

General George D. Wagner Files

Naomi Bowyer Brown Article

General George D. Wagner

by NAOMI BOWYER BROWN

George Day Wagner was born September 22nd, 1829, in Ross County, Ohio. His father was born in Germany and the family of Days, of which his mother was a member, came from North Carolina to Ohio and he was named for his mother's family. When he was four years of age, his parents moved to Warren County, and settled at Wagner's Grove, (named for them) in Medina Township. Here he grew to manhood, and received a common school education in the country schools of Warren County. He was a matured man at sixteen years of age, industrious and good natured and a favorite among the young people of his age in North Warren County.

On February 4th, 1847, he was united in marriage to Frances E. Alexander. He was eighteen years of age and his wife had just passed her sixteenth birthday. They went to housekeeping on his father's farm in Medina Township, Warren County, and their marriage was a very happy one.

The Wagner family was affiliated with the Whigs in politics until the formation of the Republican party, then George D. Wagner became one of its organizers and active members. In the spring of 1856, he began making political speeches in behalf of the Republican party in the school houses in North Warren County. At this time he was twenty-seven, and his wife twenty-five. They had been married nine years and had four children. In the fall of 1856, he was elected representative in the lower house of the state legislature, being the first Republican representative from Warren County.

He was chairman of the Finance Committee on Federal relations, and on the Committee of Military affairs during the special session of 1861. He was an earnest supporter of the war from the beginning. In his manners he was pleasant, in his temper kindly, in his feelings genial and companionable.

He organized the 15th regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry and was appointed Colonel of this regiment, May 22, 1861, took command June 14, 1861, and entrained for West Virginia at once. His first battle was at Rich Hill, and his second at Green Brier River. His prompt and gallant action in these two battles enabled the counties of Virginia, refusing to secede from the Union, to form the state of West Virginia. The notes of his regiment say that on April 1, 1862, they were near Columbia, Tennessee; on April 3rd, they were on the march to Shiloh; on the 7th they reached Shiloh, advanced on the enemy and held the advance. General Wagner's Brigade was 2500 strong and none in command of a brigade at Shiloh were more conspicuous for courage and gallantry than

he. On November 29th, 1862, he was made a Brigadier-General, for brave, efficient and loyal service.

On September 30, 1862, General George D. Wagner was in command of a division at the battle of Stone [sic] River. His division was instructed to hold the ford. It was the most dangerous and difficult task in the battle, but his division took their position and with fixed bayonets they held the ford.

General George D. Wagner was called the "Hero of Chattanooga." In September, 1863, the Mayor of Chattanooga surrendered the city to General Wagner, and his troops were the first to enter the city.

In April, 1864, he was with his command in the Atlanta campaign, and won distinction and honor at Kenesaw [sic] and Lookout Mountain.

In September, 1864, he was ordered to Chattanooga in the Tennessee campaign, taking an honorable and distinguished part in the battle of Franklin, November 30, 1864. In this battle General Wagner lost 1,241 of his troops. His command had borne the blunt of the battle, but had given good account of themselves.

When Wagner took his troops out in the cotton field at three-thirty in the afternoon, to face an army greatly outnumbering his command, he had orders in his pocket from Seafield, his commanding officer, to take his troops into the cotton field where the enemy could easily slaughter them. He was only obeying the orders of his superior commander.

Thirteen years after the death of General George D. Wagner, General Jacob D. Cox, who had command of a division at Franklin and had watched the slaughter of Wagner's men. without danger to themselves and without any effort to relieve Wagner, wrote a history of the Battle of Franklin, in which he said that Wagner should have been shot for the position he took and the men he lost in the Battle of Franklin. Cox waited until Wagner had been stilled by death for thirteen years, and could not defend himself, then attacked his military ability and personal character. Soldiers that had fought with Wagner at Franklin, from Ohio, Alabama, Iowa and Indiana, came to his defense and Cox was forced to rewrite the Battle of Franklin, taking a much milder attitude toward Wagner.

Soon after the Battle of Nashville, the army was re-organized and General Wagner retired from service. His wife, Frances E. Wagner, dies April 22, 1865, at the age of 34 years, 4 months, and 16 days. Later, General George D. Wagner moved to Williamsport and took up the study and practice of law. Here he became an active and prominent worker in the Free Mason Lodge and president of the Indiana State Agricultural Society. He was appointed Minister to Germany, and was in the Bates House in Indianapolis when he suffered a severe attack of acute indigestion and after an illness of four or five days died at the Old Bates House in Indianapolis, February 13th, 1869, at the age of 40 years, 5 months, and 21 days. The immediate cause of his

death was an overdose of a prescription left by his physician to alleviate nervous suffering.

