

Brevet Major General
Frederic Winthrop:
“The Union’s Last Martyr”

By Daniel E Russell
City Historian
City of Glen Cove, New York

One of the highest ranking officers from Glen Cove to serve in the Civil War was Frederic Winthrop. He would rise from a lowly private, carrying his regiment’s flag at the Battle of Bull Run to a Brevet Brigadier General by war’s end. Killed in combat at the age of 25 just days before Lee surrendered at Appomattox, he would be posthumously promoted to Brevet Major General two years later.

Born in 1839, Frederic (sometimes spelled Frederick) Winthrop was the fourth of six sons and two daughters of Thomas Charles Winthrop and Georgiana Maria Kane. His father was a wealthy New York City “commission merchant” and investor who divided his time between an elegant house on 14th Street in Manhattan and a large estate which covered several hundred acres in northern Glen Cove, just west of the causeway leading to East and West Islands. His grandfather, Francis Bayard Winthrop, helped to create the prototype of the New York Stock Exchange, and was a director of the Bank of the United States, the first federal banking institution in the US.

Frederic was directly descended from John Winthrop, the first colonial governor of Massachusetts. The Winthrops were also related to Rev. Benjamin Woolsey, the clergyman who owned an enormous estate in the north of the present-day City of Glen Cove. (Since he acquired the lands from his wife’s family, Woolsey named his estate “Dosoris,” a contraction of the Latin words “dos uxoris” meaning “wife’s dowry.”)

The Winthrop family appears to have enjoyed their summer idylls in Glen Cove. Even as war clouds began to gather on the horizon, the Glen Cove Gazette reported that two of Thomas’ sons (probably his two youngest sons, Grenville and Eugene) caught 261 “snapping mackerel” (today called “snappers”, actually young bluefish) in Dosoris Pond in a single day.

At the age of 16, Frederic Winthrop joined the banking establishment of Denniston, Wood & Company as a clerk. It was a position designed to provide valuable training for a young man in the practical aspects of finance and investing. It was clear that the family intended young Frederic to follow in his



Frederic Winthrop in an undated photograph. He is wearing the shoulder boards bearing a single star for a Brigadier General, indicating this photograph was taken between 10 November 1864 and his death on 1 April 1865.

father's – and grandfather's – footsteps as a leader in the mercantile community.

On 19 April, 1861, Winthrop was invited to a party given to honor Major Robert Anderson, the intrepid commander of Fort Sumter. After South Carolina seceded from the Union, Anderson had successfully defended the besieged fort, located at the mouth of Charleston Harbor, from Confederate militia for four months before dwindling supplies forced him to evacuate his command by sea. Spurred by patriotic fervor, Winthrop joined several of the other young men present to enlist that very day in the 71st Regiment of the New York State Militia, which was about to be mobilized for three months combat duty in Virginia. His cousin, Theodore Woolsey Winthrop, was already a Major with the 7th New York Regiment and had embarked for Washington that very same day.

It is one of the many ironies of the Civil War that Theodore Winthrop would be shot dead at the Battle of Big Bethel, the first Union officer killed during one of the very first land battles of the Civil War, and his cousin Frederic Winthrop would be one of the last officers killed in the war, at the Battle of Five

Forks.

On 21 April, 1861, Private Frederic Winthrop of Company F, 71st Regiment, New York State Militia left New York with his regiment bound for the nation's capitol. They arrived at Washington on 27 April, and were temporarily quartered aboard a steamboat until barracks were available for them at the Navy Yard. After a month of training, elements of the 71st Regiment participated in the occupation of Alexandria, Virginia and skirmishes at Aquia Creek and Matthias Point; it is not certain whether Winthrop was present at those engagements, but it is known that he was present at the first Battle of Bull Run on 21 July 1861. While the battle was a major Union defeat which placed the nation's capitol in jeopardy of being invaded by the Confederate army, Colonel (later General) Ambrose Burnside would note the regiment's "bravery and steadiness... both in the field and during the retreat." Frederic Winthrop served in the battle as a regimental color bearer, and was "honorably mentioned for his distinguished bravery and gallantry on the field that day".

