that stretched for more than two miles. They arrived at Fort Jackson four miles east of Columbus, on June 11 and on June 13 the Poland Guards, including our subject Will and his cousin Will, were mustered into the United States Army for a term of three years, unless discharged sooner. The mustering officer was very concerned about Will. At age 18 he was the youngest member of the Poland Guards, and being only five-foot-six and weighing barely 125 pounds, with a very pale complexion, he looked much younger than that. But after assurances from some of his fellow volunteers, Will raised his right hand and was sworn into the Army as a private.

Dozens of volunteer companies were forming all over the state of Ohio and streaming into Fort Jackson to be mustered into the United States Army. Ten of these companies, including the Poland

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Guards, were formed into a new regiment, called the Ohio 23rd. In this new regiment, the Poland Guards lost their name and were simply called Company E. The Ohio 23rd was the very first regiment to be formed for three-years service. Up until that time all other regiments were formed for just three-months service. It was also the first regiment to have its officers appointed by the governor and not elected by the men of the regiment. Although there was a great outcry from the men about not getting to elect their officers, it turns out that the Ohio 23rd was to become one of the most famous regiments of the war. The officer's ranks of the Ohio 23rd produced two Governors of Ohio, two Lieutenant Governors of Ohio, four United States Congressmen, one United States Senator, a Supreme Court Justice and two United States Presidents. That's what I would call a pretty good staff of officers.

After a month at Camp Jackson, which would later be renamed Camp Chase, the soldiers of the Ohio 23rd still had not been issued uniforms. Some of the men had shown up in their oldest clothes, expecting to be issued uniforms on their first day. After a month these poor guys were walking around with no shirts and blankets wrapped around their waists. Finally, just after July 10, a shipment of clothing arrived, but it turned out to be only undershirts and underwear. To protest the lack of uniforms, the soldiers of the Ohio 23rd mustered out onto the parade ground the next morning wearing only what they had been issued. Private Will and his fellow soldiers spent the next several days drilling on the parade grounds wearing nothing but their unmentionables. On July 16 the men's blue uniforms finally arrived and by the 23rd they were issued knapsacks, cartridge belts and muskets.

By the end of July the Ohio 23rd was placed on a train that made its way to western Virginia. Once there, the troops marched for several days to various locations until they arrived at a place called Carnifex Ferry. This was to be the place of Private Will's very first taste of battle. Although during the battle at Carnifex Ferry Private Will was in the thick of things, he never really engaged the enemy, but after the battle was over he saw what the carnage of battle can do when he and other members of his company were assigned to clean the battlefield. Their job was to strip the dead Confederate soldiers of their clothes and accoutrements and then unceremoniously bury them in mass graves.

Three days after the battle at Carnifex Ferry an event took place that would end up having a profound effect on Private Will. It was an innocuous event at the time, but as our story will show, it changed the course of Will's life, and would eventually propel him into fame and glory, as well as Masonry. One of the officers in Private Will's Ohio 23rd was a major by the name of Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes, of course, would become the 19th President of the United States in 1876. Major Hayes took a liking to Private Will and after the battle had a hand in transferring him to a new position, that of clerk to the Quartermaster of the brigade. Major Hayes told Private Will's commanding officer, Colonel Scammon, to "keep an eye on that young man; there is something to him".

By mid November, Private will and the brigade that included the Ohio 23rd had marched to Fayetteville in western Virginia. This would be the brigade's winter headquarters. The Quartermaster's Department established its headquarters in Fayetteville's business district. Private Will's work as a clerk freed him from the building of fortifications, the repair of roads and bridges, and the inspections,

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reviews and drills that occupied the other soldiers. What spare time he had he spent reading or participating in debates that the men held to amuse themselves. From November to March, the Ohio 23rd saw very little action, just a few skirmishes with Confederate guerrillas.

Each infantry regiment in the Union Army had a commissary sergeant who was responsible for seeing that the regiment was supplied with rations. The commissary sergeant for the Ohio 23rd was a soldier named Humphrey, who became very ill in December and was unable to fulfill his duties. Private Will took over the duties as commissary sergeant and on March 1, 1862, was officially promoted to that position. As commissary sergeant, Will's duties included going to the brigade commissary every day or every other day and procuring rations for the 1,000 men in his regiment. As one soldier put it, "Come rain or sunshine, weekday or Sabbath, when the time comes for rations, they have to be drawn and dealt." One of the benefits of being commissary sergeant was that it was a job that was performed behind the lines, free from fighting in battles, drills, and guard duty. The position also had its privileges, such as having a horse to ride, a wagon to carry your personal belongings, and plenty of food to eat. But supplying soldiers with rations during battle sometimes even placed those who worked behind the lines in harm's way, as our Sergeant Will would soon discover.