General George D. Wagner was addicted to drink, but he was not alone. Some of earth's greatest and wisest souls – those who have been the best commanders, the greatest generals, the sweetest poets, those who have contributed most to the wealth of science and literature and statesmanship, have been so-called “drunkards.”

He loved his father, his mother, his wife and his children; he loved his country above all earthly objects; he loved liberty, regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude. Illustrious man, orator, statesman, philanthropist and soldier, whose declining sun as it hastened down the western horizon of his youth, threw back its yellow beams of golden light in hues of mellowed splendor, to illustrate and cheer the nation and the State he loved so well.

Wagner's Military Record found near his tomb

Wagner's Military record at Armstrong Chapel near the Tomb of Gen. Wagner

[beginning is missing] these two battles enabled the counties of Virginia, refusing to secede from the Union, to make the state of West Virginia. The notes of his regiment say that on the 1st day of April, 1862, they were near Columbia, Tenn.; on the 3rd. of April, they were on the march to Shiloh; on the 7th they reached Shiloh. Notes of Company A say: arrived on the field of Shiloh and advanced on the enemy, and held the advance.” They arrived on the field of battle at 1 o'clock in the afternoon and General Wagner's brigade was 2500 strong, and none in command of a brigade at Shiloh were more conspicuous for courage and gallantry than he. On the 29th day of April, 1862, the 15th Indiana moved its camp from Pittsburg landing five miles toward Cornith. [sic] The notes of Company A say “May 21, 1862, on picket before Cornith, [sic] Miss.” “May 23rd. In camp before Cornith.” [sic] “May 31st, 1862, the rebels last night evacuated Cornith [sic], Miss.” On November 29th, 1862, he was made a Brigadier-General, for brave, efficient and loyal service.

On the 26th day of September [December], 1862, General George D. Wagner was in command of a division at the battle of Stone [sic] River. His division was instructed to hold the ford. This was the most dangerous and difficult task in the battle but his division took their position just under the bank of the river at the ford. General Rosecrans rode with his guard, a young man about twenty years of age to the bank of the river at the ford and called for General Wagner and his division. “Here! Here!” answered Wagner, “We are in position in defense of the ford ready for action.” “That's good, Wagner, and all is well,” replied Rosecrans, his commanding officer. Just then the young orderly was shot dead by a ball from the enemy aimed at General Rosecrans. “Down and across at the ford,” said Wagner, and Rosecrans crossed the ford, then

General Wagner gave these orders to his men, "Fix bayonets and hold your ground." They fixed their bayonets and they held their ground and they held the ford. Soon the ford became the center or pivot of the battle and upon this center, for hours the battle raged or oscillated, but through it all General George D. Wagner and his men with fixed bayonets held their ground and held the ford.

September, 1863, the Mayor of Chattanooga surrendered the city to General George D. Wagner, and his command was the first to enter Chattanooga. The Nation watched and applauded and hailed General George D. Wagner as the "Hero of Chattanooga" and no war recorded in history has seen more magnificent fighting than that. In the campaign of Chattanooga and Chickamauga, 120 thousand men were engaged and twenty eight [sic] thousand killed or wounded. His command led the valiant charge up Missionary Ridge and many of the brave boys, who went with him from Warren and adjoining counties, fell as they went over the ridge.

In April, 1864, he was with his command in the Atlanta campaign, and again won distinction and honor at Kenesaw [sic] and Lookout Mountain.

In September, 1864, he was ordered with his division to Chattanooga and continued in the Tennessee campaign, taking an honorable and distinguished part in the hard fought [sic] battle at Franklin, November 30th, 1864. As the bright autumn day, hazy with the golden light of Indian summer atmosphere, wore away, the troops that had worked so hard looked hopefully forward to a prospect of ending it in peace and rest, preparatory either to a night march to Nashville, or to a re-enforcement by Smith's corps and General Thomas. But about 2 o'clock, some suspicious movements on the hills a mile or two away- the waving of signal flags and the deployment of the enemy in line of battle- caused General Wagner to send his adjutant-general, from the advanced position where his two brigades had halted, to Schofield his commanding general, with the information that Hood seemed to be preparing for attack. In a very short time the whole Confederate line could be seen, stretching in battle array, from the dark fringe of chestnuts along the river bank far across the Columbia Pike, the colors gayly fluttering and the muskets gleaming brightly, and advancing steadily, in perfect order, dressed on [illegible] center, straight for the works. Meantime General Schofield [sic] had retired to the fort, on a high bluff on the other side of the river, some two miles away, by the road, and had taken General Stanley with him. From the fort the whole field of operations were plainly visible. Notwithstanding all the demonstrations the two brigades of Wagner were left, on the knoll where they had been halted by order from Schofield [sic] and, with scarcely an apology for works to protect them had waited, until it was too late to retreat without danger of degenerating into a rout.

