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# "The Honor of Manhood:" Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Notions of Martial Masculinity

## **Abstract**

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is perhaps best known as the commander of the 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry during the Battle of Gettysburg. While depictions of Chamberlain's martial glory abound, little attention has been paid to the complicated motives of the man himself. This paper seeks to examine the unique ways in which Chamberlain interacted with Victorian conceptions of martial masculinity: his understanding and expression of it, his efforts to channel it, and his use of it as a guiding principle throughout the trials of both the American Civil War and his post-war life.

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Joshua Chamberlain, Battle of Gettysburg, Little Round Top, 20th Maine, Appomattox, Bowdoin College, Victorian Masculinity, Honor, Civil War Medicine, Civil War Amputees, Masculinity, Martial Masculinity, Gender

**“THE HONOR OF MANHOOD”:  
JOSHUA LAWRENCE CHAMBERLAIN AND  
NOTIONS OF MARTIAL MASCULINITY**

Bryan Caswell

Few veterans of the American Civil War were as prolific in their post-war writing as Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the so-called “Hero of Little Round Top.” Indeed, Chamberlain’s accounts of his service, in particular his role in the Battle of Gettysburg, are so numerous that his importance has at times been quite overestimated by historians and the general public alike. He has been hailed alternately as one of the saviors of the Union at Gettysburg and as an egotistical, washed-up old soldier seeking only to promote himself, oft-times at the expense of other officers. Though Chamberlain’s writings do show him to be unusually adept at self-promotion, his detractors fail to recognize the deeper motives that lurked behind Chamberlain’s post-war behavior. Deprived of what might have been considered the basis of his masculinity, Chamberlain instead had sought to reaffirm and relive the manhood he had earned through his exemplary service in the Civil War.

Chamberlain finished the war a brevet major general of volunteers. Chosen to accept the Confederate surrender at Appomattox in April of 1865, Chamberlain returned to Maine a celebrated war hero and was soon elected governor, a post for which he still holds the record for most consecutive terms. After his stint in the public sphere, Chamberlain returned to his beloved alma mater Bowdoin

College, this time as its president.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite his myriad successes after the war, Chamberlain looked for opportunities to recreate his wartime experiences and accomplishments with increasing regularity, the most obvious manifestation of which was his preoccupation with writing the history of the war. This preoccupation would continue until his death on February 24, 1914.

Before examining Chamberlain's re-creation of martial masculinity, however, that manhood itself must first be defined and explored. Chamberlain's notions of proper masculine behavior are evident from the very inception of his intent to enlist in the Union Army. Among radical antislavery circles, the very fact that Chamberlain held abolitionist sympathies lent him a level of masculinity.<sup>2</sup> Of far greater effect was the importance Chamberlain placed on each man's patriotic duty. As he prepared to volunteer in 1862, Chamberlain maintained a steady stream of correspondence with Governor Israel Washburn, two letters of which are particularly revealing. In the first, dated July 18, Chamberlain wrote that "every man ought to come forward and ask to be placed at his proper post." On a more personal note, he continued, "I do not want to be the last in the field. . . . I know I can be of service to my Country in this hour of her peril."<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is repeated in a much

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Pullen, *Joshua Chamberlain: A Hero's Life and Legacy* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999), 20, 57; Golay, *To Gettysburg and Beyond*, 304.

<sup>2</sup> Abolitionism, especially of the militant variety, was seen as a mark of manliness among certain circles in New England. See Stephen Kantrowitz, "Fighting Like Men: Civil War Dilemmas of Abolitionist Manhood," *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, Catherine Clinton & Nina Silber, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Israel Washburn, 14 July 1862.

more succinct fashion in the second letter, dated August 8: “I feel it to be my duty to serve my country.”<sup>4</sup>

Though a wonderful and manly sentiment, to be sure, Chamberlain’s sense of duty may not have earned quite as much support from Chamberlain’s loved ones as it did from the governor of Maine. Though his father had encouraged martial virtue in Chamberlain from an early age, Joshua Chamberlain the elder seems to have undergone a change of heart in 1862 and no longer wished for his son to join the military, most likely due to the recent death of Chamberlain’s younger brother, Horace.<sup>5</sup> Some biographers of Chamberlain additionally claim that his wife Francis, or “Fanny,” did not approve of her husband’s intention to enlist. Diane Smith argues, however, that Fanny was actually supportive of Chamberlain, encouraging him to do his duty as he saw fit.<sup>6</sup> It is entirely possible, however, that this support did not come from her own sympathies but was a result of the expectation that Northern women should prove their own patriotism by willingly sacrificing their menfolk.<sup>7</sup> If this was in fact the case, Chamberlain left behind him a household uneasy about his going and uncertain of the value of his possible sacrifice. He would have to prove them wrong.