Between March and August of 1862, the Ohio 23rd spent a lot of time on the road, marching from one place to another. In August the regiment made a stop in Washington, DC, where Sergeant Will had the opportunity to see President Abraham Lincoln up close during a speech. But the specter of war soon roused the troops from their Washington vacation and they were on the march again, this time to a place called Flat Top Mountain, where a major battle would take place. The Union Army routed the Confederates at Flat Top Mountain and pursued them to a place called Sharpsburg, Maryland. During the early morning hours of September 17, the battle of Antietam began.

The men of the Ohio 23rd and several other regiments had left for the battlefield at 2:00 in the morning without having had breakfast. By 2:00 pm, with the battle in full rage, the men of the 23rd, who were waiting by Antietam Creek for orders to advance, were exhausted and famished. They had not packed any rations in their haversacks and had not had anything to eat in almost 20 hours. Sergeant Will was determined to feed his men before they were given the order to advance on Sharpsburg, so without asking permission he obtained a fellow volunteer and they loaded a wagon with cooked meat, pork and beans, crackers and coffee. Sergeant Will and his companion set off to get rations to his men right in the middle of the Battle of Antietam. The pair was stopped twice by superior officers who ordered that



Sergeant Will turn back, but both times he and his companion waited until the officer had left and then continued on. The advance of Sergeant Will and his commissary wagon was described by several soldiers who witnessed it firsthand. They first had to crash through a Confederate blockade, which they did at full speed while having the back end of the wagon shot away by a small

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cannon. They continued on at breakneck speed through a terrific fire of musketry and artillery that seemed as though it would annihilate everything within range. The wagon finally arrived in the midst of the half-famished regiment. Sergeant Will reported to the commanding officer, and then he began issuing rations to the men. One soldier who had been severely wounded in the battle was heard to say, "God bless the lad!" After the war Sergeant Will said that was the highest reward he could possibly receive.

The commanding officer who Will had reported to was so impressed with his actions that he recommended him for a promotion. He wrote to Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes that Sergeant Will "showed ability and energy of the first class, delivering supplies under fire in two instances with perfect method and coolness..." The actions of Sergeant Will were so dramatic that two memorials to that event were erected: a bronze tablet showing Sergeant Will bringing rations to the soldiers at Antietam was erected in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1908, and a thirty-three foot monument was placed at the foot of the Burnside Bridge on the Antietam Battlefield to commemorate his valiant act in 1903. In addition to the monuments, in 1896 friends of Sergeant Will sought to have him awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. President Grover Cleveland and Major General Nelson Miles recommended the award, but when our hero heard about it he declined and asked that no further action be taken.

In November of 1862, Sergeant Will was sent home to Ohio for recruiting duty. While he was there he met with Colonel Hayes, who promptly promoted him to second lieutenant at the tender age of 19. After two months of recruiting, Lieutenant Will was ordered back to the front, where he was appointed by Colonel Hayes to be the brigade's new assistant quartermaster. Unlike the post of commissary sergeant, where Will was only concerned with supplying rations, his new job required him to be responsible for issuing clothing, equipment, tents, stoves, saddles, musical instruments, tools, wagons, medicine, horses, mules, feed and dozens of other items. On March 30, 1863, just five months after his promotion to second lieutenant, Will was promoted again, this time to first lieutenant. One soldier commented on Lieutenant Will's promotion, "He deserved it. Watch him, and some day you will see him promoted to General."

In the fall of 1863 Lieutenant Will re-enlisted for another three years or until sooner discharged. Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes had taken quite a shine to the young Lieutenant and asked him to be his aid de camp in addition to the regimental quartermaster. Throughout 1863 and most of 1864 Lieutenant Will travelled up and down Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and parts of Ohio with the Hayes brigade, taking part in several skirmishes and some major battles. In January 1864 Lieutenant Will was again given a new assignment, the last he would receive during the war: he was promoted to adjutant for Colonel Hayes. As the Colonel's adjutant, he rarely left the future president's side, and once again our Lieutenant would distinguish himself in the heat of battle.

