

David Whitney

Vermont Native, Civil War Veteran, NW Iowa Pioneer



by
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and
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This work
is dedicated
to the memory
of one of its co-authors

Hazel Whitney Eichman

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to
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Preface

Introducing David

David Whitney was born near the very eastern-most corner of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. When he died—just into the second quarter of the twentieth century—he was making his home much further west, near what was by then the geographic center of the United States.

David's story, from its very beginning to the end of his life, is at one with America's developing history. As a young man, volunteering initially as a teenager, David served extensive combat duty in the Civil War, his country's only war of internal rebellion

After the war, David joined the great westward migration that further expanded the nation he had helped save from dismemberment. After he had established a home on the Iowa prairie, David lived a long and productive adult life for fifty-five more years in what has become America's heartland.

With his service in war and his migration west, David shared in the experience of many late nineteenth-century Americans. Such migratory and war experiences were also not unique in his family, neither his immediate family nor the ancestral family going back two centuries.

Reading David's Story

David Whitney's story, as presented here, includes more than just information about David and his activities. It is a family-oriented account with the focus on David and his most immediate family. The largest part deals with David's war experiences and those of his brother and brothers-in-law.

For a general overview of the story, you may want to start by reading the individual entries in the Synopsis (p. iii). This section has a concise description of each individual portion, arranged chronologically, as in the Table of Contents, along with the starting page number of each portion being described. The synopsis may also be used for your ease in finding items of special interest initially or finding again something you have read previously but aren't sure which portion it's in.

In addition, before reading any portions of Part II—concerning the military service of David and his brother and brothers-in-law—you may wish to read the section “The Hierarchy of Military Units: Terminological Note” (p. 6), especially if you are unfamiliar with traditional U.S. Army structure and unit designations. To fully understand this account of the Whitney family's military service, you will often need to be able to know the difference between, for example, a regiment and a corps and how they are related, and sometimes how the different ranks of the soldiers and officers relate to the various units.

David Whitney

Synopsis

The Whitney Family Line (p. 1)

David Whitney's ancestors migrate westward from England to Boston Harbor in Massachusetts (1635); then westward within Massachusetts through several generations; and finally into Orange County, Vermont (late 18th century). David's namesake grandfather establishes a farm in Tunbridge Town, where David is born (1844). David's parents, Daniel and Julia Hall Whitney, soon move westward in Orange County to Brookfield Town, which becomes David's last official place of residence in Vermont.

The Whitney Family in the Civil War – Preface (p. 5)

David, along with one brother and four brothers-in-law, serve in various units of the Union Army in the Civil War of the United States. As with all great wars, this experience greatly affects the lives of the veterans after they return home at the end of their service. For David's brother, Alonzo, the war is his terminal experience, as he does not survive it.

Alonzo B. Whitney and Alpheus Cheney with the 10th Vermont Regiment (p. 9)

Alonzo Whitney and a future brother-in-law, Alpheus Cheney, volunteer early in the call for troops to preserve the Union (August 1862). Their first duty, with the 10th Vermont Infantry Regiment, is spent mostly along the Potomac River in the defense of Washington, DC, the nation's capital. In letters back to the Coolidge family in Vermont, in whose school they had both taught the previous year, they note the lack of combat at their position but the prevalence of deadly disease among their comrades. Their unit plays a supporting role in the great Battle of Gettysburg (July 1863) and then goes on to participate in many other important battles through April 1865. However, neither Alpheus Cheney nor Alonzo Whitney complete their military service in the 10th Regiment.

Alpheus Cheney's Further Service (p. 12)

David's brother-in-law, Alpheus Cheney, is promoted twice during his enlistment with the 10th Vermont Regiment before accepting a commission as an officer to organize and lead a unit of the newly forming United States Colored Troops (September 1863). He starts out as a First Lieutenant with the 7th USCT but is promoted to Captain to command a company whose Captain was killed in battle. Because of his excellent leadership record in combat, Cheney is later transferred to a staff position and promoted to the rank of

Major with the 41st USCT. He marries David's sister Emma while on active duty with the 10th Vermont Regiment and, after completing his service, takes his wife westward in the massive internal migration of the late 19th century. Alpheus and Emma Whitney Cheney pioneer on a farm west of the town of Spencer in Clay County, Iowa, where he puts his leadership experience from the war to use as an elected county official in the early history of Clay County.