Once an officer of the Union army, Chamberlain displayed behavior that landed him squarely in the category

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Israel Washburn, 8 August 1862

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Fanny & Joshua*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah E. Goulka, *The Grand Old Man of Maine: Selected Letters of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), xxxvii; Smith, *Fanny & Joshua*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 18-19; Frances Clarke, *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 43.

of Union soldiers historian Lorien Foote labels as “Gentlemen.” Gentlemen within the Union armed forces valued self-restraint above all else and believed that manhood could only be gained and kept through the avoidance of uncouth behavior.<sup>8</sup> Frances Clarke agrees and argues in *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* that self-control, particularly when enduring suffering, granted moral superiority in Victorian society.<sup>9</sup> One of the most integral aspects of the self-restrained manhood of a Victorian gentleman was temperance. Not to be confused with complete abstinence from drinking alcohol, temperance only required one not to drink in excess and to bear all in moderation.<sup>10</sup> Though he was no stranger to having a drink or two, Chamberlain himself was the soul of temperance, going so far as to temporarily block the promotion of a Lt. Nichols on the grounds of “drinking intoxicating liquor to excess.”<sup>11</sup> Chamberlain’s self-restraint also manifested itself in his purportedly humble reaction to any praise directed towards him, as he explained to Fanny in a letter just after the Battle of Gettysburg: “I am receiving all sorts of praise, but bear it meekly.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite this emphasis on restraint, tender emotions were also valued as a basic tenet of manhood among gentlemen. Indeed, historian Reid Mitchell states in *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* that “true

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<sup>8</sup> Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, *War Stories*, 18, 22, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Foote, *Gentlemen*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Israel Washburn, 28 October 1863.

<sup>12</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 4 July 1863.

men recognized the role of emotions.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Chamberlain was no exception, writing often to his wife and children of how much he cared for and missed them. In a letter written only months after enlisting, Chamberlain told Fanny that he was “thinking of you and the darlings whenever my thoughts are not absorbed in military affairs, & dreaming of you every night.”<sup>14</sup> Six months later, in April of 1863, Chamberlain continued to write lovingly to his family, ensuring Fanny that “I am always thinking first of you.”<sup>15</sup>

An officer’s masculinity was, of course, not limited to his behavior in camp and with his family but was also crucially defined by his conduct on the battlefield. In his seminal work *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, Gerald Linderman points to the centrality of courage in considerations of the manhood of volunteer soldiers, writing that the two were often used interchangeably by men on both sides of the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> In *Meanings for Manhood*, Clyde Griffin elaborates further, describing Victorian martial masculinity as a combination of “murderous male conflict” and “male camaraderie.”<sup>17</sup> Chamberlain’s own perception of the battlefield was very much in keeping with these notions of what could be called glorious combat, and despite his participation in and exposure to the brutal realities of combat, Chamberlain seems to have fully embraced the

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<sup>13</sup> Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 26 October 1862.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 24 April 1863.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Clyde Griffin, “Reconstructing Masculinity from the Evangelical Revival to the Waning of Progressivism: A Speculative Synthesis,” in *Meanings for Manhood*, Mark Carnes & Clyde Griffin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 191.

Victorian culture of martial courage and glory. In a notebook entry made while still in the range of enemy fire at Fredericksburg in December of 1862, Chamberlain praised the valor of the men who had given their lives in futile charges against the prepared Confederate positions on the northern end of the field and thought it fitting that such brave souls should be given the honor of being laid to rest beneath the aurora borealis as it illuminated the night sky.<sup>18</sup> The following July, as the Army of the Potomac recovered from the Battle of Gettysburg, Chamberlain wrote to his wife exclaiming the virtues of his men and the army at large, saying “We are fighting gloriously” and that his regiment, the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Volunteer Infantry, had held “the post of honor.”<sup>19</sup> Two days later, when giving his report of the regiment’s performance in the battle, Chamberlain went on to write that “Our roll of Honor is the three hundred eighty officers and men who fought at Gettysburg.”<sup>20</sup> Valor in the face of danger could even mitigate otherwise undesirable characteristics, as in the case of Lt. Nichols who, five months after Chamberlain’s initial misgivings concerning alcohol, was supported in his promotion due to his “earnest and brave” behavior.<sup>21</sup>

Chamberlain’s belief in the honor and glory of combat was not simply contained within notebooks and letters, but manifested itself in his own actions throughout the war. He was praised multiple times for his courageous service at Gettysburg, where he led a bayonet charge into the teeth of a Confederate regiment, and, in what may have been a shining example of Victorian self-control and modesty in the face of suffering, Chamberlain did not even mention that

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<sup>18</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, Notebook Entry 13-14 December 1862.

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 4 July 1863.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Lt. George B. Herendeen, 6 July 1863.