The 71st Regiment returned to New York City immediately following the battle. Winthrop was not satisfied with the prospect of remaining in a militia regiment, serving only short tours of combat duty. He managed to secure an appointment as a Captain in the 12th Regiment of United States Infantry, then stationed at Fort Hamilton in New York City. Winthrop spent the better part of the winter recruiting men for his company and training them. On 21 April 1862, the regiment arrived in Virginia ready to participate in the Peninsula Campaign, the first major Union offensive of the Civil War. During this campaign, Winthrop saw combat at the Siege of Yorktown (from 5 April to 4 May), the Battle of Gaine's Mill (27 June), and the Battle of Malvern Hill (1 July). He also fought at the Second Battle of Bull Run (28 August to 30 August), and the Battle of Fredericksburg (11 December to 15 December) during the same year.

Winthrop contracted typhoid fever while fighting the the miasmatic swamps of the Chickahominy River valley of Virginia. Disease was a far greater risk to soldiers than an enemy bullet, claiming an estimated 224,000 Union lives compared to 110,000 killed in combat. The 12th's regimental surgeon ordered him to recuperate (probably in Washington DC). However, word reached Winthrop that the Confederate army had invaded Pennsylvania, and a battle was to take place at Gettysburg. He boarded the evening train to Gettysburg, and reached his regiment in time to participate in the famous battle.

In the late summer of 1863, young Winthrop was promoted to Acting Assistant Adjutant-General to the staff of General Romeyn B Ayres, commander of the Second Division of Fifth Corps. His appointment to serve as a staff officer did not stop Winthrop from actively leading his unit in combat, and in November he participated in the Battles of Rappahanock Station on 7 November 1863 and Mine Run during 27 November to 2 December, 1863.

Winthrop fought in the Battle of the Wilderness in May, 1864. For his distinguished service in that battle, he was promoted to Colonel in command of the the 5th New York Infantry. This regiment, once commanded by both Brevet Brigadier



During the Civil War, carte-de-visite photographs of popular Union officers and statesmen were mass produced for sale to the public - much like today's baseball cards. This card of Frederic Winthrop bears the hand-written inscription "Genl Winthrop, the union's last martyr."

General Hiram Duryea and his brother Colonel George Duryea of Glen Cove, had been mustered out of service but was reformed by many of its veteran soldiers in the fall of 1863. Winthrop would also participate in the Battles of Spottsylvania, North Anna and Bethesda Church during the same month.

The troops under Winthrop's command devoted much of the second half of 1864 to destroying Confederate railroad lines in the Virginia countryside. It was dangerous work, frequently exposing the soldiers to heavy enemy fire, but the destruction of the rail lines prevented Confederate replacement troops and supplies from reaching the front lines.

Winthrop was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General on 10 November, 1864 "for brave, constant and efficient services in the battles and marches of the campaign before Richmond and Petersburg, VA". Brevet promotion was designed to enable the military to quickly promote officers who had demonstrated exceptional skill and bravery in combat to a higher rank, sidestepping the often lengthy process of promotion through standard army channels. Winthrop was given command of the First Brigade, Second Division, Fifth Corps.

Frederic Winthrop was killed in action on 1 April, 1865, at the Battle of Five Forks. Fifth Corps, under the overall command of General Phil Sheridan, was sent to attack a well de-

fended Confederate position behind a raised breastwork constructed of logs and earth. Several Union assaults were repulsed. Winthrop, on horseback, rallied his troops for one final assault. As he rode along the breastwork, he was shot through the left lung and immediately fell.

George Townsend, one of the youngest and most widely read of the newspaper correspondents covering the battles of the Civil War, was present at the Battle of Five Forks and recorded Winthrop's death:

