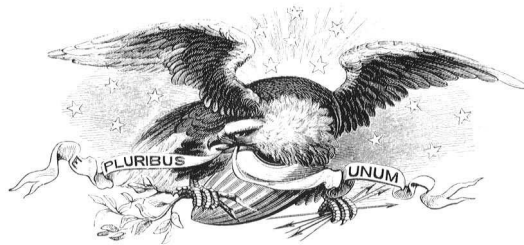


GEN. FRANK WASHBURN.

# **BYT. BRIGADIER GENERAL FRANCIS WASHBURN**



**1<sup>ST</sup> LIEUTENANT, 1<sup>ST</sup> MASS CAVALRY  
CAPTAIN, 2<sup>ND</sup> MASS CAVALRY  
COLONEL, 4<sup>TH</sup> MASS CAVALRY**

BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS P. WASHBURN  
By Michael K. Sorenson

## GENERAL FRANCIS WASHBURN

### BREVET (POSTHUMOUS) BRIGADIER GENERAL

Francis Washburn and the California Hundred were as dissimilar as Boston and San Francisco. Washburn was a blue-blooded Boston Brahmin. He came from Massachusetts gentry and fit easily into the officer's corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry. Yet the free-spirited men of the Cal Hundred were not sure that friendly relations could be reciprocated so easily from the enlisted ranks. But over time, Captain Washburn would earn the regard of the Californians, and they would earn his.

Washburn came to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry already seasoned by the hard realities of combat and military life, having served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry for a year. He initially enlisted in this Ivy League regiment the day after Christmas in 1861 as a 21-year-old shavetail lieutenant from Harvard University's Lawrence Scientific School. A year later, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cavalry was organized, he accepted the captaincy of Company D, made up of course, of Massachusetts men. A tradition of mounted service from the bay state reached back for two centuries, when Massachusetts troopers fought at the Narragansett Fort in King Philip's War. Arguably, this had been the first great cavalry victory in North America. Francis Washburn could not have known that he would lead a desperate saber charge in one of the *last* cavalry engagements in the Civil War, shedding his blood in Virginia two days before the war's end. But a lot of riding and scouting and shooting had to come first.

In the beginning, the rough and tumble Californians were unsure that their cultured bay state officers could demonstrate leadership in the field. But passage of time, and miles in the saddle, periodically punctuated by bullets,

helped meld the two factions together. When J. Sewell Reed, captain of the California Hundred, rose to command of the first battalion in August of 1863, Washburn took control of Company A. This placed a Massachusetts blueblood officer in command of the savvy Californians. One of the westerners, Thomas Barnstead, reported to a California newspaper, "A Massachusetts man is now our Captain, and so far, is liked very well." Others felt the same about Washburn. One of the Massachusetts officers recalled that Washburn, "proved one of the best officers of the line." Around camp, he exercised a level of fairness that struck home with the Californians. In the field, he led from the

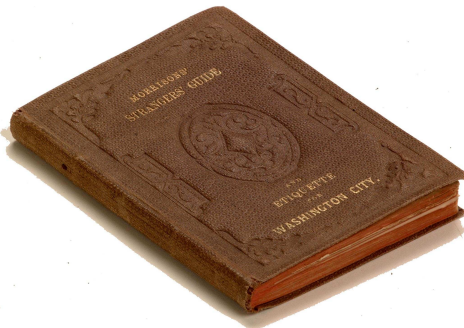


*Francis Washburn as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant*

front.

By February, 1864, Massachusetts was ready to muster in another regiment of cavalry under the flag of the 4<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. The Governor had determined that the officer's corps should be made up of experienced cavalry officers. Opportunity once again reached out to Captain Washburn who was discharged from his duty with the Cal Hundred and mustered in as lieutenant colonel of the new regiment.

By the following year, Washburn had been promoted to full colonel as the 4<sup>th</sup> Mass held its place in line at Petersburg, watching U. S. Grant tighten the vice on the Army of



**Above:** Francis Washburn's wool blanket with his initials F.W. cross stitched in the face.

**Below:** Captain Washburn's tour guide to the sights in Washington D.C.

Northern Virginia. When Lee suddenly bolted from his trenches and sprinted in a final, desperate move to save his army, Colonel Washburn and his troopers took up the chase under command of General Phil Sheridan.