On came the enemy, as steady and resistless as a tidal wave. A couple of guns, in the advance line, gave them a shot and galloped back to the works. A volley from a thin skirmish-line was sent into their ranks, but without causing any delay to the massive array. A moment more, and with that wild "rebel yell" which, once heard, is never

forgotten, the great human wave swept along, and seemed to engulf the little force that had so sturdily awaited it, in an open cotton field.

The first shock came, of course, upon the two misplaced brigades of Wagner's divisions, which through some one's blunder, had remained in this false position until too late to retire without disaster. They had no tools to throw up works, and when struck by the resistless sweep of Cleburne's and Brown's divisions, they had only to make their way as best they could, back to the works. In that wild rush, in which friend and foe were intermingled, and the piercing "rebel yell" rose high above the "Yankee cheer," 1,241 of Wagner's troops were killed or taken prisoners, from four o'clock until dark. But Pat Cleburne and eleven other confederate [sic] officers lay dead on the porch of the Carter House. Wagner's command had borne the blunt of the battle, but they had given good account of themselves.

When Wagner took his troops out into the open cotton field at three thirty in the afternoon, to face an army largely outnumbering his command, he had in his pocket, orders from Scofield, his commanding officer, to take his troops into the open cotton field, where the enemy could easily slaughter them. He was only obeying the orders of his superior commander.

Thirteen years after the death of General George Day Wagner, General Jacob D. Cox, who had command of a division at Franklin, that had had a very advantageous position and was able to watch the slaughter of Wagner's men, without danger to themselves and without making any effort to relieve Wagner, took it upon himself to write a history of the battle of Franklin, in which he said that General George D. Wagner should have been shot for the position he took and the men that he lost in the battle of Franklin. General Cox was not noted for brilliantcy [sic] in command and was apparently jealous of the record of Wagner. Cox was afterwards Governor of the state of Ohio, elected from Cincinnati and a member of Congress and the President of the Wabash Railroad. Cox was one of that foul brood that would wait until after the lips of Wagner had been stilled by death for thirteen years, when he could not defend himself, to make an attack upon Wagner's military ability and personal character.

Soldiers that had stood with Wagner at Franklin, from Ohio, Alabama, Iowa and Indiana, came to the defense of their dead commander and defended Wagner so well, that General Cox was forced to re-write the battle of Franklin, taking a much milder attitude toward Wagner, and his position at Franklin. If Wagner should have been shot for losing in killed and captured 1241 men at Franklin, what would General Cox do with Grant, who lost 12,000 men in one hour in the battle of Cold Harbor. Gen. Grant, too, was severely criticised [sic] for his loss of men at Shiloh, and Senator Harlan of Iowa asked that Grant be removed. General Wagner turned the tide at Shiloh and made possible the victory for the Northern army there. Grant has been severely criticized for his conduct at Shiloh, Cold Harbor and Vicksburg. Should he have been shot on this account? Only one criticism can be offered against Wagner as a commander, and that

was the heavy loss of his command in a battle where he was obeying the orders of Scofield, his superior commander.

Soon after the battle of Nashville, the army was re-organized, General Wagner retired from the service with an honorable discharge on account of the serious illness of his wife, Frances E. Wagner. His wife died April 22nd, 1865, at the age of 34 years, 4 months, and 16 days. Soon after the death of his wife he moved to Williamsport and took up the study and practice of law, and was very successful in his law practice. Here he became an active and prominent worker in the Free Mason Lodge, and President of the Indiana State Agricultural Society. He was appointed Minister to Germany, and was in Indianapolis at the Bates House, arranging to go to Berlin and fill this appointment, when he suffered a severe attack of acute indigestion and after an illness of four or five days, died in the Old Bates House in Indianapolis, February 13th, 1869, at the age of 40 years, 5 months, and 21 days. The immediate cause of his death was an over-dose of a prescription left by his physician to alleviate nervous suffering.