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, Testimonial, 10 March 1864.



he was wounded in his official report of the battle.<sup>22</sup> Almost a year later, as Chamberlain was recovering from his Petersburg wound, he received possibly the highest praise conceivable: that of Ulysses S Grant, Commanding General of the United States Army. Upon hearing of Chamberlain’s fall in the process of leading an assault, Grant promoted him to brigadier general on the spot, the first field promotion the lieutenant general had ever given.<sup>23</sup> If this were not enough, Grant wrote in his memoirs that “[Chamberlain] was gallantly leading his brigade at the time, as he had been in the habit of doing in all the engagements in which he had previously been engaged.”<sup>24</sup>

Aside from notable heroics on the field of battle, Chamberlain’s sense of manhood also sustained a deep and abiding courage that impelled him never to shy away from combat. In no fewer than six letters to various family and loved ones, Chamberlain wrote either of his reluctance to leave the army on leave or his anxiety to return to the fight once on leave, even after being wounded multiple times.<sup>25</sup> Some of these letters were written in the context of

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<sup>22</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, “Report of Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain, Twentieth Maine Infantry, July 6, 1863,” In *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 1985 reprint (Harrisburg, PA: Historical Times, 1985), 622-626 .

<sup>23</sup> Alice Rains Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 215.

<sup>24</sup> Ulysses S Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, Vol. II (New York: Library of America, 1990), 601.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 24 April 1863; Joshua Chamberlain to Lt. F. T. Locke, 27 July 1863; Joshua Chamberlain to Col. E. D. Townsend, 9 May 1864; Joshua Chamberlain to Samuel Cony, 31 August 1864; Joshua Chamberlain to Joshua Chamberlain, Sr., 12 February 1865; Joshua Chamberlain to Sarah Brastow, 9 March 1865.

Chamberlain's concern for his men, for as he wrote in a letter to Governor Coburn in 1863, "I consider it an officer's first duty to look after the welfare of his men."<sup>26</sup> Yet in others, Chamberlain uses distinct phrasing that makes clear that his desires are fueled by considerations of masculinity, the most notable being in a letter to Fanny of March, 1865, when "honor and manliness" prompted Chamberlain's final return to active duty.<sup>27</sup> It was just such a combination of coolness under fire, disregard for personal safety, and concern for subordinates that marked Chamberlain and others like him a strong man and, by extension, a model officer.<sup>28</sup>

Yet while he had admirably lived up to the standards of Victorian martial masculinity in his service to the Union, Chamberlain's life would be forever altered on June 18, 1864. Ordered to capture a formidable Confederate system of works, Chamberlain led his brigade in charging the Rebel positions. Struck in the hip by a Confederate minié ball, Chamberlain collapsed, bidding his men to continue on without him. Chamberlain was carried from the field on a stretcher to a makeshift hospital tent, where his wound was initially pronounced fatal and inoperable. His younger brother Tom, a junior officer in the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine, would not accept this state of affairs, however, and brought two surgeons from Chamberlain's brigade to save his older brother's life.<sup>29</sup> As the two men set to work, the full extent of Chamberlain's ghastly injury became known. The ball had passed obliquely upward through his right hip into his left, rupturing the bladder and urethra before fracturing the pelvic bone. After extracting the bullet, Chamberlain's surgeons were able to reconnect his urinary passageways,

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<sup>26</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Abner Coburn, 21 July 1863.

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Sarah Brastow, 9 March 1865.

<sup>28</sup> Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 45; Foote, *Gentlemen*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Trulock, *Hands of Providence*, 213-214.

and a metal catheter was inserted to prevent urine from draining through the wound itself. Though a valid fix when used for a short period of time, this catheter was allowed to remain in place for too long and as a result formed a fistula, or small opening, in the flesh of Chamberlain’s pelvis. This fistula would later be the cause of recurring pain that required four additional surgeries over the course of Chamberlain’s life, rendering him incontinent and impotent.<sup>30</sup> The now-general’s life had been saved, but at great cost.

Chamberlain’s wound had sufficiently healed by March of 1865 to allow him to take part in the final campaigns of the war, as the Army of the Potomac broke the Army of Northern Virginia and forced its surrender at Appomattox Court House in April. None of Chamberlain’s courage or gallantry seemed to have been lost, and he ended the war with distinction. This is not unusual for, as Frances Clarke argues in her study of Civil War amputees, most wounded veterans of the American Civil War were not disillusioned but were rather confirmed in their own religion and patriotism, and graphic injuries portrayed not the horrid nature of war but the commitment of the injured to his country’s cause. Indeed, though he was not missing any limb or other part of his body, Chamberlain’s reaction to his wound and his post-war persona are consistent with the conclusions of Clarke’s study. This should come as no surprise, as the loss of one’s biological basis for manhood could well be considered psychological trauma akin to amputation. Chamberlain’s wound may even have been more traumatic, for if an amputation could be considered

