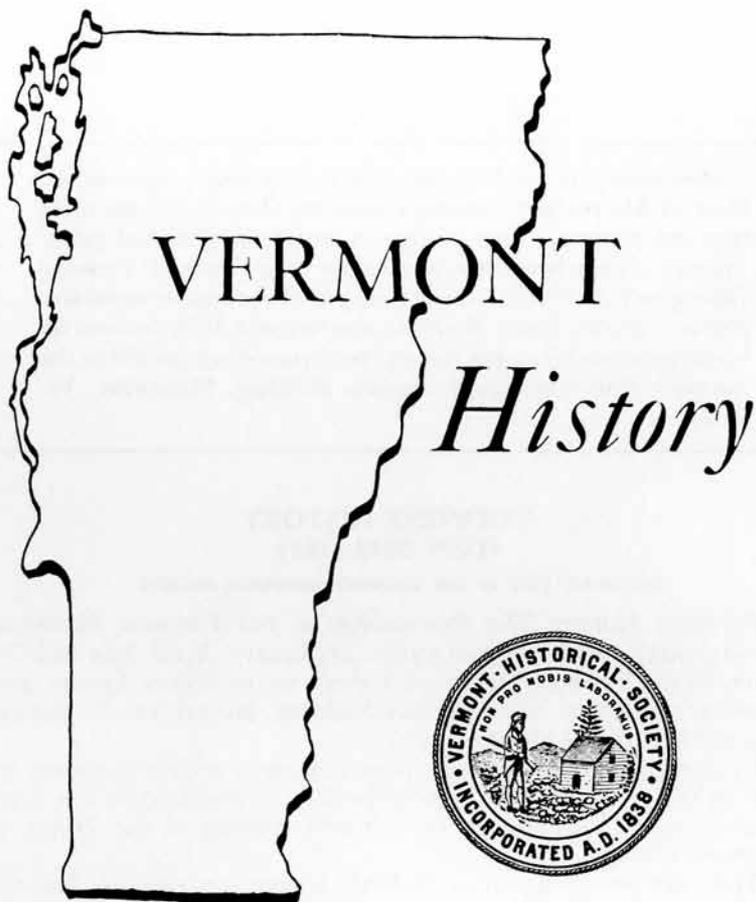
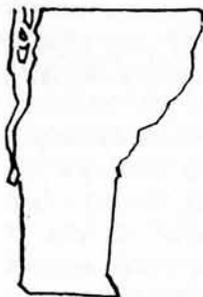


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General Hitchcock, the grandson of Ethan Allen, offered President Lincoln advice which might have brought the Civil War to an earlier end.

## A Reluctant Warrior Advises the President; Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Abraham Lincoln and the Union Army, Spring 1862

By MARSHALL TRUE

The story seems a simple one. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, a sixty-three year old retired army officer and graduate of West Point, was invited out of retirement to serve in Washington in the critical spring of 1862. The invitation to serve came from the newly appointed Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, and President Abraham Lincoln. Standard accounts which mention him at all have Hitchcock returning to Washington as an ineffectual advisor in the War Department, where he performed routine administrative duties in prisoner exchanges and courts martial until his retirement on October 1, 1867.<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock's journals and correspondence at the Library of Congress, particularly his memorandum to President Lincoln of March 30, 1862 (reproduced below), suggest a richer and more complex tale.<sup>2</sup> The memo shows that Hitchcock offered Lincoln and Stanton advice which, had they taken it, might have changed the course of the Civil War. Only when they did not take his advice did Hitchcock resign himself to ordinary administrative details.

An officer for almost forty years, Hitchcock had not only taught tactics at West Point, commanded the model third regiment at Jefferson Barracks, and served with distinction with Scott in Mexico, but he had also earned a well-deserved reputation among his fellow officers as a military scholar and a tactician. General Winfield Scott, one of the United States' most respected tacticians, thought Hitchcock was an excellent officer whose services would significantly aid the Union War effort.<sup>3</sup>

Hitchcock had been extremely reluctant to return to military service. He had forcefully declined the command of a "regiment of Green Mountain boys" from his native Vermont offered him by John N. Pomeroy

of Burlington in September of 1861;<sup>4</sup> "I have thought younger men than myself more fitted to render service . . .," he wrote Pomeroy.<sup>5</sup> And he continued throughout 1861 and early 1862 to resist all such appeals. Hitchcock had always been something of a reluctant soldier, and as he admitted to his diary, he had "no heart in this horrible war;" moreover, his retirement in St. Louis—which he had devoted to scholarship—remained a happy one. Throughout his military career Hitchcock had read, taken notes on, and speculated about philosophy, literature, and religion. In retirement he had written books on alchemy, the ideas of Spinoza and Swedenborg, and had recently completed a book entitled, *Christ the Spirit*, on the spiritual meaning of Jesus' life. He regarded scholarship as his true calling.<sup>6</sup>