Regardless of what General Jacob D. Cox of Ohio, said in 1882, no charge can be preferred and sustained against General George D. Wagner. We have admitted he was addicted to drink, but we deny all other charges. In his short and eventful career he may have taken an occasional drink, but the highest moral tone prevailed [sic] his entire life, in every word and action, and within his bosom beat a generous heart, warm with love for his fellow man: full of charity, his life glowed with patriotism for his Country. Some of earth's best and wisest sons – those who have been the ablest [sic] commanders in wars, the greatest generals, the sweetest poets, those who have contributed most to the wealth of science and literature and statesmanship, have been so-called "drunkards." The waves of oblivion have rolled over Gen. Wagner's memory for many years; if he drank, it was merely of a local character and criticism should have ceased when he was no more.

The esteem in which he was held is clearly shown by the confidence that those who knew him best, had in him. The Republicans of Warren County selected him to be their first representative in the lower house of the State Legislature; Warren, Benton and White Counties selected him to represent them in the State Senate; Governor Morton asked that he be given the most important appointment on the most important committees. In 1861 when war was threatening, the 15th Indiana Volunteer Regiment selected him as their Colonel. He was the hero of 19 battles, and for bravery was advanced to Major-General; asked to be discharged from the army that he might come home and be at the bed side of his sick and dying wife; received the honors of a Mason, succeeded in his practice of law, was elected President of the State Agricultural Society and was appointed Minister to represent the United States in Germany. Every fact connected with his public and private life refutes any charges made against his private character.

It is now nearing three score years since death claimed General George D. Wagner. A Rosary of years connecting the present with the past, and we are met here to defend

the character and pay our respects and extol the virtues of this great man. In this little country church, in which we are now gathered, he knelt at its alter [sic] in earnest humble prayer, and partook of the sacrament with his neighbors and friends, here he helped water the vine some pioneer pilgrim had planted, and at this alter [sic] he came with his Mother and Father to worship, here he came with his bride, and here he bade her a last farewell. From among these people he answered his country's call and went forth to battle for the right, as he was given to see the right. Today we have stood at the grass covered mound nestling in the silence of this country church yard. "In the solemn silence of the voiceless grave, the chief lessons of our republic can be learned, and the destiny of its real mission be unfolded." We have read the short epitome on the time stained [sic] monument that begs memory to the hero of Chattanooga; for almost sixty years it has been kissed by the same sun that peeped over the Blue Ridge and across the waters of the Wabash River, melting the tears with which the mourning night had bedewed the inscription of General George D. Wagner. The February day that brought the body of Our hero back to his home among the gentle hills and rolling prairies of Warren county which had smiled upon his infancy and been gladdened [sic] by his youth, and strengthened by his manhood, that day is an ever memorable one to Warren county, with the sorrowing concourse of friends and neighbors who followed his body to the grave. And of that number no man gain said the honor of his death, lacked full loyalty to the flag for which he fought or doubted the justice of the cause for which he offered his life.

The strifes [sic] and uncertainties of the past are finished, we see around [rest is missing]

Cemetery Images

[images: Cemetery head stones and the head stone of General Wagner]

Newspaper Article: Defense of General Wagner June 26, 1927

Defense of Gen. Geo. D.

BY J. WESLEY WHICKCAR of Attica, Indiana

This year Warren County celebrates the 100th anniversary of its existance [sic] as one of the stars in the galaxy of the ninety-two Counties that make the State of Indiana. This County has produced three men, any one of whom standing alone, would be sufficient to give it a place in the constellation of Counties that make the State, and distinguish it as one of the fixed stars. These three men, each in his time, place and generation, have been as remarkable as any who have appeared on the stage of public

affairs from any county in the state. They are first Zachariah Cicot, the pathfinder of the Wabash, who glazed the way for Harrison and his army from Vincennes to Tippecanoe, who is buried at Independence; second, George Day Wagner, the hero of nineteen battles in the Civil War; third, J. Frank Hanley, Governor of Indiana. All lived in Warren county and are buried in Warren county.