Alonzo Whitney's Further Service in South Carolina (p. 15)

David's brother, Alonzo Whitney, receives a commission as a Captain commanding a company of the 26th United States Colored Troops (March 1864) and spends the rest of his military service in that role in South Carolina in the area near Beaufort and Hilton Head. His unit sees combat action in July 1864 on islands along the South Carolina coast and again at the end of November 1864, when Alonzo's regiment is part of an attempt to block rail passage from Savannah, Georgia. In this battle's aftermath, Alonzo is a victim of friendly fire and dies the next day as a casualty of war.

Alonzo Returned to Vermont (p. 19)

Alonzo Whitney's body is returned to Vermont for burial with a large monument marking his grave. Alonzo's apparent post-war plans of pursuing a career in medicine, as indicated in a letter to Mrs. Coolidge and possibly reinforced by his official assignment to temporary duty as a nurse with a field hospital, are not realized because of his death. The reason for Alonzo's leaving the medical service and accepting a commission to lead African-American troops is unclear but may be related to his sense of patriotic duty as expressed in his letter to the Coolidges. Concern for the status of African-Americans also has a long, pre-Civil War history in Vermont. One mystery about Alonzo's plans, relating to personal items found with his body, still remains.

David's Military Service – Preface (p. 22)

Between September 1862 and July 1865, David Whitney serves two separate enlistments. His first term is spent primarily in northern Virginia camps in defense of the Union's capital but not completely away from Civil War hazards. A considerable number of David's comrades die of disease in camp before he and the other survivors end their nine-month enlistment by participating in one of the most important battles of the war. David's second enlistment leads him into some of the fiercest battles of the war. One of the most distinctive ones is considered to have saved Washington, DC, from capture. David is wounded in the last big battle of the war, just a week before its formal ending through the surrender of Confederate forces. During his military service, David travels around a lot in the northeastern and middle Atlantic regions of the United States by various means of transportation, including rail, steamship, and, most significantly, on foot, marching numerous times and many miles to one battle or another.

Nine Months with the 15th Vermont Volunteers (p. 24)

In September 1862 David volunteers along with his brother-in-law, Edwin Sprague, for service in the 15th Vermont Regiment. Two weeks of intense picket-duty training in October near Brattleboro, in the southeast corner of Vermont, ends with their unit being shipped to Washington, DC, to become part of the defense of the Union's capital. They travel first by train along the Connecticut River across Massachusetts and the state of Connecticut to New Haven, where they board a steamer in Long Island Sound toward New York City. After crossing New York Harbor, they board a freight train in New Jersey and ride to Baltimore. After a slow ride at night on a passenger train on to Washington, the 15th Regiment arrives in time for breakfast at a reception center, where they also stay the first night. They soon march across a bridge over the Potomac River into northern Virginia, where they spend most of the nine months of their enlistment.

In Defense of Washington (p. 29)

The 15th Regiment's training in picket duty is immediately put to good use as David and his Vermont comrades spend the first month very near Washington at 'Camp Vermont'. In November they are sent through drizzling rain and snow to help guard a strategically important railroad. In December the 15th Regiment moves out to Fairfax County and becomes involved tangentially in defending against a raid by Confederate cavalry. In May 1863, a company from the 15th is attacked while guarding a supply train. All in all, David and his comrades see little actual combat during this tour of duty in northern Virginia that lasted just short of 9 months.

