

Michigan's Civil War Citizen-General: Alpheus S. Williams

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Review

Jack Dempsey

Winter 2020

Dempsey, Jack. *Michigan's Civil War Citizen-General: Alpheus S. Williams.* The History Press, 2019. HARDCOVER \$14.29 ISBN 9781467138642 pp. 240

It was my pleasure as a newspaper reporter in days gone by to have interviewed the authors of fine biographies of two of Michigan's important military men in the Civil War – Jack C. Mason, who wrote *Until Antietam: The Life and Letters of Major General Israel B. Richardson, U.S. Army* (published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2009), and Robert Garth Scott, who edited and compiled *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals & Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Willcox* (Kent State University Press, 1999).

These books centered on often-overlooked historical figures from the Wolverine State: Richardson, a resident of Pontiac when the Civil War began; and Willcox, a native-born Detroitier. Both were West Point graduates and veterans of the Mexican War. Richardson, who had initially led the 2nd Michigan Infantry Regiment in the Civil War, was reportedly coming to the attention of President Abraham Lincoln as a tough and aggressive division commander when he was fatally wounded at Antietam. Willcox, who had first led the 1st Michigan Infantry until his capture at Bull Run, eventually became division commander in the Union army's Ninth Corps and survived the war. Accounts of both of these generals could be found in articles and books on specific battles and campaigns over the years, but neither had been the subject of thorough biography until recent times.

Yet there was another Union general from Michigan who was even more important for his key roles in the war, and whose story was not told in book form until now. This brief biography is *Michigan's Civil War Citizen-General: Alpheus S. Williams*, a paperback published by the History Press and authored by Jack Dempsey, who, in the interest of full disclosure, I met once, briefly and socially, years ago at a Michigan book event.

Readers of this review should understand that, like Richardson and Willcox, “Alf” Williams was absolutely documented in Civil War reports and records, though he was not always given proper and timely credit for certain battlefield successes and critical decisions that prevented disaster for Union arms. It would be nearly impossible for someone today to pick up any decent history of the battles of Cedar Mountain, Antietam, Chancellorsville or Gettysburg (for all three days) without finding references to him and his important service, and his cogent observations of events and personalities. And he was an important commander, too, in the March to the Sea and the Carolinas campaign.

Yet for Williams individually, though he was appreciated in Michigan and by his soldiers, there was only an obscure pamphlet-sized booklet published about him in Detroit after 1900. It was not until 1959 that a book of his excellent Civil War letters, with “all purely family matters deleted,” was published by Wayne State University Press and the Detroit Historical Society, titled *From the Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*. But it was far from the complete biography Williams deserved as a brave, dependable and intelligent officer – a man who was not by education a professional soldier, but who was self-taught – learning through study and by training and practicing leadership in the local militia for decades, with service in the 1830s “Patriot War” on the U.S.-Canadian border and also at the conclusion of the Mexican War.

For biographical detail, at least in recent times, one could Google Williams’ name and locate an online scan of a 1983 doctoral dissertation at Michigan State University about his life. But this generally commendable work had its flaws and was never published in book form. A reader of that paper faced over 248 pages of narrative text (not including endnotes) on a computer screen – something that can be hard on eyes middle-aged and older. Thus, Dempsey’s biography (186 pages of narrative text and photos, excluding citations and appendices) is more concise yet more accurate regarding Williams’ Civil War record. *Michigan’s Civil War Citizen-General* stands as the one and only biography of him in the form of a physical book, and should serve as a kind of companion volume to *From the Cannon’s Mouth*.

Dempsey points out, as have others, that Williams deserved promotion to the rank of major general, given his good reputation and record in war. But the fact Williams was not a West Pointer worked against him, and it appears he did not cultivate the political support or seek the

publicity he needed. Thus, he held his major general's post with only brevet, or honorary rank, while proving himself a popular and respected general in the Union army's Second, Twelfth and Twentieth Corps, with his soldiers giving him the nickname "Pap" (though pronouncing this "Pop".)

Of course, some Civil War readers will already be familiar with Williams and his key roles, and because they have seen historians so often quoting from his pithy letters. But for those readers who are not, and who may avail themselves to *Michigan's Civil War Citizen-General*, I will give no particulars here about his service in the conflict. Just as a film reviewer must not ruin a movie for potential audience members, I feel constrained to allow potential readers of this biography to see for themselves the breadth of contributions and spot-on observations this modest but competent non-West Pointer made. An impartial reader, I think, should come away with an appreciation of Williams, who proved himself as a commander time after time.

To the good, Dempsey dismisses and disproves an old saw that claimed Williams, as a young man and Yale graduate before coming to Michigan, was left a veritable fortune of tens of thousands of dollars after his father's death in Connecticut, but that Williams frittered it away traveling the world and living the highlife. Dempsey notes this was not true – that Williams was left a much smaller bequest of a few thousand dollars, though the young man did travel around Europe and elsewhere with friends for months, even years at a time. Yet Williams seems to have been uninterested in practicing law, the profession in which he was educated, and proved unsuccessful in business.

The author also provides accounts of Williams' prewar track record in Michigan's militia, politics, and journalism, showing how he established a solid reputation as a military man and good citizen. Undiscussed, though, is the likelihood, that Williams' political views (a one-time Whig who became a Democrat, not favoring abolition) worked against his promotion to major general in the war, even though top Michigan Radical Republicans supported him. Of course, his wartime experience and postwar career are documented here, as well as the effort by Michiganders that eventually led to the dedication of an equestrian statue/memorial to Williams on Detroit's Belle Isle.

Dempsey includes occasional editorial comments/asides regarding Williams, patriotic and religious, that are unnecessary in this true story of a historically under-appreciated figure, but

these are few. Though this narrative is very short, several pages are given over to appendices of the general's farewell address to his men and a postwar speech he gave to a reunion event; personally, I would have rather had more details and context in the text than these speeches. Lastly, this book does not include a bibliography, though the works the author used appear in endnotes; for a bibliography, the reader of *Michigan's Civil War Citizen-General* is directed to Dempsey's web page.

I think many readers of history and biography have also probably come across this sort of publishing shortcut in other books – an unwelcome trend, with some publishers deciding that a proper biography is not needed when they are providing citations. That's unfortunate, but in this case it should not discourage a reader otherwise unfamiliar with Michigan's much neglected general.

Kim Crawford is a retired newspaper reporter and author of *The 16th Michigan Infantry in the Civil War, Revised and Updated*; *The Daring Trader: Jacob Smith in the Michigan Territory*; and coauthor of *The 4th Michigan Infantry in the Civil War*. He has written about Michigan soldiers in the Civil War for Michigan History magazine and served as guest curator for Flint's Sloan Museum 2012 Civil War exhibit, "The Brave and the Faithful."