Despite his considerable reluctance, in March of 1862 Hitchcock agreed to return to military service. Part of the reason for this decision rests on changed circumstances in the War Department. In January of 1862, President Lincoln had requested the resignation of Secretary of War, Simon J. Cameron. Cameron and Hitchcock had been enemies since 1837 when Hitchcock, on duty as a disbursing agent to the Winnebago Indians in the Northwest Territory, had uncovered fraud and corruption in Cameron's dealings with the Indians. Hitchcock believed Cameron was "a disgracefully corrupt man," and there was no possibility of his serving the Union cause in Washington under Cameron's direction. Cameron's departure from Washington for the American mission in Russia opened the door for Hitchcock's return to military service.<sup>7</sup>

Hitchcock's unpublished journals also show a growing concern for the way the Lincoln administration was conducting the war; he was particularly aghast at the Union defeat at Manassas which he found both predictable and stupid.<sup>8</sup> Hitchcock was also distressed at Federal policies in Missouri which in his eyes had led to the "dark prospect" that secessionism would succeed there. Hitchcock worked with Generals William S. Harney and Henry W. Halleck, in charge of the Department of Missouri, to prevent secessionists from gaining control of the state. As part of that effort he authored a protest which denounced the military bill passed by the Missouri Legislature in 1861 as "an indirect secession ordinance."<sup>9</sup>

Many of his fellow officers, including Harney and Halleck as well as Scott, urged Hitchcock both privately and publicly to return to arms. The Reverend William G. Elliot, Hitchcock's friend for more than twenty years, wrote "Accept the appointment. . . . You will have done a great good, and a Patriot's duty. . . ." His friends argued that since Hitchcock was already committed to the Union cause, he should take up active military service.<sup>10</sup>

Cameron's departure, the unfavorable course of the war, and the remonstrances of his friends forced Hitchcock to give serious thought to going back to military duty; nevertheless, worried about his health and persuaded by his idea of the public interest, he continued to resist. As late as February 11, 1862, he wrote to General Halleck, then in command of Union troops in Missouri, who had sought Hitchcock's services, that "My better judgment is not convinced. . . . I am at liberty to sacrifice myself, but I do not feel at liberty to jeopardize the public interest." As Hitchcock candidly revealed in his journal a few days after this letter to Halleck, "I know the terrible responsibility, what if I should suffer physical collapse while at the head of an army?" Hitchcock had not enjoyed good health since the Mexican War; specifically he was worried about an "incipient paralysis" about which a doctor had warned him as early as 1849.<sup>11</sup>

What finally persuaded Hitchcock to return to military duty was the result of a series of interviews with Secretary of War Stanton and President Lincoln which convinced the old soldier that his advice was desperately needed. On Friday March 7, 1862, Hitchcock received a telegram from Stanton demanding an immediate "personal conference."<sup>12</sup> Hitchcock took the first train out of St. Louis and arrived in Washington on Monday, March 10th, exhausted, dusty, and suffering from a severe nosebleed. He went directly to the War Department where Stanton told him that "he and the President wanted the benefit of my experience."<sup>13</sup> Hitchcock was then taken to the White House where both Lincoln and Stanton assured him that he could serve in the War Department itself. They wanted his experience and counsel. Hitchcock agreed to serve, but he still harbored serious doubts because, as he recorded in his journal, "I am almost afraid that that secretary hardly knows what he wants himself."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless Stanton and Lincoln had made Hitchcock an offer that his sense of duty and patriotism would not permit him to refuse; and on March 11 Hitchcock informed Stanton that he would return to duty. In his letter accepting the appointment, however, he specifically disclaimed any command position and asked that he be assigned to the War Department with orders to report to Stanton himself.<sup>15</sup>

On March 13th, Stanton ordered Hitchcock back to Washington and over the next few days attempted to change Hitchcock's mind about accepting a field command. This behavior suggests that at least Secretary Stanton, if not the President himself, had not been entirely candid with Hitchcock about the role they expected him to play. Stanton's importuning of Hitchcock peaked on March 17, when, according to Hitchcock's journal, the Secretary made serious allegations about General George McClellan's competence and patriotism. Although Hitchcock did not record the specific charges, he noted that he "felt positively sick" upon hearing them.