A Great Battle at Gettysburg (p. 31)

In late June 1863, David's 15th Vermont Regiment is reassigned to the Army of the Potomac in anticipation of the great face-off north of Washington that takes place at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The regiment leaves their position at Union Mills, Virginia, marches northward, crosses the Potomac River, then continues on up across Maryland into Frederick and finally to the Pennsylvania line. As they approach Pennsylvania on the first day of battle, the 15th is ordered initially to guard the corps supply train but subsequently is sent on to the battlefield at Gettysburg. On the second day of battle, David's regiment is in the midst of it at the beginning but is again ordered to guard the supply train just off the edge of the battlefield, where they remain until the Confederates are routed. The 15th then leaves the supply train and joins the pursuit toward Frederick and on up the Potomac. On July 18, two weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, David and his comrades, now at the end of their nine-month enlistment, are sent home, but are delayed on the way at New York City to help control draft riots breaking out there.

Back in Vermont (p. 36)

David reaches Brattleboro, Vermont, and is mustered out of service on August 5, 1863. His first round of active duty ends after being spent primarily in camps in northern Virginia but with participation in one of the most intense battles of the war. David's

brother-in-law and comrade in the 15th Regiment, Edwin Sprague, remains in Vermont with his bride of a year and a half, David's sister Maria, and subsequently has two children with her. David, however, stays home only through the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas before re-enlisting, this time with the 10th Vermont Regiment.

The 10th Vermont Regiment – A Second Tour of Duty (p. 38)

David joins Company G of the 10th Vermont Regiment, the unit his brother and brother-in-law had been serving in during David's tour with the 15th Regiment. In January 1864 he returns to northern Virginia where he had spent most of his previous enlistment. After a few months split between camp and picket duty plus one diversionary skirmish in February, the 10th Regiment becomes part of the Union forces' reorganization in preparation for a spring offensive southward towards Richmond known as the Overland Campaign. David's regiment is reassigned to the 6th Army Corps and is ready to move out at the beginning of May.

The Overland Campaign – Battles in Spotsylvania County (p. 42)

On May 4, 1864, David's regiment crosses the Rapidan River and prepares for the first battle of the Overland Campaign at a heavily wooded location called the Wilderness just across the Spotsylvania County line. David's unit initially encounters enemy artillery fire on May 5th but then assumes a support position out of the direct line of fire. The next day they are pulled into combat to cover a 6th Corps withdrawal, at which they succeed by startling the advancing enemy by shouting. The 6th Corps manages to regroup, and the onset of dusk ends that day's fighting. As Union troops move on to Spotsylvania Court House on May 7th, the 10th Vermont Regiment again assumes a support role, and May 8th and 9th are spent establishing a defensive position. During the next two days the 10th Regiment is on the skirmish line firing at the opposing forces. On May 12th they are part of a follow-on assault on the portion of the Confederate defense known as the Bloody Angle. Although David's Regiment takes casualties in the Spotsylvania County phase of the Overland Campaign, their losses are comparatively few due to their role mainly in support positions.

The Overland Campaign – North Anna River and Totopotomoy Creek (p. 47)

After heavy losses in Spotsylvania County, Union forces redeploy further south towards Richmond. They take up positions along the North Anna River opposite a strong Confederate defense that had set up there in anticipation of the Union movement. David's 6th Corps is once again in a support position, this time behind another corps on the west end of the Union line. On May 25th they make a significant contribution to the overall strategy by destroying railroad tracks important to Confederate supply and troop movement. The next day the Union Command decides to leave the North Anna and move down the Pamunkey River to a position east of Richmond. Along the way, David's 6th Corps is diverted at Totopotomoy Creek to assist in support of Union forces there that

had met with resistance from Confederate forces who had followed along on the opposite bank of the Pamunkey. Late at night on May 31st, The 6th corps is sent on as one of the first two infantry units to engage the enemy in the last battle of the Overland Campaign

The Overland Campaign – Cold Harbor (p. 50)

On June 1, 1864, David's 6th Corps reaches Cold Harbor, a significant crossroads east of Richmond, in time to be part of an assault that afternoon on a Confederate defense that had been set up after a skirmish with Union cavalry troops the previous day. David and his comrades of the 10th Vermont Regiment take 600 Confederate prisoners; his Company G, along with two other companies from the 10th Regiment, are the last Union soldiers to leave the field of battle that night. On June 3rd, the 10th Regiment is once again at the forefront of an assault on the Confederate line, and much heavy fighting results in great casualties for both sides. Among David's regimental comrades, 81 men are lost, leaving the regiment with 364 to carry on.