In July of 1864 Hayes brigade, one of several brigades of the First Division, was chasing General Early's Confederate forces through Virginia. When the armies met at a small town called Kernstown, Early's army was routing the Union forces. Colonel Hayes ordered his brigade to retreat when he

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discovered that one of his regiments had been left behind in an orchard, so he directed Lieutenant Will to go back into the orchard and bring the soldiers out. Lieutenant Will galloped off at full speed through open fields, over fences and across ditches, while a well-directed fire from the enemy poured around him. At one point the Lieutenant was completely enveloped by the smoke of an exploding shell, and all those witnessing this heroic ride feared he had been lost. But Lieutenant Will emerged from the smoke and reached the orchard unscathed. After he had gathered up as many of the regiment's soldiers as he could, they retreated through the woods and caught up with the Hayes brigade in Winchester. One day after the battle of Kernstown, Will was promoted to captain. A fellow soldier is recorded as having said that "he did not begrudge Will the promotion, and plenty of us thought he ought to be promoted to a major or colonel."

At about the same time that Will was promoted to captain, General George Crook was promoted to brevet major general in charge of a large portion of the Union Army. General Crook had heard much about Captain Will and asked to have him transferred to his Division as his adjutant. Captain Will served as General Crook's adjutant until the end of the Civil War and saw action in many large battles in the waning months of the war.

On September 19, 1864, Crook's army was pursuing the confederates through Virginia. They had stopped at a place just east of Winchester, Virginia, called Opequon. This was not to be Captain Will's last battle of the war, but it would be the battle that would introduce our hero to Freemasonry. The Battle of Opequon was huge and fought over several days. During the battle, Captain Will had at least one horse shot out from under him, and at one point, he and an aide came face to face with an entire company of Confederate cavalry. In their hasty retreat Captain Will's aide was killed and Will barely escaped with his life.

When the battle was over and the Confederates had retreated up the Shenandoah Valley, Captain Will had the very important task of recording the names of the deceased, the injured and those taken prisoner. While performing this duty, he accompanied a surgeon to the prison in Winchester where Confederate prisoners were being treated for their injuries and readied for transport to Union detention centers. After passing the guard at the main gate, Captain Will observed a Union doctor walking among the Confederate prisoners, shaking their hands, stroking their shoulders, and smiling as he spoke to them. He then observed the doctor take a large sum of cash from his pocket and distribute it to many of the prisoners. Captain Will was shocked. He had never before seen such behavior toward the enemy. Captain Will accompanied this doctor back to the Union camp and along the way had the following conversation with him that the Captain recorded in memoirs later in his life:

I asked him *"Did you know these men or ever see them before?"* "No", replied the doctor, *"I have never seen them before."* *"But how did you know them and why did you give them money?"* I asked. *"They are Masons, and we Masons have a way of finding that out."* I asked if he ever expected to be paid back. The doctor replied *"If they are ever able to pay it back, they will. But it makes no*

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difference to me; they are brother Masons in trouble, and I am only doing my duty.” I said to myself, “If that is Masonry, I will take some of it myself.”

Captain Will did not have the opportunity to act on his desire to join Masonry until May of 1865 when the war was over and the Union Army was being divided up and sent in different directions. Before leaving for Washington, DC, for a grand review of the army by President Johnson, Captain Will went back to Winchester and visited Hiram Lodge #21 to begin his journey.

Now, before we get to how Captain Will became a Mason and the remainder of his story, let me take a moment to tell you about Hiram Lodge #21, because Captain Will’s initiation into that lodge and the lodge’s operation itself, were hastened into being by Major General Philip Sheridan and, of all people, a Master Mason from Montpelier, Vermont.