Hitchcock also told the Secretary that he could not "improvise a campaign having nothing to do with the army in the field."<sup>16</sup> (On March 8th General McClellan had his stormy breakfast meeting with President Lincoln at which they discussed accusations of treason against the General; Stanton's interview with Hitchcock argues strongly that the Secretary of War did not have full confidence in McClellan's integrity.)<sup>17</sup>

It was in this atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust that Hitchcock began work in the War Department. In mid-March, Lincoln relieved McClellan of overall command of the Union forces and confined his command to the Army of the Potomac.<sup>18</sup> As the military situation developed, Union armies were preparing to mount two major offensives against the forces of the Confederacy—against Corinth in northeastern Mississippi in the West and against Richmond, the Confederate capital, in the East. Plans for these offensives had been formulated over the winter months and seemed fully developed by the time of Hitchcock's arrival. However, on March 23 Stonewall Jackson disrupted Union plans with an ill-advised attack on the forces of General James Shields at Kernstown in the Shenandoah Valley. The battle itself was inconsequential; Jackson was seriously outnumbered, and his forces were roundly defeated. Yet the effects of this minor fracas were profound indeed.<sup>19</sup> Kernstown, in fact, enabled Jackson to wage his successful diversionary campaign in the Shenandoah Valley during the Spring and Summer of 1862. Jackson's sally aroused renewed fears about the defense of Washington and set off a series of readjustments in the deployment of northern forces which created severe consequences for General McClellan's peninsula campaign against Richmond. Most importantly, General Irwin McDowell's forces of approximately 30,000 men were retained for the defense of the capital. Additionally 11,000 men, commanded by Brigadier General Louis Blenker, were ordered from the Shenandoah to join the newly created Mountain Command of General John C. Fremont. General Hitchcock participated in planning these adjustments, and it was to some of the questions that they raised that the following memorandum was addressed.<sup>20</sup>

Copy of a paper handed to the President by General H[itchock] War Department, Washington, D. C., 30th March, 1862

The main line of the enemy extends from Richmond through Chattanooga and Corinth to Memphis; and at Corinth there is a connection south.

Gen[eral] Halleck is acting upon the West of this line, with Gen[eral] Buell as his immediate commander, having Corinth in view as one object; and some point at or near the Cumberland Gap as another object. Gen[eral] McClellan has Richmond for his object with Washington under his safekeeping.

The immediate interest of that war is connected with the above indications and all adjacent operations are incidental.

It is necessary to break the line of communication between Richmond and Corinth.

This may be done by Buell; and if he should occupy the Cumberland Cap, near the R[ailroad] this object will be sufficiently accomplished.

If some point East of the Gap, be also made an object it will require a large force to reach and maintain it, or that force might be destroyed by the Enemy.

Instead therefore of employing a force necessary for seizing a point East of the Gap, (as proposed by the President,) it might be better to employ a less[er] force in the protection of the Bal[timore] and Ohio r[ail] r[oad], (the duty assigned to Gen[eral] Fremont,).

From present indications it might be better, instead of sending the Mountain Department all of the forces desired by its commander, to divide that force,—one part to go to him for the protection of the B[altimore] and O[hio] and the country immediately south of it, and the other part, to strengthen McClellan's *Right* now occupied by Shields; the route from Richmond being opened to the enemy, who, though not likely to take it, might be invited by its weakness to make some desperate attempt, similar to one already made by Jackson upon Shields [at Kernstown].

A movement by McClellan's Left is known to the enemy; hence nothing is more natural than a blow on McClellan's *Right*. Nothing has intervened since that made a few days since (by Jackson) to prevent a repetition of it with a larger force.

If McClellan should fail,—not likely to happen, but if he should fail, what would be the movement of the enemy?

This should be guarded against by a part of the force called for by Fremont, instead of sending that force to cut the Richmond and Knoxville R[ailroad]—the success of which might even aid in forcing the enemy to make a desperate attempt on the right of Washington.

