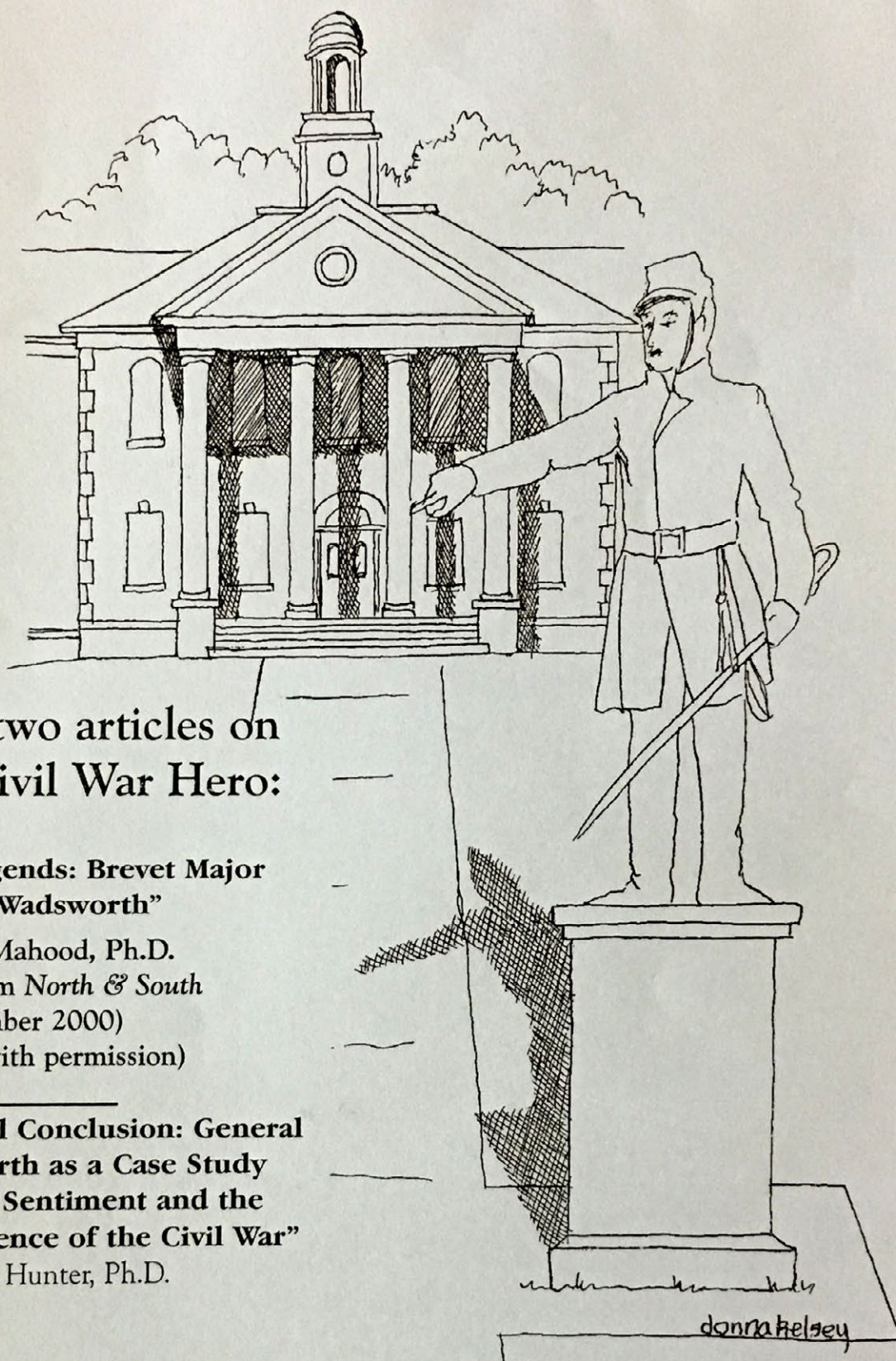


# GENERAL JAMES S. WADSWORTH

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## *A Primer*

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Containing two articles on  
Geneseo's Civil War Hero:

**"The Stuff of Legends: Brevet Major  
James S. Wadsworth"**

By Wayne Mahood, Ph.D.  
Reprinted from *North & South*  
(November 2000)  
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**"Abolition as Logical Conclusion: General  
James S. Wadsworth as a Case Study  
in Anti-Southern Sentiment and the  
Radicalizing Experience of the Civil War"**

By Judith A. Hunter, Ph.D.

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Published in conjunction with the Commemoration of  
General James S. Wadsworth's 200th Birthday • October 2007  
By the General Wadsworth Statute Campaign

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## Introduction

The Genesee Valley played a truly significant role in helping to preserve the Union and to eliminate slavery in the United States. A primary reason for this was the leadership of James S. Wadsworth.

