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From the Collection

Portrait of Major General James B. McPherson

Accession Number 80.0003

Steven M. Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator at Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum, Lincoln Memorial University.

In war, glory is withheld by death. Most think it otherwise, that somehow, they are inexorably linked with one replacing the other depending on the circumstances, as the dead are memorialized. Perhaps, but if one were to poll the dead, it's likely they would give up a bit of glory for a little more life.

Major General James B. McPherson was one of the highest-ranking Union generals killed in the Civil War. John Reynolds, Joseph K. Mansfield, and John Sedgewick were members of that dubious fraternity with Sedgewick's last words being, "They can't hit an elephant at this distance." One doesn't have to look far for irony in war.

McPherson was born in Ohio on November 14, 1828, being a member of another fraternity, that of the august group of successful generals from the Buckeye State who served the Union in the war. He was a child of the stars, well-educated, bright, graduating from West Point first in his class in 1853. Of course, he would go into the Corps of Engineers because that was the arena of the best and brightest military minds. Classmates Philip H. Sheridan and John Bell Hood were assigned to the infantry, Sheridan graduating 34 and Hood 42 out of a class of 52. Both would impact McPherson's career. Newly graduated, James B. McPherson so impressed his superiors that he was selected to teach practical engineering at the Academy. After service at West Point, he was assigned to improve the defenses of New York Harbor, Fort Delaware,

and Alcatraz Island. A few days after the Union debacle at First Bull Run, McPherson left California for the East. His war had come.

Leon Lippert was born in Sailauf, Germany, in 1863 and emigrated to the United States at age 17. He might not have been born in Ohio, but he did attend the Art Academy of Cincinnati in 1885. He settled in Newport, Kentucky, and like McPherson, proved through his successful career as a portrait painter and illustrator, that he too was a child of the stars.

In the year that Lippert was born, McPherson was promoted to brigadier general in the regular army, serving in the Western Theater. He had by that time served under U.S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, both Buckeyes, and convinced them that here was an officer of potential. He also served under Major General Henry W. Halleck, but Halleck was a New Yorker so the less said, the better.

In 1864 McPherson was commanding the Army of the Tennessee with Sherman on his Atlanta Campaign. They were up against Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and his Army of Tennessee, who was valiantly trying to keep the wolf from the door and the Union army from Atlanta. In reality, it was a foregone conclusion that Johnston could do little more than prolong the city's eventual fall to the Union. This strategy infuriated Confederate President Jefferson Davis, never a fan of Johnston, who was convinced that Johnson had to be replaced by a general who could defeat the invading Yankees. On July 17, 1864, Johnston was relieved and replaced by General John B. Hood, who immediately launched an attack against Union General George Thomas's Army of the Cumberland, which failed. His next action was to send his troops against McPherson's Army of the Tennessee. It was while reconnoitering on July 22, 1864, McPherson and his staff rode into a line of Confederate skirmishers. Turning to gallop to safety, McPherson was shot and killed. The child of the stars had fallen, although not unnoticed. It was said Sherman wept when given the news, and even McPherson's classmate turned enemy, Hood, wrote a moving testimonial.

Lippert's portrait of McPherson, painted circa 1904, was commissioned by the Military Order of the Loyal Legion (MOLLUS) of the United States and donated in 2011 to the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum after being on long-term loan. The museum also has a Lippert of Grant, as well as a portrait of Sherman and Sheridan. Sherman

is posed before a low line of mountains with a map of Atlanta's defenses on the table before him. The background behind Sheridan could be interpreted as a setting or rising sun. Either would suffice. Leon Lippert's Grant, dated roughly the same as McPherson's portrait, has the general simply standing, waiting for someone to try to dislodge him.

Like others who go off to war, the story of James B. McPherson is one of lost potential. He had planned to be married but the war interfered. He could have turned military success into a political career or found work as an engineer in a nation perched on the edge of an empire. He might have stayed in the army, but the post-Civil War U.S. Army was carved into near oblivion by a pettifogging Congress, so that arena was reduced to an afterthought.

Instead, McPherson, like over 700,000 of his comrades who deserved more than a mention in history textbooks, remains mostly anonymous. A great deal is often made of soldiers' honorable lives and tragic deaths; but, in the end, their existence may be reduced to a simple observation by William Shakespeare:

Methinks I could not die anywhere so

Contented as in the king's company; his cause being

Just and his quarrel honorable.

Henry V Act 4, Scene I