

Oliver Otis Howard and Lincoln Memorial University

Oliver Otis Howard was born on Nov. 8, 1830, at Leeds, Maine. He attended Bowdoin College from 1846 to 1850, where he developed the basic tenets of his character, becoming a very pious student who conspicuously refrained from drinking, swearing, and smoking. Immediately after graduating from Bowdoin, Howard entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and graduated fourth in his class in 1854. Soon after, he married his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Ann Wait, and taught mathematics at West Point for several years. Howard considered studying for the Episcopalian ministry, but eventually decided to make the army his career.

He threw himself into the Union war effort after the firing on Fort Sumter, obtaining a commission as colonel of the 3rd Maine and leading a brigade at the battle of First Bull Run on July 21, 1861. Howard was promoted to brigadier general in the fall of 1861 and was wounded at the battle of Fair Oaks on June 1, 1862. Two bullets slammed into his right arm, forcing surgeons to amputate it. Howard informed Lizzie the day after in a letter that "I am on my way with only my left arm." He maintained his sense of humor, joking with Maj. Gen. Philip Kearney, who had lost his left arm in the Mexican War, that they would need to buy only one pair of gloves between the two of them from now on.

Howard recuperated for three months, the only time during the war that he was off duty, and returned to the Army of the Potomac by September, 1862. He commanded a division of the 2nd Corps at the battle of Antietam, September 17, and led it in the terrible attacks against a strong Confederate position in the battle of Fredericksburg, on December 13. Both battles were very costly and Howard performed well, achieving promotion to major general at the end of the year.

But his next assignment, command of the 11th Corps, nearly ended in disaster. His largely German unit held the right wing of Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville, and therefore was targeted by Stonewall Jackson's flank attack on the evening of May 2, 1863. Howard had neglected to properly fortify his position and was caught by surprise, his corps was routed and barely recovered in time to prevent a worst catastrophe. The battle wound up as a dismal Union defeat.

Yet Howard survived this blow to his career. Newspaper criticism led Hooker to send Howard to Washington to explain the battle to Lincoln, to correct false impressions. Howard's interview with the president was the first time they had ever met. The young general, only 32 years old, pled his case, but there was no real need to do so, for neither Lincoln or any other authority thought of replacing him. Howard had some political connections, but they were not important in saving his

career. The key was that no one thought he was willfully negligent or incompetent. They recognized that it was an error of inexperience, and that Howard's qualities were such that the war effort needed him. Yet, Howard began an acquaintance with Lincoln that eventually would play a role in the founding of this university.

Soon after, Howard performed a significant role in winning the battle of Gettysburg. While the 11th Corps was severely beaten in a large fight north of town on July 1, 1863, he established a strong defensive position on the high ground south of town that became the main Union line for the remaining two days of that engagement.

In August, 1863, while returning to his command after a leave of absence to visit his family in Maine, Howard stopped in Washington to see Lincoln a second time, apparently about the possibility of taking a different command outside the Army of the Potomac. He had no luck in this, but the next month he left the Potomac army anyway when his 11th Corps and the 12th Corps were ordered to reinforce the Union Army of the Cumberland, which had just been defeated at the battle of Chickamauga and was under siege in Chattanooga, the Gate City to the Deep South.

Just before leaving for Tennessee, Howard visited Lincoln for the third and last time, on September 27, 1863. In a letter to his wife, Howard described how Lincoln

gave him a map of the mountain area of E. Tennessee, “a very nice coast survey map,” he called it. Apparently he made no mention in this letter of any conversation with Lincoln regarding the loyal people of East Tennessee.

Howard performed well while leading the 11th Corps in the battle of Chattanooga, November 24-25, 1863, an engagement which opened the way for future operations against Atlanta. Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman would lead that massive effort in the spring of 1864, commanding a group of three Union field armies.

Sherman gave Howard command of the 4th Corps in the Army of the Cumberland. Howard did very well during this campaign, and soon confirmed Sherman’s high opinion of his abilities. Sherman grew to trust and rely on Howard a great deal.

When Sherman’s command drew close to Atlanta in mid-summer, the greatest battle of the campaign took place on July 22. In it, Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, commander of the Army of the Tennessee, was killed. Choosing a replacement for him was Sherman’s most important personnel decision of the campaign. After several days of deliberation, he picked Howard for the prestigious assignment. It was a controversial move, for Howard was a relative newcomer to the Western armies and this was the army that Grant had commanded at Shiloh and Vicksburg,

and Sherman had commanded at Chattanooga. In picking Howard, Sherman bypassed Maj. Gen. John A. Logan, the charismatic leader of the 15th Corps, who had ably led the army on July 22 when McPherson was shot.