Spring had come and the world was turning green again. The muddy trenches at Petersburg were now a thing of the past and spirits were high as everyone sensed that this final dash could bring the war to a close. But the Rebel forces were still dangerous, and both armies were now in a life and death footrace, infantry and cavalry and lumbering guns doing 35 miles a day. Lee was racing for the Southside Rail line that would unite him with much needed supplies. And Sheridan was racing to beat him there. Colonel Washburn had already lost a brother to Southern gunfire. He must have wondered at his chances of surviving the next few days, to see things finally come to a close.

On April 6 the roads carrying the 4<sup>th</sup>

Mass Cav were littered with signs of a defeated Confederate army, having passed the same way only hours earlier: broken wagons, abandoned artillery limbers, discarded muskets and blanket rolls, all left by a worn out army in flight. And the Army of the Potomac had never been driven as hard as it was being driven now.

Out ahead, in an effort to gain breathing space from the Federal army, General Longstreet planned to cross the Appomattox River near Burkeville using a long span called High Bridge. He planned to then destroy the structure to prevent a Federal crossing in pursuit. He sent 1,600 rebel cavalry troopers to hold the 2,500 foot long bridge. Colonel Washburn was sent to destroy it and prevent the Confederate crossing. His small force of 78 cavalry and 800 infantry reached the long trestle just before the Confederates did. Leaving his infantry in a growth of trees near the Watson farmhouse, Washburn took his cavalry command to the bridge and found butternut pickets holding two redoubts at the crossing. There were also reports of a sizable Confederate cavalry closing fast behind him. Instinctively, Washburn could read the signs that he was cut off from other federal support. But he was informed that the Rebel forces were demoralized and would break at any sign of federal cavalry. He was to attack any force encountered, regardless of size.

This was a perilous order to give to an officer like Colonel Washburn, as his record for boldness in tactics exceeded his record for discretion. Indeed, he would soon learn that the scarecrow forces of the South were still deadly, especially now, when cornered and fighting for their very existence.

What was about to happen may be regarded as an obscure skirmish if the numbers engaged and the duration of time involved are considered alone; if judged however by the fierceness of the struggle, the percentage of casualties, and the results of the engagement, the fight might be considered one of the more noteworthy actions of the closing drama before Lee's surrender. Indeed, the fight was described by Mr. Hay and Mr. Nicolay in their history of Abraham Lincoln as "the most gallant





**Above:** *High Bridge where the South Side Railroad crosses the Potomac River near Farmville, Virginia. The wagon way used by Lee's forces is visible, just below the railroad trestle atop the bridge.*

**Left:** *Francis Washburn as a Colonel of the 4<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry.*



and pathetic battle of the war.”

Colonel Washburn led his troopers through a stand of timber and attacked a battery of guns that had command of the approaches to High Bridge. Succeeding in dispatching the guns and securing the south end of the bridge, he prepared to set it afire. But the rattle of

musketry from the woods in his rear revealed that his band of foot soldiers had been attacked by Rebel cavalry who had now arrived on the scene. After riding toward the sound of the guns, Washburn's command burst from the trees and saw that the little line of infantry, outflanked and outnumbered, was falling back while fighting. Washburn sent his adjutant to rally them, and determined that a forceful attack upon the Southern forces would collapse their line and save the infantry. After dressing his ranks, Washburn called out the plan to his men. They trotted in columns of fours and when beyond the flanks of the haggard infantry, the squadron turned and the 78 horsemen hurled themselves into the Confederate van, a cavalry force many times their size.

In the impetuous charge, the troopers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Mass, though badly outnumbered, collided with the first southern battle line of



General Thomas T. Munford and put them to flight. The troopers reformed and prepared to go again when the balance of the Confederate cavalry swarmed into the melee. Order and coherence were lost as Federals mingled with Rebels in a furious hand-to-hand struggle. The rowel of one of Washburn's spurs was shot by Confederate fire during the clash.

In the swirling, close combat, Washburn engaged Confederate Brigadier General James Dearing in a saber contest. (Dearing would be killed a few moments later, the last Confederate General to die in the war.) This personal fight was cut short when Washburn was shot through the cheek by a rebel cavalryman. Falling from his horse, he then received a saber blow to his skull and it was over for him. He would be found the following day, clinging to life on the bloody field. The outnumbered Federals lost heavily and were unable to control the bridge. Of the 13 Union officers involved, 11 were dead, wounded, or captured. But Longstreet had been delayed long enough for Grant's 24<sup>th</sup> Corps to cut off the Confederate retreat.