The End of the Overland Campaign – Around Richmond to Petersburg (p. 53)

Beginning June 12, 1864, as the Overland Campaign is coming to a close, David's unit moves east from Cold Harbor and then south to the James River before being transported on June 16th on steamboats upstream to a position between the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. The 6th Corps is used again primarily in support of another corps but becomes involved in Union assaults on rail lines in the Petersburg area, including a offensive against the Weldon Railroad near Jerusalem Plank Road on June 21-23. Most of the Union forces remain in the Petersburg area, but in July, the 10th Regiment is sent north on a very special mission crucial to the security of the Union's capital.

Back North to Maryland – "The Battle that Saved Washington" (p. 55)

On July 6, 1864, David's 10th Vermont Regiment is taken by steamboat back down the James River into the Chesapeake Bay and up to Baltimore Harbor, where they board a train for Frederick, Maryland. A small group of inexperienced Union troops have been trying to set up a defense there against a probable Confederate attack against either Baltimore or Washington. David and his comrades are part of a 6th Corps detachment supplementing and bringing combat knowledge to that effort. When it becomes obvious that the Confederates are targeting Washington, Union troops are moved a few miles south of Frederick along the Monocacy River to guard its bridges and prevent or at least forestall Confederate passage towards the Union's capital. In a one-day battle on July 9th, the vastly outnumbered Union forces put up a fierce defense and manage to delay the Confederates' move on Washington but at the cost of a great number of casualties. David's 10th Regiment is the last to leave the battlefield as Union troops withdraw. After marching east the next day and staying overnight at a point south of Baltimore, they return to that city on July 11th for a brief rest following the grueling "battle that saved Washington". At the same time, their Confederate opponents at the Monocacy reach Washington but find that the capital's defenses have been reinforced by the rest of the Union's 6th Corps. The Confederates then leave without damaging Washington and return to Virginia, where David and his comrades will face off against them again.

Ending the South's Penetration of the North (p. 62)

David's 10th Regiment rejoins the 6th Corps in Washington on July 14th and then helps pursue their Monocacy Battle foe into Virginia's agriculturally rich Shenandoah Valley, a strategically important source of supplies for Confederate forces. Early successes by the Union forces seem to signal the end of Confederate dominance in the valley, and the 10th Vermont Regiment is ordered back to Petersburg. But a Confederate cavalry excursion into Pennsylvania, culminating in the burning of buildings in the city of Chambersburg, reverses the order, and David and his comrades join the newly reorganized Army of the Shenandoah. Several harsh battles in the northern end of the valley in August and September leave the Confederate Command short on manpower and supplies, and they retreat to a position in the higher elevations of the southern part of the valley. The Union Command then practices a 'scorched earth' policy, destroying crops and burning barns and mills in the Shenandoah farmland. In October, David's regiment is again scheduled to return to Petersburg but their journey is halted once more, as the Confederate Command makes a final attempt at retaining access to the valley. Another fierce one-day battle at the very northern end of Virginia at Cedar Creek on October 19th ends with continued Union dominance. The 10th Regiment remains in the valley through November, participating in the presidential election at the beginning of the month and having turkey for Thanksgiving before departing from Washington to sail back to Petersburg, arriving there on December 4, 1864, the same day David's brother is mortally wounded in South Carolina.

Return to Petersburg – David's Last Battle (p. 68)

David spends the winter of 1864-1865 helping set up defenses in preparation for the final siege of Petersburg. Picket duty brings the men of the 10th Vermont Regiment within shouting distance of their Confederate counterparts, and shouting back and forth does occur. In late March Confederate desertions and combat losses elsewhere lead the Confederate Command to plan a surprise offensive as part of an attempt at an orderly withdrawal from the Richmond area. David's combat-experienced unit plays a significant role in a Union counterassault that thwarts the Confederate assault on Fort Stedman. Another Confederate setback on April 1 triggers the massive final Union offensive at Petersburg, beginning in the early morning of April 2. David's 10th Regiment is once more at the front of the attack, being the first unit to plant its flag inside the Confederates' strong fortification at Fort Welch. By the next day, April 3, Confederate troops are withdrawing totally from Petersburg, and David's 10th Regiment comrades join the final pursuit up the Appamattox River. David, however, remains behind, as his combat duty ends on April 2 when he takes a bullet in the leg.

