

Clinton A. Cilley (1837 – 1900)

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BIRTH: 16 February 1837 Rockingham County, New Hampshire

ENTERED SERVICE: 29 May 1861 at Wasioja, Dodge County, Minnesota

BRANCH: ARMY

CONFLICT: Civil War

DEATH: 9 May 1900

Early Years

Clinton Albert Cilley was born in New Hampshire in 1837 to Reverend Daniel Plummer Cilley and Adelaide Ayres Haines.¹ His paternal grandmother was the sister of a governor of New Hampshire.² He was raised in southeastern New Hampshire and well-educated. He attended the Boston Latin School in 1852 (the oldest school in the United States, founded in 1635 and still open today) where he was awarded the Franklin Medal for exceptional scholarship. He attended Harvard and upon graduating in 1859 went to Minnesota to teach.³

Cilley came from a long line of military heroes. His Revolutionary ancestor, Joseph Cilley served in the Second New Hampshire Regiment, formed in May 1775, as the second of three Continental Army regiments raised by the state of New Hampshire. He was later appointed Colonel of the First New Hampshire Continental Regiment. He fought in both battles of the American campaign in Canada, and the battles of Trenton Princeton, Saratoga, Monmouth and Stony Point.⁴

The War Years

According to the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Professor Clinton A. Cilley, as President of the new Free Will Baptist Seminary in Wasioja, Minnesota in 1861, spoke to his students the day after the firing on Ft. Sumter, and said, "Would it were God's will that peace prevailed, but now we can do no other than serve our Union cause. Are you with me?"⁴ With the help of Wasioja attorney James George, Cilley and a large number of his students and faculty volunteered to form Company C of the Second Minnesota.⁵ They enlisted at the tiny stone building in Wasioja in Dodge County that then served as a Civil War recruitment office; it still stands and now houses a

museum. Built as a law office by Mr. George in 1855, it is the only Civil War recruiting station to be preserved as a historic site in Minnesota and the only one west of the Mississippi.⁶ The seminary, just a short distance away, which had enrollment of over 300 students prior to the Civil War, burned down in 1905. The ruins, and the nearby historic buildings, are listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.⁷

Just over a year after organizing, Company C stopped the Confederates at Chickamauga, Georgia, but at a high cost; of the 80 who enlisted, only 25 returned, which devastated the fledgling town.⁸ According to the Minnesota Historical Society:

"By the late summer of 1863, the campaign to control Chattanooga and eastern Tennessee resulted in some of the war's heaviest fighting. On September 19-20 the Second Minnesota clashed with Gen. Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee at the Battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia. On the second day of the battle, a federal tactical error led to a Confederate breakthrough which swept half the Union army from the field. The Second Minnesota and their comrades took up a defensive position to delay the Confederates. From mid-afternoon until dusk they held their position in the face of repeated attacks. This brave defense earned their corps commander, Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas, the nickname "Rock of Chickamauga." The battle was a Confederate victory."⁹

Cilley earned his Medal of Honor serving as Captain in Company C of the Second Minnesota Infantry at Chickamauga. His citation, awarded on 12 June 1895, reads, "Seized the colors of a retreating regiment and led it into the thick of the attack."¹⁰ He was subsequently promoted to Brevet Colonel. In his arguments for a disability pension due to post-war locomotary ataxia (partial paralysis) and nervous dyspepsia years later, he stated his service as:

- Enrolled 29 May 1861 in Company C of the Second Regiment of MN Volunteers
- Promoted to Second Lieutenant in said company and regiment 4 December 1861
- Promoted to First Lieutenant in said company and regiment 16 April 1862
- Promoted to captain in said company and regiment 10 July 1864
- Made assistant adjutant-general with rank of Captain 14 July 1864
- Promoted to Major and assistant adjutant-general 21 March 1865
- Brevet Lieutenant-colonel 13 March 1865
- Brevet Colonel 18 March 1865
- Honorably mustered out 1 September 1866¹¹

Because of his ability and bravery, Cilley advanced in rank and continued to receive promotions after the final Union victories. His assignment to General Schofield's headquarters brought him to North Carolina at the end of the war. This move, and his involvement in administrative matters related to the freedmen, represented a significant turning point in his later career. As commander of part of the defeated South, General Schofield had responsibility for public order and the administration of justice.¹²

Post-War Years

Cilley married Emma Harper, the daughter of James Harper, a former member of the North Carolina House of Representatives and the U.S. House of Representatives, 42nd U.S. Congress.¹³ He and Emma were the parents of four sons and one daughter: Albert Harper Cilley (1870-

1873), John Harper Plummer Cilley (1871-1947), Gordon Harper Cilley (1874-1938), James Lenoir Cilley (1876-1965), and Katharine Adelaide Cilley, who died as an infant at seven months.¹⁴