During his effort at High Bridge, Colonel Washburn had been mortally wounded, only two days before the Southern surrender at Appomattox. After the capitulation, Lee's Inspector General said of the High Bridge action, "So fierce were the charges of Colonel Washburn and his men, and so determined their fighting, that General Lee received the impression that they must be supported by a large part of the army, and that his retreat was cut off." Lee halted to entrench, and this delay

enabled Sheridan to intercept the rebel forces at Saylor's Creek.

After the war, Confederate General Rosser said to a surviving member of the regiment, "You belonged to the 4<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry? Give me your hand! I have been many a day in hot fights. I never saw anything approaching that at High Bridge. While your Colonel kept his saddle, everything went down before him!"

Colonel Washburn died at his brother's home in Worcester, Massachusetts a few days after the fight at High Bridge. The family soon learned of his brevet brigadier general's commission for gallantry, but now Francis Washburn's associations with the Cal Hundred, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry, and the Union cause, were history.

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**Official Records – Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry**  
**Battle at High Bridge – April 6, 1865**

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**Report of Major Henry B. Scott, Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry (unattached).**

HDQRS. FOURTH REGIMENT MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY  
Near Richmond, Va., April 24, 1865.

I have the honor to transmit for the information of Your Excellency a report of the engagement at High Bridge, Va., on the 6th instant, of a detachment of this regiment with the cavalry of General Lee's army.

This engagement, although disastrous to the general in the loss of three excellent and very gallant officers killed and five officers wounded, has redounded greatly to the credit of the regiment and the State. Several rebel officers with whom I conversed after their capture spoke of it as the most gallant fight of the war. The numerous saber wounds given and the great mortality among the officers is good evidence of this, and the fact that Colonel Washburn, with less than seventy men, almost held his own against three brigades of cavalry, with the infantry of Lee's army supporting them, needs no comment. I leave the two regiments of infantry under Colonel Washburn's command out of the consideration, because it is generally conceded that their behavior was not creditable. I think there is no doubt that if the whole regiment had been under Colonel Washburn's command we should have a different result to the engagement, and General Lee's surrender been hastened two days. I am happy to inform Your Excellency that the colors of the regiment were not captured; at the suggestion of Surgeon Garvin they were burned by the color-sergeant, Thomas Hickey.

I would respectfully suggest, if the matter has not already received your attention, that a new set of colors be sent the regiment, and three company guidons for Companies I, L, and M, which, unfortunately, were captured when all the officers and men were killed, wounded, or taken prisoners. I shall have the honor to forward nominations for the vacancies caused by the deaths in battle as soon as I am advised by Colonel Washburn, who is now at home.

I am, with great respect, your obedient servant,  
H. B. SCOTT,  
Major, Commanding Regiment.

His Excellency JOHN A. ANDREW,  
Governor of Massachusetts.

HDQRS. FOURTH REGIMENT MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY  
Near Richmond, Va., May 9, 1865.

COLONEL: I have the honor to forward, for the information of the major-general commanding the department, the enclosed report of the fight at High Bridge, Va., on the 6th ultimo, made by Lieutenant Lathrop, the senior officer of the regiment remaining unhurt.

I respectfully ask your attention to the fact that of eleven officers engaged but three escaped uninjured, three officers being killed dead on the spot and five severely wounded, one of whom, Colonel Washburn, has since died, and ask that some official notice of their gallantry, as evidenced by their wounds, may be taken. I may add that all of these wounds are saber cuts or shots received at close quarters. The following officers were severely wounded, and merit brevets: Colonel Francis Washburn, since died; Lieutenant Colonel Horatio Jenkins, jr., pistol wound in arm; Captain Caldwell, in thigh; First Lieutenant Belcher, saber cut; Second Lieutenant Thompson, in abdomen. Captain Goddard, Captain Hodges and Lieutenant Davis were killed on the spot while displaying especial gallantry. All of the officers and men of the command behaved admirably and deserve praise. The discrimination has been made in recommending brevets in favor of those who are, and have been, suffering from wounds.

I am, colonel, with great respect, your obedient servant,

H. B. SCOTT,  
Major, Commanding Regiment.

Bvt. Colonel ED. W. SMITH,  
Assistant Adjutant-General, Department.

**Report of Lieutenant Joseph H. Lathrop, Adjutant Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry.**

HDQRS. FOURTH REGIMENT MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY  
Camp Lee, Va., April 25, 1865.

