

Alpheus Starkey Williams

Undoubtedly, Alpheus Starkey Williams was the finest brigadier general to serve the Union Army throughout the war without any promotion until near the very end when he was given an honorary brevet to major general. His fine performance could not overcome the fact that he was not an academy graduate; was a member of the Whig party; and had a bitter dislike for the press.

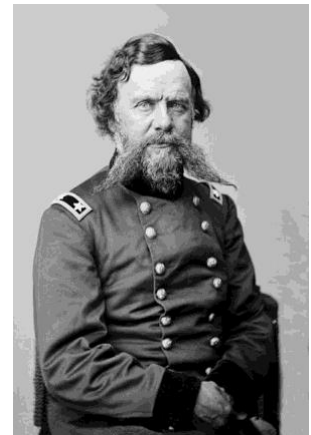
Williams was born in Deep River, Connecticut, on September 20, 1810. His father died when he was eight, his mother when he was seventeen. However, he was left an estate of \$75,000 which allowed him to graduate from Yale in 1831, study law and travel extensively in the United States and Europe spending a year and a half in the latter place in 1834-1836.

He moved to Detroit in 1836 and it would be his home for the remainder of his life. There, he established himself as a lawyer, he married his first wife Jane Larned and produced five children of whom two died young. Jane passed away in 1848 and he remained unmarried until he married Martha Tillman in 1875.

In the years prior to the Civil War, he served as a probate judge of Wayne County, president of a bank, owner of the Detroit *Advertiser*, postmaster of Detroit, and member of the Board of Education.

It was in Detroit where Williams first became involved with the military with his enlistment in the local militia, the Brady Guards. He began as a private in 1838 and within twenty years he had been promoted all the way to Major General of the Michigan Militia. He served in the Patriot War, January 1838–December 4, 1838, and, like many Civil War generals, he served in the Mexican War, Apr 25, 1846 – Feb 2, 1848.

After Fort Sumter was overtaken by the Confederates, the governor of Michigan appointed the 51-year-old Williams as brigadier general of the Michigan troops. Lincoln appointed him a brigadier general of volunteers on August 9, 1861 to rank from May 17, 1861. Arriving in Washington, Williams (photo at right) was faced with the intimidating task of turning raw recruits into a fighting force. The troops thought this short, balding, nearsighted officer with a scraggly beard and riding a horse named “Plug Ugly,” appeared to be anything other than a competent commander. They soon learned that twenty-five years of military experience had left him with the toughness of a drill sergeant. Within a matter of weeks, his men performed with the precision of regulars. While the men trained, Williams fought with the War Department for more food, clothing and other supplies for his men. Because of his concern for his men, lack of ostentation and his appearance, the men gave him the nickname “Old Pap.”

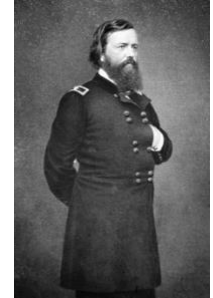


Williams, and his 5,000-man brigade, was placed in the command of Union General Nathaniel Banks' V Corps of the Army of the Potomac. He was first stationed near Darnestown, Maryland until he was moved to the extreme right wing of the army at Hancock, Maryland where he assumed command of the First Division in General Banks' V Corps and remained there from January to March of 1862. Banks led the V Corps and Williams to a disaster at Winchester, Virginia and were almost annihilated by Confederate



General Stonewall Jackson on May 25, 1862. Old Pap rallied his division outside of town and led them on a thirty-five mile, fighting retreat. A miserable Williams wrote a letter to his daughter telling her that inept leadership had led to the defeat of Banks' (photo at left) army. He said that a unified command under one general would have destroyed the Rebels.

Williams was about to get his wish, which would also turn out to be unsuccessful. Banks' V Corps was redesignated II Corps and consolidated with John Pope's Army of Virginia. Williams considered Pope (photo at right) to be a "cabbage head," but preferable to Banks. By July, Williams was on his way to meet General Robert E Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. On August 9th, Williams once again met up with Stonewall Jackson, at Cedar Mountain, and after a bloody battle against overwhelming forces, Old Pap had to withdraw.