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<sup>30</sup> Charles K. McAllister, “The Lion of the Union: The Pelvic Wound of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain,” *Journal of Urology* 163, no. 3 (March 2000), 713-716.

effeminate, what then might people have thought of being rendered impotent?<sup>31</sup>

Clarke identifies three sources of value amputees placed on their own bodily sacrifice, especially if they wrote of their experiences after the war: civic commitment, religious insight, and strengthening of character.<sup>32</sup> The second, religious insight, is apparent in Chamberlain's behavior from the moment he was wounded. Having briefly attended Bangor Theological Seminary as a young man in consideration of entering the clergy, Chamberlain possessed a deep and abiding faith that is evident throughout his wartime correspondence, no more so than on June 19, 1864, as he lay suffering from what he believed to be a mortal wound. Scribbling a hasty letter to his wife, Chamberlain wrote,

My darling wife,

I am lying mortally wounded the doctors think, but my mind & heart are at peace Jesus Christ is my all-sufficient savior. I go to him. God bless & keep & comfort you precious one, you have been a precious wife to me. To know & love you makes life & death beautiful.<sup>33</sup>

Chamberlain's civic commitment was also above reproach and was both defined and grew in strength as a result of his service. Four years after the war, in a letter to the Maine Republican Nominating Committee, Chamberlain avowed that he was "still strong in the faith of her [the Union's]

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<sup>31</sup> Clarke, *War Stories*, 4, 57-58, 159.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 146, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 19 June 1864.

cause.”<sup>34</sup> Finally, as brevet major general, governor of Maine, and president of Bowdoin College, Chamberlain’s strength of character was above reproach, and he was held in such high regard by his superiors in the army that he had been chosen to receive the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

Paradoxically, Chamberlain’s very survival may have been the most damaging aspect of his wounding. While amputees and other wounded veterans sought to confirm the justifications of their own sacrifices, the commitment of those who sacrificed their lives in the line of duty was never questioned. Men, particularly officers, who perished in inspiring fashion with little regard for their own mortality were often transformed into martyrs, with friends and family nearly obligated to hold their deceased as an example of the highest devotion.<sup>35</sup> The events of Chamberlain’s wounding conform to the conventions of patriotic martyrdom extremely well. Ordered to take an enemy position in an impossible assault, Chamberlain not only led his men with unquestioning bravery but at one point received the colors from a falling flag bearer and personally bore them onwards. Struck down for his courage, Chamberlain encouraged his men to proceed without him as he attempted to rise despite excruciating pain.<sup>36</sup> Carried to the rear and told his wound was mortal, Chamberlain put all faith in God and faced death unafraid, confident in his faith and his affection for his loved ones.<sup>37</sup> Yet instead of being granted a martyr’s death and joining all those men on the Union’s Roll of Honor,

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<sup>34</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to the Maine Republican Nominating Committee, 27 April 1869.

<sup>35</sup> Clarke, *War Stories*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> Trulock, *Hands of Providence*, 206-210; Longacre, *The Solder and the Man*, 193-197.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 19 June 1864.

Chamberlain found his life restored to him, the very basis of his manhood in agonizing ruin. Thus would Joshua Chamberlain be forced to reenter civilian life, the martyr who survived.

Chamberlain's return to life outside the army proved to be an intensely trying affair. Absorbed in the affairs of state as governor of Maine and then with the business of running Bowdoin College as its President, Chamberlain's grip on domestic tranquility loosened considerably. Fanny, who had always sought attention, began to grow distant, acting out and traveling extensively to live with various relatives. Though there exists no concrete proof, one cannot help but wonder how great a role her husband's incontinence and impotence played in Fanny's restless behavior. Events came to a head in the fall of 1868, when Fanny supposedly spread allegations of being physically abused by her husband.<sup>38</sup> Chamberlain moved quickly to quash such talk and, while there is scant evidence of whether such abuse actually occurred, the two would live in legal separation for over a decade before reconciling.<sup>39</sup> As his failure as male head of household was added to the pains of his pelvic injury, Chamberlain's writings begin to show a distinct pattern. Though he wrote in 1865 that "Soldiering in time of peace is almost as much against my grain as being a peace man in time of war," Chamberlain appears to have increasingly associated martial service with essential qualities of masculinity.<sup>40</sup> Terms such as "manhood" or "manly" rarely refer to subjects outside the realm of war, and even as governor of Maine, Chamberlain was willing to accept a criminal's "solemn word of honor as a man" as a

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<sup>38</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 20 November 1868.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Fanny & Joshua*, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Charleton Lewis, 26 June 1865.

direct result of his good service in the Union army.<sup>41</sup> Even more telling were the men Chamberlain chose to admire. After attending the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant in 1885, Chamberlain wrote to Fanny that “The great men of the nation were there.”<sup>42</sup> Yet in that age of towering industrial pursuits and larger-than-life figures, the men to whom Chamberlain referred were not dashing captains of industry or powerful politicians; they instead went by the names of Sherman, Sheridan, and Hancock.<sup>43</sup>