MAJOR: Being the senior officer of the Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry who escaped uninjured from the fight near High Bridge, Va., on the 6th instant, I have the honor to make the following report of the operations of the cavalry during that day:

At 4 o'clock on the morning of April 6 a detachment of thirteen officers and sixty-seven men of the Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry, under command of Colonel Washburn, left Burkeville to co-operate with the Fifty-fourth Pennsylvania and One hundred and twenty-third Ohio Infantry in burning a long railroad bridge over the Appomattox River about two miles from Farmville. We proceeded quietly until, when within some two miles of our destination, the advance guard was fired on by a few mounted rebels. The cavalry then pushed forward to hold a road leading to the bridge, while the infantry

followed slowly. A few minutes later we came to a small stream, the bridge over which had been torn up, and on a hill just beyond were about thirty rebel cavalry who commenced firing as soon as the head of our column came in sight. The advance guard, under Lieutenant Davis, dashed forward, laid the planks, charged up the hill, and drove the enemy for more than a mile until, near Farmville, they were re-enforced and made a stand. We skirmished with them for half an hour or more, when they opened on us with artillery, and we gradually fell back, hearing our infantry firing quite rapidly in our rear.

The fight took place at about noon in a small strip of woodland nearly a mile from the bridge, the country adjacent being very rough and hilly, so that it was impossible for cavalry to work to any advantage. When we reached the scene of action the infantry were deployed and holding a fence just inside the woods, while a few beyond was a brigade of dismounted rebel cavalry engaging our infantry at short range. Immediately on our arrival Colonel Washburn held a consultation with General Read, and at once determined to charge the enemy. Forming the squadron on the brow of the hill we moved forward in column of fours, at a trot, until beyond the right flank of our infantry, and then, wheeling to the left, fours we charged into the woods. This charge was eminently successful, the enemy scattering in every direction, and we captured a number of them. The squadron was then reformed and we charged back into the woods, meeting a large force of rebel cavalry who had come up during our first charge. The men fought desperately hand to hand, but the conflict only lasted a few minutes, for, overpowered by numbers and all the officers being disabled or captured, many of our men surrendered. Some tried to cut their way out, but it was useless. The guidons of Companies I, L, and M were captured, but the regimental flag was burned by Color-Sergeant Hickey when he found that escape was impossible. Our whole force, infantry and cavalry, numbered about 800 men, while the troops we fought were General Roseer's division of cavalry, with Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry and Longstreet's infantry within supporting distance.

The enemy's loss was much greater than ours, but our cavalry suffered severely, particularly in officers; of 11 who went into the fight, 3 were killed, 5 wounded, and 3 taken prisoners. Our surgeon and chaplain remained in the rear with the wounded and were captured after the action was over.

Five officers and sixty enlisted men were taken prisoners and remained in the hands of the enemy until the 9th instant, when General Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox Court-House.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. H. LATHROP,  
First Lieutenant and Adjutant Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry.

Major H. B. SCOTT,  
Commanding Fourth Massachusetts Cavalry.



## **Chelsea Telegraph and Pioneer**

April 29, 1865

Battle of High Bridge.

Fourth Mass. Cavalry.

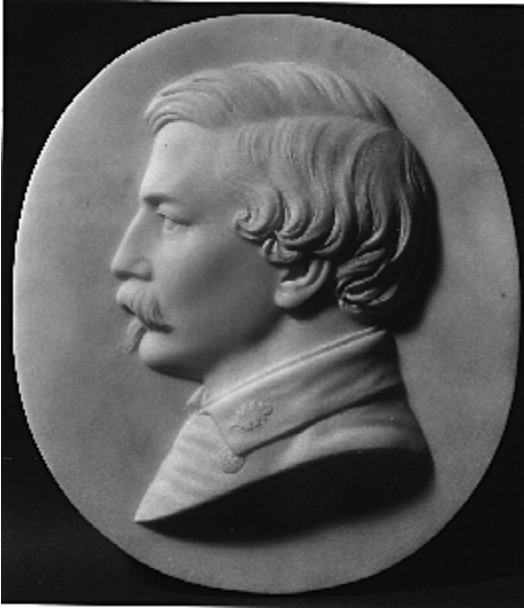
Col. Horatio Jenkins, of this city, returned home on Friday Morning, looking well. He was wounded in the charge of the 4th Mass. Cavalry, on the 6th inst., receiving a bullet in the right arm, where it remains. The Cavalry composed of the body guard of Gen. Ord, two squadrons, about 80 men; Col. Washburn in command. They reached Burkville on the night of the 5th, in pursuit of Lee. Early on the morning of the 6th, Gen. Ord sent two regiments of infantry, accompanied by his body guard, to take possession of Highbridge, on the Lynchburg road, and hold it. They reached the bridge, meeting only with the enemy's scouts; but here the rebel Gen. Rosser intercepted their retreat by throwing himself between them and Burkville, and immediately made an attack. Our Infantry numbered 800, and Cavalry 80, with eleven officers. Rosser's men numbered at least 2,000, with Fitz Hugh Lee's cavalry at supporting distance. The rebels, knowing their advantage in numbers, pressed so hotly that it became necessary for our Cavalry to charge, which they did, with the understanding that the Infantry would support them in the effort to cut their way through the rebel ranks. The charge was made gallantly; the enemy's first line of battle, consisting of one Brigade, was cut through and their men scattered in every direction. But the Infantry failed to follow up the charge! Reforming in compact order, again the Cavalry charged, throwing themselves on the enemy's second line. A hand to hand fight ensued, when our brave little band was almost cut to pieces; all were captured; three officers killed and five wounded, out of eleven. The infantry was subsequently captured. The enemy, fearful of the close proximity of Sheridan, moved off rapidly, leaving the wounded in a rebel house by the roadside, whence they were taken by the advance guard of the Federal army.