Hitchcock's advice chiefly concerned the deployment of troops in the Shenandoah Valley. Specifically, he sought to persuade President Lincoln not to give the 11,000 men, under the command of Blenker, into Fremont's hands and thereby weaken Union defenses in the Shenandoah Valley. Hitchcock's strategic concerns were obvious. As McClellan's army proceeded up the peninsula towards Richmond, Confederate forces advised by General Robert E. Lee would have to seek some means of striking back to relieve the pressure.<sup>21</sup> One area in which Union forces might be threatened was on McClellan's right in the Shenandoah. In fact Jackson's attack on Shields at Kernstown had, in Hitchcock's eyes, advertised the South's intentions of doing just that. The failure to keep adequate numbers of men in the Shenandoah Valley weakened Banks' and Shields' forces and made them less capable of resisting an attack. Furthermore, the weakness of the Union defense in the Shenandoah meant that more men had to be kept available for the defense of the capital. McDowell's army could not then be employed in aid of McClellan's campaign. Had McDowell's forces been available to McClellan, as he had believed they would be and as

originally planned, McClellan might have been able to take Richmond which, in turn, might have brought the Civil War to an earlier end.

Much that Hitchcock had warned Lincoln against happened. Stonewall Jackson's success in driving Banks out of the Shenandoah and across the Potomac, which effectively immobilized McDowell's army, was a critical part of Lee's strategy for defending the Confederacy. By gathering his forces to attack at strategic points and using these attacks to keep enemy forces dispersed and unable to concentrate against him, Lee and the Confederacy managed to turn back McClellan's army.<sup>22</sup> Hitchcock privately advised General Winfield Scott that Banks' defeat had "been a disaster" and made it very clear that he had warned Lincoln and Stanton against such an eventuality on several occasions.<sup>23</sup>

The failure of Lincoln and Stanton to take his advice persuaded Hitchcock that his services as a military adviser were no longer necessary.<sup>24</sup> He submitted his resignation because, as Hitchcock confided to his journal, "It might well be supposed (if my resignation should be publicly announced) that I had left Washington *in disgust*."<sup>25</sup> As indeed he had. Hitchcock left Washington in late May after offering Stanton his resignation. He spent the summer visiting friends and relatives in New York and New England. Stanton refused to accept his resignation and instead offered him an indefinite leave. By fall Hitchcock was back in what he saw as his "quarantine" in the War Department.<sup>26</sup> Although he was convinced that Lincoln had erred by giving Fremont a command and by not heeding his advice about Jackson in the Shenandoah, Hitchcock had no interest in creating a political controversy. As he confided to General Scott, "I have not the slightest idea of charging upon any one faults of design."<sup>27</sup> He continued to be politically loyal to Lincoln and Stanton. In the Department, Hitchcock supervised court martial procedures and attempted to regularize prisoner exchanges; he also continued to read and write about Shakespeare, Dante and his beloved philosophers. After the spring of 1862 he never again sought the role of military advisor to the President. This unhappy conclusion, however, was not due to the General's failure to offer sound military advice; rather, it was a product of Lincoln's and Stanton's failure to heed that advice when it was offered.

Would Hitchcock's advice have altered the course of the war? Could the war have ended earlier? Might there have been fewer casualties? Any answer can only be conjectural. Ethan Allen Hitchcock had the intelligence and experience to offer good military counsel to his superiors who were busy men with much else on their minds. He was then the right man in the right place at the right time. This was not enough. Perhaps Hitchcock's diffidence about his military career prevented him from insisting once his advice had been rejected. Perhaps a man who had spent

much of his life reading philosophers from Plato to Kant and Swedenborg readily accepted the futility of individual effort in history. Or perhaps Lincoln and Stanton had only wanted the services of the grandson of Ethan Allen, hero of the Battle of Ticonderoga, for political purposes of their own. In any case Hitchcock, a reluctant warrior in the first place, failed in his single attempt to alter the military history of the Civil War.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See for example Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fort Sumter to Perryville* (Random House: New York, 1958), pp. 266-267; T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (Vintage Books: New York, 1952), pp. 74-75; or Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1962), pp. 198-99 and 214.

<sup>2</sup> The Ethan Allen Hitchcock Papers at the Library of Congress include his correspondence from 1815 to 1868. A copy of Hitchcock's voluminous journal kept from 1839 to 1868 is in the papers of his nephew-in-law, William Croffut, who edited *Hitchcock's Fifty Years in Camp and Field* (G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York and London, 1909). Citations below will indicate whether the document cited is in the Hitchcock or Croffut collections in the Library of Congress Manuscript Collection.

<sup>3</sup> For brief biographies of Hitchcock, see George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., from its Establishment, in 1802, to 1890, with the Early History of the United States Military Academy* (3rd edition, New York and Boston, 1891), I, 167-79 and I. Bernard Cohen, "Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Soldier—Humanitarian—Scholar Discoverer of the 'True Subject' of the Hermetic Art," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (April, 1951), pp. 29-136.