It would seem that Chamberlain was able to hold notions of martial masculinity so dear because he still considered the war itself to have been a glorious affair, even after all he had personally suffered during and after the conflict. None of the “hardening” or disillusionment argued by Gerald Linderman in *Embattled Courage* seems to have taken root, and instead, Chamberlain would have aligned himself more with future Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who wrote of the war as the crucible in which great men were forged. As Holmes stated in a speech given on Memorial Day 1884, “The generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience. Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire.”<sup>44</sup> Chamberlain whole-heartedly agreed, and wrote in 1912 that “in the privations and sufferings endured as well as in the strenuous action of battle, some of the highest

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<sup>41</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Joseph Pottard, 27 December 1867.

<sup>42</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 8 August 1885.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 240; Oliver Wendell Holmes, Address delivered May 30, 1884 before John Sedgewick Post no. 4, Grand Army of the Republic, *The Essential Holmes: Selections From the Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions, and Other Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, Richard A. Posner, ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 87.

qualities of manhood are called forth.”<sup>45</sup> In his numerous articles written around the turn of the century, Chamberlain wrote of his and his men’s past exploits in terms so glowing one could mistake them for the musings of a volunteer of 1862 who had yet to see combat. “Stirred by the pulse of manhood and the contagion of comradeship;” “hearts swelling with manly courage;” these are the phrases Chamberlain uses to describe the “sublime scene” of his men engaged in some of the most desperate battles of the war.<sup>46</sup> “Superb courage” is often on display as no man wishes to be left out of the line for fear of being known as a coward; “the instinct to seek safety is overcome by the instinct of honor.”<sup>47</sup>

As Chamberlain praised the performance of his men, so too did he look back upon his own actions. In writing of his brigade’s fateful assault at Petersburg, Chamberlain takes care to note that he and his staff not only led the charge but did so mounted, and that he himself bore the flag forward until he was shot.<sup>48</sup> Chamberlain’s performance at the Battles of White Oak Road and Five Forks in March of 1865

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<sup>45</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies: The Last Campaign of the Armies* (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 385-386.

<sup>46</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, “My Story of Fredericksburg,” in “*Bayonet! Forward!*” *My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 4; Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies* 3; Joshua Chamberlain, “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg,” in “*Bayonet! Forward!*” *My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 29.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” in “*Bayonet! Forward!*” *My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 42; Chamberlain, “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg,” 24, 31; Chamberlain, *Passing of the Armies*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Chamberlain, “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” 48.



was also by his account exemplary, as he was both called upon to “save the honor of the V Corps” in the former battle and complimented by General Sheridan for leading from the front in the latter.<sup>49</sup> Both these accounts concern events either directly related to Chamberlain’s pelvic wound or occurring afterward, and while it is tempting to read in them a possible attempt to broadcast and reaffirm his continuing manhood, it must also be considered that that period of time had offered Chamberlain the greatest opportunity to perform such heroics in reality, having just been promoted to brigadier general and holding the command of a brigade.

Chamberlain’s respect for the performance of his and all other men during the war appears at times to go so far as to ignore the ugly realities of the conflict that he himself witnessed. In “My Story of Fredericksburg,” originally published in 1912, Chamberlain writes of lines of men advancing against the Confederate positions “in perfect order and array, the flag high-poised and leading...bright bayonets fixed, ready at the final reach to sweep over the enemy’s rock-like barrier.”<sup>50</sup> Yet Chamberlain was not writing in December of 1862; he knew full well the carnage that took place immediately afterward, having experienced it firsthand. Eight years earlier in “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” Chamberlain had the temerity to admire the very orders of attack that led to his pelvic injury. Knowing the impossibility of any such assault, he wrote that the orders were “certainly a compliment to my six

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<sup>49</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, “Military Operations on the White Oak Road,” in *Bayonet! Forward: My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 72; Joshua Chamberlain, “Five Forks,” in *Bayonet! Forward: My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 110; Chamberlain, *Passing of the Armies*, 72, 130.

<sup>50</sup> Chamberlain, “My Story of Fredericksburg,” 4.

splendid regiments.”<sup>51</sup> This mindset was not born of blind optimism and nostalgia, however. The price of the war can be seen to weigh on Chamberlain at times, particularly in the article “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg,” first published in 1913, in which he laments that he and his regiment “had more to learn about the costs” of their valor, and that “We kill only to resist killing.”<sup>52</sup> Though seemingly at odds, these two approaches to Chamberlain’s subject matter are reconciled by the man himself in “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox.” As he gazed out across the fields before Petersburg, Chamberlain realized that only the consecration of the blood of the fallen could prevent him from beholding a desolate vision.<sup>53</sup> Chamberlain’s praise of courage and honor therefore does not reject the horrible reality of the Civil War but embraces it, for only through a reaffirmation of their valor could the sacrifice of the war’s dead and wounded be given meaning.