Being a Yankee army hero in the post-Civil War South made him a bit of an oddity. In the book *Bluecoats and Tar Heels*, he is described as a Harvard-educated, Union war hero who served in postwar North Carolina as a headquarters staff officer and Freedman's Bureau official before returning to civilian life, remaining in the state, establishing a law firm with a former Confederate officer, marrying the daughter of a prominent citizen, and settling in Lenoir, a small town in Western North Carolina, eventually emerging as a civic leader, appointed as a judge and becoming mayor. According to the author, "Unlike more notorious Union army veterans who settled in the Tar Heel State, Cilley managed to avoid controversy and thus faded into obscurity after his death in 1900."¹⁵

In *Clinton A. Cilley, Yankee War Hero in the Postwar South: A Study in the Compatibility of Regional Values*, he is described as native of New England, from a family noted for its early political opposition to slavery. After working for the Freedman's Bureau, he continued to champion first education for blacks and publicly supported education. Yet he quickly became a prominent attorney and citizen, a leader of efforts to promote economic development and cultural progress. Even in his later years as a crippled war veteran, he gained widespread popularity as a public speaker and guest columnist for the *Charlotte Observer*. His success was attributed to his willingness to get along with the white majority in the South and ability to find or create common ground, but also the existence of common values between the New England values he was raised with and those of the leading citizens in the North Carolina mountains, hidden beneath the sectional bitterness of postwar decades.¹⁶

Cilley's personal papers may be found in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Catawba County Museum of History, which contains a major repository of Civil War objects and displays the Clinton A. Cilley Collection¹⁷, including this distinguished colonel's field desk.¹⁸

Gravestone

Clinton A. Cilley died at the age of 63 on 9 May 1900 and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Hickory, Catawba County, North Carolina.¹⁹



Documentation

¹ J. P. Cilley. *The Cilley Family*. Augusta, ME: n.pub., 1878.

² Paul D. Escott, "Clinton A. Cilley, Yankee War Hero in the Postwar South: A Study in the Compatibility of Regional Values", *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (OCTOBER 1991), p. 406, Published by: [North Carolina Office of Archives and History](#)

³ <http://www.cilley.net/thecilleypages/cilley-en-o/p5616.htm>

⁴ NSSAR Profile, Compatriot Medal of Honor Recipients, online at https://www.sar.org/History/Compatriot_Medal_Of_Honor_Recipients/Cilley

⁵ Michael Eckers, *The Boys of Wasioja: Dodge County Men in Company C, Second Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, published by Community News Corp., 2009, back cover.

⁶ Dodge County Historical Society, Civil War Recruiting Station <http://www.dodgecountyhistorical.org/sites-2/>

⁷ Dodge County Historical Society, Seminary Park http://www.co.dodge.mn.us/departments/parks_and_trails/seminarypark.php#lh2VvCjsi0ITQo7H.99

⁸ <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=36535716>

⁹ Minnesota Historical Society, The Second Minnesota Volunteer Infantry <http://www.mnopedia.org/group/second-minnesota-volunteer-infantry-regiment>

¹⁰ U.S. Army Medal of Honor Citations <https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/rubin/medal/citations1.htm>

¹¹ *Reports of the Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Forty-eighth Congress and Special Session*, March 1885; Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1885; Report No. 1089, p. 1 <https://books.google.com/books/reader?id=KJHQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&pg=GBS.PA335>

¹² Paul D. Escott, "Clinton A. Cilley, Yankee War Hero in the Postwar South: A Study in the Compatibility of Regional Values", *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (OCTOBER 1991), pp. 407-408, Published by: [North Carolina Office of Archives and History](#)

¹³ Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-Present, online at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000222>

¹⁴ <http://www.cilley.net/thecilleypages/cilley-en-o/p5616.htm>

¹⁵ The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, *Bluecoats and Tar Heels: The Transition from War to Peace in North Carolina, 1865—1877*; Published by ProQuest, 2006, p. 88 <https://books.google.com/books?id=QnFW9TdHvXOC&pg=PA88&lpg=PA88&dq=clinton+a+cilley+north+carolina&source=bl&ots=bF8ZhyplLv&sig=AKNg7RAVxENIa-CVDa558d5MS9M&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj96u-jlPvMAhUEE1IKHdqjCoAQ6AEIQjAG#v=onepage&q=clinton%20a%20cilley%20north%20carolina&f=false>

¹⁶ Paul D. Escott, "Clinton A. Cilley, Yankee War Hero in the Postwar South: A Study in the Compatibility of Regional Values", *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (OCTOBER 1991), p. 405, Published

by: [North Carolina Office of Archives and History](#)

¹⁷ NSSAR Profile, Compatriot Medal of Honor Recipients, online at
[https://www.sar.org/History/Compatriot Medal Of Honor Recipients/Cilley](https://www.sar.org/History/Compatriot_Medal_Of_Honor_Recipients/Cilley)

¹⁸ From: Catawba Museum <http://catawbahistory.org/museum-of-history>

¹⁹ http://www.homeofheroes.com/gravesites/states/pages_af/cilley_clinton.html

Bio Photo

NSSAR Profile, Compatriot Medal of Honor Recipients, online at
[https://www.sar.org/History/Compatriot Medal Of Honor Recipients/Cilley](https://www.sar.org/History/Compatriot_Medal_Of_Honor_Recipients/Cilley)

Gravestone Photo courtesy of Robert Cilley, descendant of MOH recipient