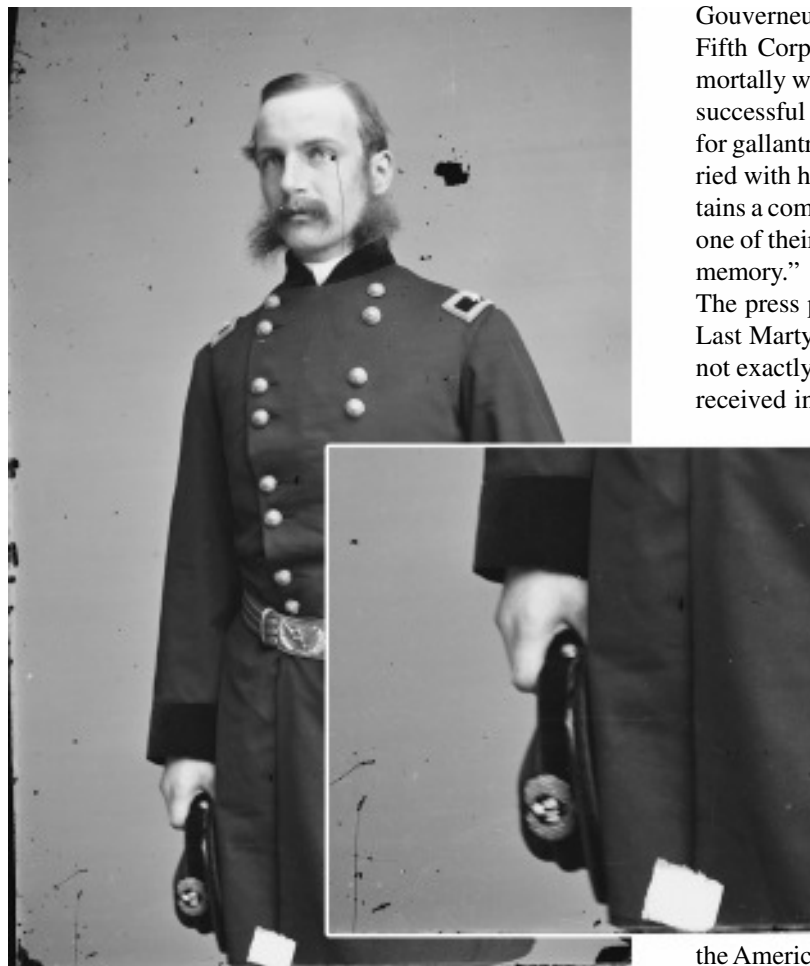
...his men, who loved him, gathered around and took him tenderly to the rear, where he died before the stretcher on which he lay could be deposited beside the meeting-house door. On the way from the field to the hospital he wandered in mind at times, crying out, "Captain Weaver how is that line? Has the attack succeeded?". When he had been resuscitated for a pause he said: "Doctor, I am done for." His last words were: "Straighten the line!" And he died peacefully. He was twenty-seven years of age. I had talked with him before going into action, as he sat at the side of General Ayres, and was permitted by the guard of honor to uncover his face and look upon it. He was pale and beautiful, marble rather than corpse, and the uniform cut away from his bosom showed how white and fresh was the body, so pulseless now."

On being told of Winthrop's death, General Charles Griffin said "This victory is not worth Winthrop's life." Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, who was in overall command of Fifth Corps, would write 15 years later that Winthrop "was mortally wounded at the head of his command while making a successful assault. His conduct had always been distinguished for gallantry of action and coolness of thought, and no one carried with him more of the confidence and inspiration that sustains a command in trying scenes. His countrymen have lost no one of their soldiers who more deserves a lasting place in their memory."

The press pronounced Frederic Winthrop to be "The Union's Last Martyr," the last heroic casualty of the Civil War. It was not exactly true, as at least two other generals died of wounds received in battle after Winthrop's death and before Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House just a few days later. On 8 April, 1865 the Glen Cove Gazette published the announcement of the death of Brevet Brigadier General Frederic Winthrop:

Death of Gen. Winthrop - Brevet Brig. Gen. Fred Winthrop, son of Thos. C Winthrop, Esq. of this village, was killed in the recent battles near Petersburg. He was a private in the 71st regiment at Bull Run, and steadily won his way up by meritorious conduct on many battle fields. At the time of his death he was but 25 years old.

Due to bureaucratic bungling, Winthrop's body did not reach Washington DC until 8 April, 1865. It was then sent north to New York City by train. Funeral services were arranged for the afternoon of 12 April. His body was placed in a "handsome rosewood coffin, lined with lead, and wrapped in the American flag, upon which were laid wreaths of flowers of the purest white." From his parent's elegant home on 14th Street, Winthrop's coffin was escorted by the 71st, 12th and 22nd Regiments down lower Broadway, which had been cleared of all



A damaged negative of Winthrop - clearly taken at the same photo session as the previous image - provides details of his hat insignia: the letters US surmounted by a star, surrounded in a wreath. This was not a standard hat insignia for the era.

vehicles by the New York City police. His pallbearers were four Brigadier Generals, three Colonels, and a Captain.