As the value of the war waxed in Chamberlain’s perception, so did civilian life wane. This was not an uncommon occurrence amongst veterans of the Civil War. In *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union & Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America*, James Marten explains that society at large during the decades following the Civil War began to place less emphasis on the martial values held so dear to former soldiers, raising up new heroes of ambition and industry to replace the old. There were also fewer chances for the fulfillment found through dramatic leadership so prevalent during the conflict.<sup>54</sup> It was this last

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<sup>51</sup> Chamberlain, “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” 48.

<sup>52</sup> Chamberlain, “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg,” 23, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Chamberlain, “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” 43.

<sup>54</sup> James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union & Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 21, 25.

that concerned Chamberlain the most, for especially after his terms as governor of Maine and tenure as President of Bowdoin, civilian life held little excitement or even success for him. In order to reclaim the supremely masculine identity that Chamberlain had held as a result of the Civil War, the only remaining course of action was to seek solace in a recreation of the conditions of that very conflict.

The simplest manner of recreating such an environment may have been to surround oneself with those who held similar values, namely Chamberlain’s fellow veterans and officers. Such a strategy seems to never have been far from Chamberlain’s mind, and in his writings a mythic brotherhood seems to form, the only requirement for which was having served in the Army of the Potomac. Remembering the Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac after the cessation of hostilities, Chamberlain wrote of the worn and weary men that had passed before the reviewing stand: “Their devotion was sublime,” and “They belonged to me, and I to them by bonds birth cannot create nor death sever.”<sup>55</sup> Chamberlain was indeed highly active among Union veterans’ groups, taking a hand in the proposal and dedication of regimental monuments, the compiling of records, and the planning of reunions. In 1888, while in attendance of a reunion celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, Chamberlain was even elected President of the Society of the Army of the Potomac, an achievement that left him both humbled and inordinately pleased.<sup>56</sup>

Chamberlain’s fraternization with fellow veterans of the Civil War was not confined solely to men who had

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<sup>55</sup> Joshua Chamberlain, “The Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac,” in *“Bayonet! Forward:” My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2d. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 160, 170.

<sup>56</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Grace Allen, 13 July 1888.

fought for the Union. Surprisingly, for a man self-described as “still strong in the faith of her [the Union’s] cause,” Chamberlain bore great respect for men who had fought not in blue but in gray.<sup>57</sup> The foundation of this respect was based in recognition of mutual suffering and courage, writing that the Confederates were also “grounded in the instincts of manhood,” and that “we had a certain pride in their manliness, and a strong fellow-feeling.”<sup>58</sup> Chamberlain was hosted many times after the war by Confederate veterans either in organized groups or in informal gatherings, and their hospitality and fellowship were paid in kind.<sup>59</sup> Writing to a North Carolinian, Chamberlain even went so far as to state that “There was no body of men so brave and in all ways manly than those she [North Carolina] sent to that great ordeal.”<sup>60</sup> Though this was no doubt flattery to some extent, one can read in it the height of Chamberlain’s admiration for his opponents.

Though a source of joyful fulfillment, Chamberlain’s fellowship with veterans of both sides of the Civil War was also fraught with heartache. Both blessed and cursed with a long life, despite the recurring complications from his pelvic wound, Chamberlain was forced to watch as one by one, his brothers-in-arms passed away. Even as early as 1893, he lamented to fellow veteran Alexander Webb that “as to Gettysburg, my comrades there are pretty well gone.”<sup>61</sup> Every dedication, every reunion saw increasingly fewer men of both the blue and the gray as the strapping veterans of

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<sup>57</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to the Maine Republican Nominating Committee, 27 April 1869.

<sup>58</sup> Chamberlain, *Passing of the Armies*, 15, 197.

<sup>59</sup> Chamberlain, “Reminiscences of Petersburg and Appomattox,” 52.

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to L. B. Eaton, 1 August 1901.

<sup>61</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Alexander Webb, 18 May 1893.

1865 turned into the old soldiers of 1913. The warmth of manly camaraderie had ultimately proved to be only fleeting.