Recovery and Restoration in the Nation's Capital (p. 73)

Because of his combat wound, David is transported via rail to Campbell Hospital, one of the Army Hospitals in Washington, DC. Campbell Hospital, a converted Cavalry barracks, serves the medical needs of the Union's sick and wounded from September 1862 to July 1865. The 10th Regiment continues fighting, contributing to the last blow

dealt the Confederates in Virginia. After the April 9 surrender of the Confederate Command, David's regiment spends about a month in two locations in southwestern Virginia before returning to the Richmond area. They march north to Washington in the last week of May and on June 23 depart for Vermont where by the end of the month they are discharged from service. David, however, is still recuperating in the capital of his nation, whose unity has been restored by the valiant efforts of David and his Union Army comrades.

Young Man and Siblings Go West (p. 77)

Recovered from the wound he suffered at the last battle at Petersburg, Virginia, David Whitney returns home to Brookfield to be welcomed by his mother and father and nine remaining brothers and sisters. David does not remain long in Vermont but migrates to Iowa, first to Black Hawk County in the northeastern part of the state. Then, after marrying Mary Jane Cutshall, David moves with his bride to the far northwestern corner of the state, where they set up farming in Osceola County west of the town of Sibley. Two of his brothers-in-law move to that part of Iowa also, settling in Clay County, and two brothers also migrate to Iowa, as does his youngest sister, who marries Sibley's first doctor. Two of his two older sisters marry and move to Wisconsin, but his other two sisters and one brother, all married, live the rest of their lives in Vermont. David's parents, Daniel and Julia Hall Whitney, die in Vermont in 1873 within four months of each other, not long after most of their children have headed west.

A Pioneer Farmer with Family (p. 82)

On arriving in NW Iowa in July 1872, David builds a dugout home as shelter for his new family, which by September includes a son, as Mary Jane gives birth to their first child. Before the onslaught of winter on the high plains, David builds a more substantial house of wood and tar paper. Winter is especially harsh that year, as a three-day blizzard in January is followed by several more snowstorms, causing a late spring. Drought that spring threatens the full growth of crops, but the crops are ruined before harvest time by a massive swarm of grasshoppers that eat everything in sight. David and Mary Jane stick it out and even double the acreage of their farm by claiming land abandoned by a neighbor despairing from the wrath of nature. They prosper and have four more children by 1884, when a farm tragedy hits them very personally: their oldest son is killed when the team of horses he uses to plow his father's fields bolts and drags him under the plowshare. But the Whitneys rebound, expanding their farm with a barn and several other farm buildings and increasing their family with six more children by 1894. That same year a tornado destroys the original barn, but David rebuilds it and continues as a prosperous gentleman farmer.

The 20th Century and Beyond (p. 87)

David and Mary Jane remain on their Iowa homestead and also acquire some land in Minnesota. Some of their older children move away to the west, but others remain close to home. In 1916 they return to Mary Jane's earlier home area in eastern Iowa, where she

dies two years later. David then comes back to NW Iowa, where one of his two youngest sons has taken over operation of the Osceola County homestead while the youngest is farming the family place in SW Minnesota. David spends the rest of his life living with various of his children, primarily with his son on the farm west of Sibley but often in the winter with a daughter in Oklahoma. He dies in September 1927 while at the home of another daughter in Nebraska. David's body is brought back to Sibley for burial alongside his wife and oldest son in the family plot in Holman Township Cemetery. The Whitney family heritage of military service and westward migration—that have resulted in experiences shared among many American families—is continued by David's descendants. Some have served in the military, and many have left Iowa and reestablished themselves far to the west in the United States. A few have returned to the east, living now very near the battlefields of David's war experience and even close to his original Vermont home.