Pope's II Corps was not engaged at Second Manassas (Second Bull Run) and retreated to Washington after the defeat. Williams, again writing his daughter, he declared the entire campaign was a useless sacrifice that led to the destruction of a good army. As soon as the II Corps crossed the Potomac. Banks was relieved of command by Williams. Williams was almost immediately superseded by General Joseph Mansfield. (photo at left)

Again, the Corps was abolished and absorbed into the Army of the Potomac as XII Corps. On September August 17th, at the battle of Antietam, Mansfield was mortally wounded and again Old Pap was in command of the Corps.

Williams' brigades, having been decimated at Cedar Mountain, were filled with untested recruits and new regimental commanders. Old Pap took firm control and for more than eight hours, fought the Confederates and advanced through the carnage of the Cornfield to the woods around Dunkard Church. Williams wrote his children that the roar of the battle was beyond anything conceivable. His corps performed admirably as he relieved General Joe Hooker's I Corps, then supported General Edwin Sumner's II Corps.

A grateful Major General Edwin Sumners personally thanked Williams for his assistance and recommended him for promotion. Williams' fellow officers said he was sure to be the next major general of volunteers. But Old Pap was not promoted, and he was crestfallen. Williams would claim that his advancement was blocked by preferential treatment given to the "graduated fools" of the regular army. Williams felt that those who were advanced had used the newspapers to magnify their inconsequential exploits. He was convinced that the press had credited the hard fighting of his corps to others. Old Pap avoided all contact with reporters for the rest of the war. Once again, he was relieved of command and returned to his division. On October 20, he was replaced by West Point Graduate Major General Henry Slocum. (photo at right)



Williams and his First division was held in reserve and escaped the carnage dealt the Yankees at Fredericksburg. They spent a quiet winter guarding the approaches to Washington. Williams was now the senior brigadier general of volunteers and having commanded at the corps and the divisional level, he expected a promotion. He did not make the advancement list and noted that less qualified generals were advanced. Old Pap seriously considered resigning.

Fortunately for the Union, Williams continued his service. In late spring of 1863, the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rappahannock River and marched through the area known as the Wilderness to strike at Lee's flank. However, on May 2, it was the Union flank that was attacked by Lee. Williams saw the collapse of General Oliver Otis "The Christian General" Howard's XI Corps before the onslaught of Stonewall Jackson. Old Pap took two brigades and, supported by artillery, smashed into the enemy lines, finally fighting his old adversary, Jackson, to a standstill. The next day he adroitly led his troops around Fairview Heights in the face of sledgehammer blows from Confederate General JEB Stuart's corps. Once again General Slocum was highly impressed and sent a letter directly to President Lincoln urging Williams's immediate promotion.

Once again a less experienced officer who was junior in grade to Williams, David Bell Birney, was promoted for his "capable leadership" at Chancellorsville. The New York Herald gave the credit due Williams for stopping the Confederate rout to Dan Sickles. The Herald reported that Williams was placidly waiting behind a "strong brick wall." The enraged Williams said, "War correspondents fled for safety the moment the first shot was fired, and then created accounts of pure fiction."

Old Pap felt that if he manipulated the press, as did Dan Sickles, he would lose his self-respect and "the good names of his children to the third and fourth generations." Dispirited and resentful. Williams led his division back across the Rappahannock and into camp.

After recovering with the rest of the army at Stafford Court House, Williams and his division left the camp on June 13, 1863 and began the march to Gettysburg. Due to a misunderstanding by General Slocum, on July 2 Williams had to assume command of II Corps once again. He moved his troops to Culp's Hill and extended the Union lines to the south into McAllister's Woods.

William's defense of Culp's Hill and the Union right flank was magnificent. He personally directed the placement of 26 guns along Baltimore Pike. The same guns repelled repeated attempted charges up Culp's Hill by the Confederates. He and his subordinates carefully chose positions for his brigades and they prevented wave after wave of attacking infantry. Williams made claims that his tactics rendered any assault on Culp's Hill useless.