While associating with comrades could possibly recreate the atmosphere of the war, it could not truly match Chamberlain’s martial experiences. In order to do so, Chamberlain would spend nearly his entire post-war career in endless pursuit of tangible situations that might offer him the chance to showcase his daring leadership and masculinity. While his roles as governor and college president seem to have been somewhat fulfilling, they do not appear to have peaked his excitement either. His shining moment came in 1880, when a disputed Maine gubernatorial election threatened to unleash partisan unrest and possibly violence throughout the state. Wanting to ensure a peaceful transition, the incumbent governor raised the state militia and asked Chamberlain to take charge. Writing, “I cannot bear to think of our fair and orderly state plunged into the horror of a civil war” in a letter to Maine Senator James G. Blaine, Chamberlain raced to Augusta.<sup>62</sup> Though ordered only to safeguard “institutions of the state,” Chamberlain instead decided to interpret his orders figuratively, using his men to defend not only the physical institutions of Maine’s government but the people who ran them as well. As the debate raged over which of three claimants to the governorship had been legally elected, Chamberlain held executive power once more, this time as the de facto military governor of Maine. In the course of twelve days in January of 1880 Chamberlain defended all candidates from riots and assassination attempts while he impartially urged that the Maine Supreme Court settle the matter. This they did, and on January 17 the dispute had been settled, a new governor had been legally elected, and Chamberlain had stepped down

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<sup>62</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to James G. Blaine, 29 December 1879.

from his post.<sup>63</sup> The former general had been in rare form and wrote to Fanny at one point in the crisis that “Yesterday was another Round Top.”<sup>64</sup> The successful resolution of the conflict brought with it praise from many corners including the Republican press, which wrote an homage “to Joshua Chamberlain, the heroic holder of the fort, the noble soul that stepped into the gap, assumed responsibility, and saved the state from anarchy and bloodshed.”<sup>65</sup>

Yet with this one fortunate and successful endeavor came many other situations that would prove to be decidedly less so. Possibly the greatest of Chamberlain’s post-war failures occurred while he was President of Bowdoin and has since come to be known as the “Rebellion of the Bowdoin Cadets.” The 1870s saw many institutions of higher learning across the United States install some kind of military program as an effort to prepare the young men of the nation for war as the young men of 1861 had not been. Bowdoin was no exception, and Chamberlain spearheaded the effort to institute mandatory drill for all students in 1872. Not only would the new system of drill provide practical instruction for use in the increasingly “manly, aggressive imperialism” of the newly reunited nation; it would also instill such indispensable values as discipline and courage in the young men under Chamberlain’s aegis of authority. At first, the new system of military drill was accepted by the students of Bowdoin, seen as an amusing diversion and an opportunity to fire the college’s 4-pound artillery piece. Soon, the strict physical and financial requirements began to chafe, however, and widespread mutiny erupted in 1873, with

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<sup>63</sup> Pullen, *A Hero’s Life and Legacy*, 89-100.

<sup>64</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 15 January 1880.

<sup>65</sup> *Kennebec Journal*, 21 January 1880.

three-quarters of the student body refusing to attend drill.<sup>66</sup> Seizing this chance to show his leadership, Chamberlain leapt into action. Taking a hard-line approach filled with military discipline and what some called “Prussian severity,” Chamberlain sent home every student who refused to drill, which included the freshman and sophomore classes in their entirety.<sup>67</sup> In letters sent to their parents, the rebellious students were given an opportunity to return to Bowdoin, provided they reaffirmed their commitment to the drill.<sup>68</sup> Though possibly effective for a similar situation in the military, Chamberlain’s actions nearly spelled ruin for the college, and though the Board of Trustees stood behind him in principle, it declared drill no longer mandatory, in effect destroying the program Chamberlain had fought so fiercely to defend.<sup>69</sup>

The success or failure of these civilian endeavors mattered little to Chamberlain if only he could prove his valor in fighting another war. The second half of the nineteenth century was far from quiet, both in North America and in Europe, and Chamberlain wasted no opportunity to reenter the military and taste the fruits of leadership and masculinity one more time. Chamberlain did not require that these opportunities be confined to the United States or even North America. His only desire apparently was to serve as an officer in an international conflict with a Western enemy, as he never sought to remain in the United States Regular Army to combat Native Americans on the

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<sup>66</sup> “Regulations for the Interior Police and Discipline of the Bowdoin Cadets;” Pullen, *A Hero’s Life and Legacy*, 70; Golay, *Parallel Lives*, 305.

<sup>67</sup> Pullen, *A Hero’s Life and Legacy*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fathers of Drill Rebels, 28 May 1874.

<sup>69</sup> Pullen, *A Hero’s Life and Legacy*, 74-75; Golay, *Parallel Lives*, 305-306.

frontier. Chamberlain's first chance came in 1870 with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, upon which he promptly wrote to Kaiser Wilhelm I offering his services as an officer. In his letter, Chamberlain described his extensive field experience during the American Civil War, and offered to resign as governor of Maine if accepted into Prussian service. Chamberlain was forthright concerning his motives for fighting, admitting that he bore no interest in the outcome of the conflict, but that "the honor of manhood is a point on which a soldier may well be sensitive."<sup>70</sup> It would do him no good.