The New York Times noted that “a more imposing cortege has rarely been seen on Broadway, and the silent crowds which uncovered as it mournfully moved along regarded with affectionate interest the enflagged coffin...” After services at Trinity Church, his body was placed in a vault which had been temporarily loaned by the DePeyster family until permanent arrangements could be made. The regiments which had escorted his body formed up at attention in the street outside of the church and fired three volleys in Winthrop’s honor. The soldiers then marched away at quickstep.

Despite his death, Winthrop’s meteoric rise from private to general was not over. On 10 April, 1867 Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sent a memorandum to President Andrew Johnson, asking the President to nominate Winthrop to be posthumously promoted brevet Major General “for gallant conduct at the battle of Five Forks, Virginia.” The promotion was to be back-dated to 1 April, 1865, the day Winthrop was killed. A promotion of this sort was exceptionally rare in the United States military at that time, and indicates the high regard in which Winthrop was held. Johnson forwarded the request to the Committee on Military Affairs and the Militia, who quickly recommended to the Senate that it be approved. On 13 April, the United States Senate bestowed the rank of Major General on Frederic Winthrop.

Winthrop’s father passed away in 1873. The Winthrop estate was one of the key parcels of land purchased by Standard Oil magnate Charles Pratt to create the enormous enclave he developed for himself and his children in Glen Cove. The Winthrop mansion would continue to be used by members of the Pratt family for several decades, first as a temporary home for several of Pratt’s sons as they oversaw the construction of their own mansions, and then as a guest house.

Several days after the announcement of Winthrop’s death, poet Frank C Moore was moved to pen a poem entitled “Straighten The Line.” It was published first in Harper’s Weekly, one of the most widely read weekly newspapers providing detailed coverage of battles of the Civil War. The title comes from Winthrop’s last words, and like much of the poetry of the era, it describes the general’s death in florid prose.

Straighten The Line

The roar of the cannon and the din of the fight
Had been heard all day and through the night,
And sabres bare and bayonets bright
Were holding fearful sway.

The hospital’s groaning tent was filled,
The field was covered with maimed and killed,
And many a strong man’s heart was chilled
At the terrible sights that day.

The wavering lines surged to and fro,
As many noble head, laid low,
Told the desperate strait of the foe –
Made even hope decline;
When the youthful form of a warrior brave

Was seen at the front of that vital wave –
“Come, boys! Rally your land to save!
Straighten the line!”

Shoulder to shoulder – rank to rank –
They charged again the foeman’s flank
O’er hill and vale, o’er ditch and bank,
O’er log and tangled vine.
The stubborn foe dismayed has fled,
The ground lies strewn with rebel dead,
And blood like water has been shed
Before that fatal line.

The battle is over, the victory won;
Like tired reapers, whose task is done,
The men come back through the beating sun –
No more their bayonets shine.
Blood has dimmed the burnished steel,
Stained with blood is each patriot heel;
Like birds of prey anon they wheel,
And again they “straighten the line.”

Back to the hospital’s precincts dread,
Among the wounded and over the dead,
Soldiers four, with low-bowed head
Pick their gloomy way.
A burden precious between is borne,
With covered face and garments torn,
They knew that a nation had cause to mourn
When their chieftain fell that day.

The hospital door is reached at last –
“Uncover his face. He’s going fast.
Every moment seems his last.
Will he give no parting sign?”
See! He lifts his weary frame;
His eyes are bright with fever’s flame;
He shouts: “Now, save your country’s name –
Straighten the line!”

Brothers, his manly spirit has flown;
May we never forget the light it has shown,
And when, ‘mid future dangers thrown,
We invoke the aid Divine,
Though wavering impulse should halt our band,
Shoulder to shoulder we” bear a hand,
And remembering WINTHROP’S last command,
We’ll “straighten the line.”