Naturally, the press, New York Times and the Philadelphia Enquirer, gave all the credit to General Slocum. General Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac gave John Gentry, a Williams subordinate, credit for defending the Hill. Williams demanded that Meade correct his report. And he did, but it was not until March of 1864 when Williams received the corrected report and by then he was in Tullahoma, Tennessee.

Williams was ordered to Tullahoma, headquarters of XII Corps to reinforce General William S. Rosecrans at Chattanooga. Arriving in Nashville in October, Williams

spent the winter guarding the railroad tracks around Nashville from Rebel attacks. His congressman assured him that the next opening for major general would be filled by Williams. Instead he found himself now in XX Corps still a brigadier general. He was now working for General William T. Sherman whose hatred of the press was even greater than Williams' own. Sherman was willing to use the reporters to advance his own reputation, Williams was not.

In the spring of 1864 Sherman began his plan to capture Atlanta, Georgia. Old Pap's division fought at Resaca and then followed the retreating Rebels. Williams and his men fought several brutal battles around New Hope Church, Kennesaw Mountains and into the outskirts of Atlanta. Williams' division was the lead in Sherman's advance and as usual received no credit in the press coverage. Harper's weekly omitted Williams from all its captions and the Cincinnati Enquirer and New York Times gave John Geary and the second division all the credit for the New Hope Church success. Williams said that Geary was an example "of the lying humbugs in this army who contrived to keep their names connected to battles which they were not near." The number of division commander that kept the press and their staff busy with press releases.

When Hooker resigned as XX Corps commander, Old Pap was again placed in temporary command of the corps and General Thomas gave a strong recommendation for Williams' permanent command. Again, Sherman ignored the recommendation and asked for General Henry Slocum. To add salt to Old Pap's wound, A. P. Hovey and Peter Osterhaus were given brevet promotions to major general. Hovey had resigned from the army and Osterhaus had been absent from his command. Williams wrote to his daughter, "I have long given up all hope of promotion from the present powers. When officers can quit the army in the face of an enemy and get promotions in Washington, those who stay may well despair." Williams stayed.

After capturing Atlanta, Sherman began his devastating March to the Sea on November 15, 1864 and Williams once again assumed temporary command of XX Corps. After months of rugged campaigning, Old Pap entered the Carolinas and received news that on January 12, 1865 he had been breveted to major general. Receiving his long overdue promotion, Williams bitterly commented, "the people at home and our delegation at congress have done me great injustice and personal dishonor. But that my brevet is necessary to retain rank in my own corps, I would send it back."

Soon after leading his men in the battles of Averasboro and Bentonville, he was superseded in command by one of Sherman's favorites, J. A. Mowrer, and returned to his old division. Sherman said that only an act of congress could give Williams the rank that he deserves.

The March to the Sea ended with the surrender of Confederate General Johnston on April 12, 1865. Old Pap marched with his command in the Grand Review in Washington. The Union XX Corps was dissolved by June 13, 1865 and Williams sent to a new post in Camden, Arkansas. The army's final affront to Williams was to relieve him of command without notice while he was on a much deserved 20 day leave and mustered out as a brigadier general and no mention of his hard-earned brevet to major general.

After the army he became a minister to the Republic of Salvador, and the two terms in congress from his home state. Later, his admirers erected a monument (photo below) to him in Detroit, Michigan. His remarkable career was only soiled by the failure of the

army to grant him the rank that he so deserved. General Henry Slocum summed it up when he said, "I found him in camp as well as on the field a most valuable and efficient officer. His division did its full duty and he, as commander, was constantly at his proper post, both by night as well as day."

Williams suffered a stroke on December 21, 1878, and died in the U.S. Capitol Building. He is buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Detroit.



Source: Article in *CIVIL WAR, The Magazine of the Civil War Society, Issue XXXVI, July-August 1992, Alpheus Williams, "Old Pap"* written by Greg Forester