## **From the report of General Ord**

Commander, Army of the James

Apprehending that my bridge-burning party might meet a force of Lee's cavalry sent southward to hold this bridge I had, before receiving Sheridan's dispatch, sent General Theodore Read, my chief of staff, and the most gallant and reliable officer I had at hand, to conduct the party, cautioning him to reconnoiter the country well before he moved up to the Farmville bridge; and after I received General Sheridan's dispatch I sent the next best staff officer I had to caution Read that Lee's army was in his rear, and he must return by pressing on, crossing the Appomattox and going around by Prince Edward Court-House. The last officer was driven back by Lee's cavalry. Read overtook Washburn's small party, took the cavalry into Farmville and examined the country, returned to the infantry, and was pushing for the bridge when the advance cavalry of Lee's whole army overtook them within two miles of the bridge. Here, about noon, the gallant Read drew up his little band of 80 cavalry and 500 infantry, rode along the front of his ranks, inspired them with all his own daring, and began the battle with an army in his front.

Charge after charge was made by the handful of cavalry, led by the chivalrous Washburn, who captured more rebels than he had men; but Read fell mortally wounded, then Washburn, and at last not an officer of that cavalry party remained alive or unwounded to



lead the men, and not until then did they surrender. But, as I learned afterward, this stubborn fight in his front led General Lee to believe that a heavy force had struck the head of his column; he halted his whole army, began entrenching, issued what was called a stampeding order, so that not long afterward Sheridan's cavalry and the Sixth Corps did overtake and strike him, and swept his lines for some two miles.

*Francis Washburn* by Horatio Stone  
Harvard Univ. Portrait Collection.

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## CAPTAIN FRANCIS WASHBURN

1<sup>ST</sup> LIEUTENANT, 1<sup>ST</sup> MASS CAVALRY  
CAPTAIN, 2<sup>ND</sup> MASS CAVALRY  
COLONEL, 4<sup>TH</sup> MASS CAVALRY

### Civil War Service Chronology

1861	Dec 26	Washburn enlists as a 21-year-old from Lawrence, Massachusetts
1862	Jan 30	Musters into the 1 <sup>st</sup> Mass Cav as a 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, Co. K
	Sep 05	Cavalry skirmish at Poolesville, Maryland.
	Nov 30	Action at Snicker's Gap, Virginia
1863	Jan 26	Musters out of the 1 <sup>st</sup> Mass Cav and into Co. D., 2 <sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav
	Jul 12	Fighting at Ashby's Gap, Virginia
	Aug 24	Cavalry fight at Coyle's Tavern, Virginia
1864	Feb 04	Discharged from 2 <sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav to accept promotion
	Feb 12	Commissioned Lt. Colonel, 4 <sup>th</sup> Mass Cav
	Feb 20	Fighting at Olustee, Florida
	Apr 02	Engaged at Cedar Creek, Florida
	Jun 09	Fighting at commencement of siege, Petersburg
	Aug 17	Heavy fighting at Gainesville, Florida, 55 casualties
	Oct 24	Hotly engaged at Big Gum Creek, Florida - 41 casualties.
1865	Feb 11	Fighting at Williamsburg, Virginia
	Apr 06	<b>Wounded at High Bridge, Virginia.</b>
	Apr 22	<b>Dies of wounds received in Virginia.</b>