<sup>4</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Pomeroy to Hitchcock, September, 1861, Box 3, Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Hitchcock to Pomeroy, September, 1861, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>6</sup> Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, September 17, 1861, Box 9, Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hitchcock had devoted his retirement to the writing, reading and reflection in which he delighted. He was living comfortably with the family of Dr. William Beaumont and enjoyed visiting the family of his nephew, Henry Hitchcock.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron's brief tenure in the War Department is discussed in Allen Nevins, *The War for the Union*, volume I, *The Improvised War, 1861-1862* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1959), pp. 396ff. The Winnebago incident is briefly treated in Lee F. Crippen, *Simon Cameron Antebellum Years* (The Mississippi Valley Press: Oxford, Ohio, 1942), pp. 35-41 and in Hitchcock's *Fifty Years*, pp. 114-119. Hitchcock's opinion quoted here is from his journal, Croffut Papers, October 4, 1861, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Hitchcock Journal, New York, July 22, 1861, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Hitchcock Papers, Hitchcock to General Winfield Scott, January 30, 1861, Box 2, Folder 15; and Collum, *Register*, I, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Elliot to Hitchcock, February 11, 1862, Box 2, Folder 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Hitchcock to Halleck, February 11, 1862, Box 2, Folder 16; and Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, February 20, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4. On Hitchcock's health, see *Fifty Years*, p. 353.

<sup>12</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Stanton to Hitchcock, Telegram, March 13, 1862, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>13</sup> Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, Washington, March 15, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4. Also see Hitchcock Papers, Hitchcock to General Lorenzo Thomas, March 17, 1862, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>14</sup> Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, Washington, March 15, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>15</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Hitchcock to Stanton, Willard Hotel, March 11, 1862, Box 2, Folder 17.

<sup>16</sup> Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, Washington, March 17, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>17</sup> See Foote, *Civil War*, pp. 253-254. Stanton spoke to Hitchcock of McClellan's "astonishing incompetency," Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, Washington, March 17, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>18</sup> Foote, *Civil War*, p. 409.

<sup>19</sup> The best brief account of Kernstown and its significance is Vincent S. Esposito, ed., *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, volume I, 1869-1900 (Praeger Publishers: New York, 1959), Maps 49 and 50.

<sup>20</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Box 2, Folder 17. Corinth was a small town in northeast Mississippi and was important chiefly as a rail connecting point. Readers might be reminded that Hitchcock was writing in Washington, D.C. and right and left should be read in that context. See Esposito, ed., *Atlas of American Wars*, Maps 50 through 53 for military details of Hitchcock's advice.

<sup>21</sup> Lee had studied tactics under Hitchcock at West Point, and Hitchcock regarded him as an "old friend and associate." Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, July 5, 1863, Box 9, Folder 6.

<sup>22</sup> Russell F. Weigly, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc.: New York, 1973), pp. 102ff.

<sup>23</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Hitchcock to Scott, New York, May 28, 1862, Box 3, Folder 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Hitchcock to Stanton, May 27, 1862, and June 1, 1862, Box 3, Folder 3.

<sup>25</sup> Croffut Papers, Hitchcock Journal, New York, June 11, 1862, Box 9, Folder 4.

<sup>26</sup> Hitchcock Papers, Hitchcock to Mrs. Mary Mann, New York, November 22, 1862, Box 3, Folder 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Hitchcock to Scott, New York, May 28, 1862, Box 3, Folder 3.

## Franco-Americans and the Vermont Melting Pot

"Vermont is the grave of Franco-Americans in New England. . . . It must be the state which is most French, but our people have melted away, and have lost all their identity. There are about 40,000 today, whereas they ought to have been a third of the population if they had kept their language and religion. The first bishop was French, Mgr. De Goesbriant [sic], then Mgr. Michaud, with an English spirit in spite of his French name. It was under the episcopacy of Mgr. Rice . . . that the good Franco-American clergy of former times were practically converted to a consciousness contrary to our hopes for French survival. Today you see a young, so-called Franco-American clergy who speak nothing but English. . . .

— *Le Travailleur*, 13 mars [1940], quoted in "Grain de Sel" dans *La vie Franco-Américaine* (1940), 150, copy in the library of l'Association Canada-Américaine, Manchester, N.H.

"Who are the Franco-Americans? . . . They are inhabitants of the United States who, by right of birth or naturalization, are citizens of the American republic, in the democratic framework of which they wish to integrate their French heritage with their American citizenship."

— *Vie Française*, 4 (#3) (Nov. 1949), 131.