Hiram Lodge in Winchester was chartered in 1768 and at the time was known as Winchester Lodge #12. Between the time of its charter and the outbreak of the Civil War, the lodge was in and out of operation, depending on the number of members it had. When the Civil War broke out, the lodge stopped meeting because the town of Winchester was alternately occupied by Union or Confederate armies no less than six times. In the fall of 1864, the Union Army, for the third time, was occupying Winchester. Members of the lodge pleaded with General Sheridan to allow the lodge to open so it could raise Master Masons from the army. Sheridan denied the request. The Postmaster General of the United States, Montgomery Blair, a Masonic brother, sent a letter to General Sheridan extolling the virtues of Freemasonry and imploring the general to allow the lodge to resume communications. Still, Sheridan refused. Then, in November, General Sheridan’s personal physician, Dr. C. H. Allen, a Past Master from Aurora Lodge in Montpelier, Vermont, personally asked for the lodge to be reopened. On the assurances of Dr. Allen that he would attend every meeting to make sure that all was above board, General Sheridan agreed and the lodge resumed meeting. Between November 1864 and June 1865, Hiram Lodge raised 231 candidates, 207 of them from the occupying army. One of these, of course, was our own Captain Will.

Captain Will was initiated as an Entered Apprentice on May 1, 1865, passed to the degree of a Fellow Craft on May 2nd, and raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason on May 3rd. The Worshipful Master who raised Captain Will to a Master Mason was a Confederate army officer, recently released from a Union prison, named John Reed.

In June of 1865 Captain Will was given a ceremonial promotion to Brevet Major. The promotion was recommended by General Crook and endorsed by Major General Sheridan, who stated it was given for “gallant and meritorious service during the campaign in West Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley.” Will so cherished the promotion to Brevet Major that for the remainder of his life he would always ask to be addressed as Major. This is quite startling, considering that after the war was over, Major Will was elected to the United States House of Representatives and later became governor of Ohio, and finally, in 1896, he was elected President of the United States. Yes, the hero of our story, Captain Will, is none other than President William J. McKinley, the 25th President of the United States.

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In July of 1865, Major Will was released from the army and returned to Canton, Ohio, where he became a lawyer. In 1867 he demitted from Hiram Lodge in Virginia and joined Canton Masonic Lodge #60, where he was very active in all Masonic activities. He later joined Eagle Masonic Lodge #431 of Canton, which after his death in 1901 changed its name to William McKinley Masonic Lodge. In 1871 McKinley married Ida Saxton. They had two daughters, one who died in infancy, the other dying when she was only five years old.



In 1877 McKinley was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served for 14 years. In 1892 he was elected Governor of Ohio, where he served two terms, and then in 1896 he was elected President of the United States. While governor and president, McKinley asked that his closest associates refer to him as Major McKinley rather than Governor McKinley or Mr. President.

McKinley, as with most Masonic Presidents, did not have a lot of time to devote to Freemasonry, but he did review two Knights Templar parades in Washington, DC, made a visit in 1899 to his mother Lodge, Hiram Lodge #21 in Winchester, Virginia, where he visited with the Brothers of the Lodge and signed the guestbook. Probably the most extraordinary thing McKinley did as a Masonic President was his participation in the Masonic Centennial observance of the death of President George Washington at Mount Vernon where he gave a very passionate speech.

On September 6, 1901, six months after being sworn in for his second term, McKinley was visiting the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, when he was shot by an assassin. McKinley lived for eight days but died at 11:00 am on September 14. There were three separate funeral ceremonies for him, the first in Buffalo, and the second in Washington, DC, where the slain president lay in state in the Capitol rotunda on September 17. Members of the Five Commanderies of the Knights Templar escorted the president's body from the White House to the Capitol. He was then taken by train to Canton, Ohio, where he was buried in Willow Lawn Cemetery on September 19 with more than 2000 Knights Templar attending in full uniform. The Knights remained in the cemetery long after the ceremony was over, singing hymns.

It is extraordinary how the compassion and generosity of a Brother Mason moved this hardened Civil War hero to join the fraternity where he served nobly for more than 36 years. McKinley was the 8th Mason to become President, and the second Masonic President to be assassinated while in office. His heroic accomplishments on the battle fields of the Civil War and his love for this country will always endear him to his many brothers of the Masonic Fraternity.

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PICTURE CREDITS

- Cover: Left photo; William McKinley as a staff officer. From the *McKinley Memorial Library and Museum, Niles, Ohio*. Right photo; Second Lieutenant William McKinley. From the *Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center*.
- Frontispiece photo: Private William McKinley. From *the Stark County Historical Society, Canton, Ohio*.
- Sketch on page 4: McKinley Serving Hot Coffee To His Regiment In the Thickest of the Battle at Antietam. From *Lives of McKinley and Hobart*.

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