It is our purpose today, to do honor to the second of these, to acknowledge our indebtedness to General George Day Wagner, as a statesman, soldier, citizen and patriot, and to extol his virtues as a man- for this purpose we have assembled here today, in that part of this County in which he lived, at the graveyard in which his sacred clay is entombed, at the church in which he worshiped. We come the more willingly, and our exercises will be characterized by a deeper earnestness, because the one whose merits we celebrate [sic] has not received the credit or attention to which his brave, loyal and unselfish devotion to his Country, to his State, his County, his home and his family, entitles him. The time has now arrived that full justice be done to General George Day Wagner, - today we gather here to utter a word of love and praise in his behalf and cull a few blossoms to lay upon his tomb.

It has been said that General George D. Wagner was addicted to drink, and for this and other reasons, the Nation and State he served is not ready to do him full justice. This phantom still prejudices the public mind. We grant that this charge is true, that General George D. Wagner "was addicted to drink." It is no crime to defend the dead, the court of death has issued no inj[missing text] [illegible] restraining us from pleading the [illegible] of the departed. We defend [illegible] assaults of [illegible] [illegible last line of column] more sacred are the reputations of the living than of the absent dead, whose voiceless lips can utter no defense. The lips of General George D. Wagner have long been dumb, but ours are not, and while we live we shall defend him, for if he "was addicted to drink" he was not alone. The same charges have been preferred against Webster, Clay and Grant. Lincoln was confronted with objections to the promotion of Grant because Grant "was addicted to drink," and he answered, "Obtain for me the brand of his whiskey, that I may recommend it to all My Generals." Yes, General George D. Wagner was addicted to drink, but he drank the same brand, from the same barrel as General Ulysses [sic] S. Grant. If this great commander of men from Warren county did drink, the escutcheon of Warren county is clear, for from the Prairies of Warren county came Governor J. Frank Hanley, whose eloquence persuaded [sic] the passage of the 18th ammendment [sic] and his defence [sic] before the highest court of the land established it. As Risapah [sic] stood by the bodies of her murdered sons, keeping back the birds of prey, so will we stand by the memory of George D. Wagner, and drive back the foul vultures that feast their greedy selves and feed their starving broods on dead men's character.

On the 22nd day of September, 1829, in the county of Ross, in the state of Ohio, George D. Wagner was born. His Father was born in Germany and the family of Days of which his Mother was a member came to Ohio from North Carolina and had taken



part in the war of the Revolution and the war of 1812, and some had taken part in the war with Mexico, and he was named for his Mother's family. When he was four years of age, his parents moved into Warren county, and settled at Wagner's Grover (named for them) in Medina township. Here he grew to manhood, and received a common school education in the country schools of Warren county. He was a matured man at 16 years of age, industrious and good natured and a favorite among the young people of his age in North Warren county. He was united in marriage with Frances E. Alexander, February 4th, 1847, when 18 years of age, his wife having just passed her 16th birthday. They immediately began housekeeping on his Father's farm in Medina township, Warren county, and their marriage was a very happy one.

The Wagner family was affiliated with the Whigs in politics, until the formation of the Republican party. George D. Wagner and his wife agreed in both politics and religion and with the formation of the new Republican party, he became one of its organizers and active members. Early in the spring of 1856, he began making political speeches in the interest of the Republican party in the school houses in north Warren County. At this time he was 27 years of age, his wife, 25 and they had been married nine years and had four children. He was an eloquent and forceful speaker and soon attracted favorable attention and was nominated at the Republican convention of Warren county for Representative in the lower house of the State legislature, and was elected in the fall of 1856, the first Republican representative from Warren County.

In the State legislature he attracted special attention as a natural orator and had ability to logically present his views on any subject, and was easily the leader of the republican party in the lower house.

The Indianapolis Journal [sic] said of him, "In 1858 he was elected to the senate from Warren, Benton and White counties Senatorial district and served with conspicuous zeal, and credit during the regular session of 1859, and in 1860 and in the extra session of 1861, called to make preparations for the war. He was chairman of the Finance committee on Federal relations, and on the committee of military affairs during the special session of 1861. He was an earnest supporter of the war from the beginning. In his manners he was pleasant, in his temper kindly, in his feelings genial and companionable; he was a ready and forceful speaker and few men made a more decided impression upon the Senate even by casual and unpremeditated speeches during his service in it than he."

He organized the 15th regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry and was appointed Colonel of this regiment, May 22, 1861, took command June 14, 1861, and entrained for West Virginia at once. His first appearance in an actual engagement was in the battle at Rich Mountain, and his second was at Green Brier River his prompt and gallant action [rest is missing]