Sherman felt compelled to explain why he had chosen Howard, and it depended on two factors. First, Howard's character--he was widely known, and admired by most of his colleagues, for his Christian behavior. Howard was a stickler for proper conduct, even in the army camps, and not only abstained from alcohol but lectured anyone near him who did not. He also chastised subordinates for using foul language, and he was, by all accounts, a genuinely good man. Although Sherman sometimes teased Howard by deliberately swearing up a storm in his presence until Howard became so frustrated that he had to leave, knowing that the young general would not lecture his superior officer, it is clear that Sherman liked and admired him for his character.

Second, Sherman knew that Howard was not a great combat leader, that his tactical skills were modest at best. But he also knew that Howard was a superb administrator. Command of the Army of the Tennessee involved not only leading men into battle but, even more importantly, knowing how to administer a large military organization of 80,000 men and hundreds of guns. He knew Logan had scant ability in this regard.

In short, despite the damage suffered his reputation at Chancellorsville, Howard persevered and continued to grow as a commander, continued to live his life according to his principles, and continued to be the dutiful subordinate willing to do almost anything necessary to put down the rebellion. All of this paid off when he was named commander of the Army of the Tennessee on July 28, 1864. He possessed the unusual record of holding major commands in all three of the main field armies of the Union during the Civil War. While Howard probably did not have the ability to hold independent command, with responsibility to plan and execute a campaign on his own, he never had the need to do this. Sherman was with him for the rest of the war and directed strategy, Howard simply put it into operation. He ended the war as a member of Sherman's elite inner circle.

At war's end, Howard was chosen to serve his country by heading the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, more popularly known as the Freedman's Bureau, on May 15, 1865. The Bureau's responsibility was to aid the four million newly freed slaves, a gargantuan task to perform with meager resources and a public that was not yet aware of the immense human need to educate, train, and protect the freed slave in the face of white Southern resentment and racial fear. His reputation as a "Christian soldier" and his administrative ability led to this assignment.

Howard threw himself into the work, protecting labor contracts, examining working conditions, and serving as an ombudsman for African-Americans. He used the resources of the Bureau to build schools and pay teacher's salaries. Howard spent more than 5 million dollars on education as head of the Bureau during its existence, from 1865 through 1871. He promoted African-American education on all levels, especially elementary level training, but also vocational training and teacher training on the secondary level. He gave some support to the few African-American colleges of the South.

Howard would become famous for playing a key role in the founding of two colleges, the first was Howard University. It was created by a group of Congregational Church members in 1869 to train African American ministers. Howard was among the founding group, and the school was named in his honor. He was primarily responsible for locating land for the campus within the boundaries of the District of Columbia, using Bureau money to help pay for the land. Howard also sustained the college financially for many years, offering to Howard University a similar role that he would play in the founding of Lincoln Memorial University almost 30 years later.

Following his tenure as head of the Freedman's Bureau, Howard was shifted to duties on the western frontier, where he had ample opportunity to observe the plight

of Native-Americans during the era of rapid American expansion into the Great Plains and the Southwest. Again, he performed well, mixing humanitarian concern for his enemy with able administration of far-flung resources across a developing land.

Howard finally retired from the army on November 8, 1894, at age sixty-four, after forty-four years of continuous military service.

His active life was not over by any means. His lecture agent, Cyrus Kehr of Chicago, had long had the idea of founding an educational institution as a living memorial to Lincoln, and he mentioned this to Howard in early 1896. It was only a vague idea, but it was now planted in Howard's mind.

Then, in June, 1896, Howard planned to visit Chattanooga to tour its battlefields. Upon hearing of this, the Rev. A.A. Myers and his wife Ellen wrote to Howard, asking him to stop by at Cumberland Gap on his way. Myers and his wife had worked since 1890 in this region, supported by the American Missionary Association, to create schools for underprivileged mountain families. They had been successful in starting fifteen elementary schools, plus the Harrow Academy (a high school), but no college had yet been established in the Cumberland Gap area.