Though that first attempt ended in failure, and indeed the war may have been concluded faster than any reply could reach Chamberlain, it did not dissuade him from trying again nearly thirty years later as the United States entered its own war, this time with Spain over control of Cuba and the Philippines. Taking no chances, Chamberlain wrote two letters on the same day in April of 1898. One, in which he again offered his services as an officer, was sent to the Secretary of War; the second, in which he offered to raise the New England Militia and lead it through the "present crisis," was sent to one of Maine's US senators.<sup>71</sup> Not only were both of Chamberlain's proposals refused, but he was forced to stand by as William Oates, who as colonel of the 15<sup>th</sup> Alabama led his men against Chamberlain and the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine on Little Round Top at Gettysburg, was given a brigadier general's star and command of a brigade of Alabama volunteers.<sup>72</sup> His final opportunity had passed with disappointment; Chamberlain would not live to see the next great conflict explode in the summer of 1914.

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<sup>70</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Wilhelm I, 20 July 1870.

<sup>71</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Major General Russel A. Alger, 22 April 1898; Joshua Chamberlain to William P. Frye, 22 April 1898.

<sup>72</sup> Pullen, *A Hero's Life and Legacy*, 152; Golay, *Parallel Lives*, 335.



Unable to successfully recreate the conditions of his wartime valor in any way other than sporadic, fleeting moments and slowly watching his beloved brothers-in-arms pass away, Chamberlain took renewed interest not in continuing his pursuit of masculinity but in reliving his old escapades. His involvement with veterans’ organizations had previously necessitated some level of interaction with the keeping of historical records of the Civil War and had even led to a spirited argument with Oates in the 1890s over whose story of July 2 at Gettysburg rang the truest.<sup>73</sup> Possibly sparked by that very argument, Chamberlain devoted the last decade and a half of his life to writing and publishing his accounts of the war. In *War Stories* Frances Clarke observes that Victorian war stories seeking to justify sacrifice to society ebb around the turn of the century, yet all of Chamberlain’s various reminiscences and articles concerning his experiences in the Civil War date to the period between 1897 and his death in 1914, with all but one published in the twentieth century.<sup>74</sup>

As a former professor of rhetoric, Chamberlain proved adept at committing his memories to writing, and his appointment as Surveyor of Customs for the Port of Portland ensured that he need not worry about supporting his family.<sup>75</sup> Fanny died in 1905, and as complications from his old pelvic wound began acting up again, Chamberlain became

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<sup>73</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Ellis Spear, 27 November 1896; Joshua Chamberlain to William C. Oates, 27 February 1897; Joshua Chamberlain to John P. Nicholson, 14 August 1903; Joshua Chamberlain to John P. Nicholson, 16 March 1905; Joshua Chamberlain to William C. Oates, 18 May 1905.

<sup>74</sup> “Bibliography,” in *“Bayonet! Forward:” My Civil War Reminiscences*, 2nd. ed. (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 277.

<sup>75</sup> Pullen, *A Hero’s Life and Legacy*, 159.

increasingly engrossed in his subject matter. As he had written to his wife twenty years before her death, “You know I have had great and deep experiences- and some of my life has gone into the history of the days that are past.”<sup>76</sup> Where recreating opportunities for glory had failed, reliving past deeds succeeded, and an increasing amount of Chamberlain’s life seems to have been spent in “the history of the days that are past.” Many passages written only years before Chamberlain’s death in 1914 and intended as part of his unfinished memoirs seem surreal. The notion of veteran camaraderie and the eternal existence of the Army of the Potomac are recurring themes, with Chamberlain writing in *The Passing of the Armies* that “This army will live, and live on.”<sup>77</sup> In “The Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac” his memories appear to momentarily gain the upper hand over reality, for in remembering the disbandment of that organization he held so dear Chamberlain asks, “Who shall tell what is past and what survives?”<sup>78</sup>

Courage and masculinity burned as strong in the waning years of Chamberlain’s life as ever they did during the Civil War, and only two years before his death Chamberlain composed a poem entitled “The Trooper’s Last Charge.” Filled throughout with striking martial and religious imagery, it is here, in this poem, that Chamberlain stands triumphant. Certain poignant phrases yearn for attention: “Ranks death cannot sunder;” “Manhood whose deeds for man / Waken for wonder;” “Man’s measureless ideal;” “Manhood’s worth redeemed anew.”<sup>79</sup> Plagued by incontinence and impotence, rocked by unexpected failures in civilian life, sorrowed at the loss of his wife and comrades,

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<sup>76</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, 8 August 1885.

<sup>77</sup> Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies*, 391

<sup>78</sup> Chamberlain, “The Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac,” 183.

<sup>79</sup> Joshua Chamberlain to Henry Johnson, 8 January 1912.

## “The Honor of Manhood”

Joshua Chamberlain had at last found in writing his relief, his expression and reaffirmation of self and masculinity ascendant.

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