This region was just then in dire need of help, for an industrial boom that had led to the creation of Middlesboro, Kentucky, and Cumberland Gap and Harrogate,

Tennessee, in the early 1890s, had gone bust. The Four Seasons Hotel, a 700 room resort near the gap, was now defunct. Grand hopes of turning Middlesboro into a Southern version of Pittsburgh and the Gap into a tourist mecca now seemed futile, but the need to educate mountain youth persisted.

Myers's letter to Howard bore fruit, and the former general stopped at Cumberland Gap on his way to Chattanooga. He gave a lecture about Grant and the battle of Chattanooga and shared the proceeds of the lecture with the Harrow Academy. Meeting with Myers and several others on the evening of June 18, 1896, on the verandah of the school, Myers made a pitch to Howard for help. He spoke passionately about his efforts to help the region and of his dream to create a college.

During this talk, Howard recalled his last meeting with Lincoln in late September, 1863. Lincoln had spoken similarly of his own desire to help the mountain people in some fashion after the war was over. "They are loyal, there, General, they are loyal," Howard remembered the president's words. He also recalled Cyrus Kehr's desire to create a college dedicated to Lincoln's ideals.

Impulsively, Howard decided to help. "Friends, if you will make this school a larger enterprise I will take hold and do what I can." Events moved quickly after that. It was decided to name the institution Lincoln Memorial University, and to buy

the Four Seasons Hotel property as a campus. Cyrus Kehr became involved too. Howard left the local arrangements up to Myers.

Howard could not take a larger role in the work just then, for he was active in the presidential campaign of Republican candidate William McKinley in 1896, and he hoped for a cabinet post as well. But after the election, no offer of a position in the administration came forth, and Howard was then able to become much more active in the school.

A charter was issued, dated February 12, 1897, and Howard was named a member of the board of trustees. Cyrus Kehr was named the university's first president. Kehr suggested Howard serve as managing director of Lincoln Memorial University, and Howard agreed on May 25, 1898.

Howard worked hard to raise money, serving as a contact person for the huge network of acquaintances he had developed in industry and politics in the world outside Appalachia. He raised several thousands of dollars and enjoyed virtually unlimited authority with the board to make decisions. In 1899, he also was elected president of the board of trustees. He appointed Rev. John Hale Larry of Rhode Island as assistant managing director, to run things on a daily basis at Harrogate while he worked in other parts of the country.

Tragedy struck the Howard family in February 1900, when his son, Guy Howard, was killed in battle in the Philippine War. Howard and his wife Lizzie deeply mourned “my strong helper...my hope for the future,” as Howard called him. “[C]rowds & crowds of hopes are baffled & dashed to the ground in his death,” he wrote. Partially to help himself heal, Howard immersed himself in his work for Lincoln Memorial University.

Howard managed to pay off the mortgage on the campus, as he endured resistance from an unexpected source. A.A. Myers lost his rudder when his wife Ellen died in 1897, and became uncooperative. He opposed John Hale Larry’s work as assistant to Howard, causing a great deal of disruption on campus, and eventually resigned from an active role in the university in January 1901.

By that time, Howard was ready to reduce his role in the university too because of advancing age and worsening health. He brought in Frederick B. Avery, an Episcopalian minister who had been involved in the creation of the university in 1896, as college president, and then cut back his work a great deal.

After a year of semi-retirement, Howard was asked to resume his active role in 1902, and consented. He served as managing director until 1907. Frederick B. Avery served as president of Lincoln Memorial University from 1901 to 1903, when

he was replaced by Dr. William L. Stooksbury. Howard managed to raise enough money to build up half a million dollars in the university endowment by 1908.

The next year, on October 26, 1909, Howard wrote a letter to Dr. Stooksbury about money for the medical school in Knoxville that Lincoln Memorial University had just acquired. Later that day he suffered a stroke, and died that evening.

During seventy-nine years of service to his country, to his soldiers, to African-Americans and Native-Americans, Howard garnered respect from nearly everyone who dealt with him. One university is named after him, and another survived largely because of his selfless energy and commitment. Howard's biographer, Prof. John A. Carpenter, wrote of Lincoln Memorial University that, "The college for the mountain folk is not only a memorial to Lincoln; it is also a living monument to the one-armed soldier."

And it is therefore fitting that this "one-armed soldier" now is represented on the campus he created, where the Four Seasons Hotel once stood, more than 107 years after he impulsively offered to "take hold" and contribute his energy and passion to the establishment of an Appalachian university dedicated to the principles of Abraham Lincoln's life and legacy.