The Valley was central to the development of America in the nineteenth century. Its wheat production made it the breadbasket of the country and its religious and social movements transformed the nation. The strong antislavery sentiments of the local population contributed to the great changes that followed.

General James S. Wadsworth was one of the more famous and important New Yorkers to participate in the Civil War. He was certainly the most prominent New Yorker to give his life for the Union. Unfortunately, there is no civic commemoration of his philanthropy and supreme sacrifice in the Genesee Valley that was his home.

Wadsworth was a key figure in the political efforts to restrict the growth of slavery before secession. Once the Civil War began, Wadsworth left behind his extensive familial and economic interests in western New York to serve in the Union army without pay. Holding the position of Military Governor of the District of Columbia early in the war, Wadsworth was instrumental in pushing the Lincoln administration to deal with the massive influx of fugitive slaves into Washington by taking steps towards emancipation.

Once the federal government made emancipation its policy, Wadsworth became the Republican candidate for Governor of New York in order to support the goal of abolition. However, he was too much in favor of abolition for the voters of New York who elected his Democratic rival by a margin of less than 11,000 votes in 1862.

After his electoral defeat, General Wadsworth commanded a division in the Army of the Potomac, which he led with distinction at the Battle of Gettysburg. He would be mortally wounded the following spring at the Battle of the Wilderness. Wadsworth's death was a personal blow to President Abraham Lincoln, who greatly admired his spirit of patriotism and sacrifice. Huge crowds turned out for the funeral services to honor the fallen general in New York City and Rochester. Eventually, the state of New York commemorated his actions by erecting a statue of him in 1914 on the Gettysburg battlefield.

Today, many western New Yorkers are unaware of these contributions and find it hard to understand that prior residents cared enough about the fate of the country and slaves to make enormous sacrifices on their behalf. The broader cultural climate has glamorized those who fought on the opposite side, while northerners have largely forgotten about northern efforts. A reproduction of the Wadsworth Gettysburg statue on the front lawn of the Livingston County Courthouse will help to correct the situation.

The General Wadsworth Statue Campaign  
Association for the Preservation of Genesee (APOG)

This booklet was prepared by the General Wadsworth Statue Campaign to support its efforts to place a reproduction of the Gettysburg State of James S. Wadsworth on the grounds of the Livingston County Courthouse in Genesee, New York.

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end, it appeared he would get elected. It was not to be; his upstate support was insufficient to overcome downstate resistance to his radicalism.

Wadsworth, who had finally, and reluctantly, agreed to run for public office, accepted the loss. Though his fortune was reduced by campaign expenses, his principles and sense of worth remained intact. This was confirmed by an aide who reported that "General Wadsworth came to my office door, stood erect, and, holding his hand on his breast, said, 'Here is one person who thinks just as much of General Wadsworth after the election as he did before.'"12

Nonetheless, he was reported by Provost Marshal William Doster "to suffer the mortification of being left without any command." This resulted from an organizational change begun in early September when General McClellan was restored to command. The newly-created Military District of the Defenses of Washington absorbed Wadsworth's previous authority. So, his restless energies were drawn to the condition of freed slaves, which he attempted to ameliorate with a number of initiatives, some of which ran afoul of policy.

Meanwhile, General McClellan's failure to advance farther than Warrenton, Virginia, by the first week of November exhausted President Lincoln's patience. On November 5, Lincoln, prodded by a majority of his cabinet, issued orders relieving McClellan for the second (and final) time and appointing in his place Major General Ambrose Burnside. Interestingly, Wadsworth was in Secretary Stanton's office with General Halleck when the orders were issued. But there was no immediate indication of what this change would mean for Wadsworth, who had been angling for a field command.

Wadsworth's future was still uncertain when Brigadier General John H. Martindale was appointed to replace him November 19 and he was granted a leave of absence by Stanton. Nearly three weeks later, on December 7, the frustrated general wrote his youngest son, James: "I do not know what I am to do... whether to remain here or go into the field." By contrast Wadsworth's middle son, Craig, had "gratefully accepted" Major General John F. Reynolds' appointment as aide-de-camp in early October.

#### A FIELD COMMAND

The change in command of the Army of the Potomac be-tokened a number of organizational changes, which paved the way for the field command Wadsworth so avidly sought. Official notice of Wadsworth's appointment came on December 16, when he was assigned to duty under Major General William Franklin, the left grand division commander. Six days later he was officially named commander of the First Division of General Reynolds' I Corps, replacing Brigadier General Abner Doubleday, who shortly became Third Division commander. Apparently Wadsworth's behind-the-scenes efforts, of which there is no written record, had borne fruit—he had a field command. Better yet, he had a division.

The Fredericksburg debacle in December, wherein the Union troops were butchered, the abortive "mud march" when Burnside attempted another expedition, and criticisms by sub-

ordinates, were Burnside's undoing. Beset on all sides, on January 25, he was gone, replaced the next day by Major General Joseph Hooker, "the blond war god."

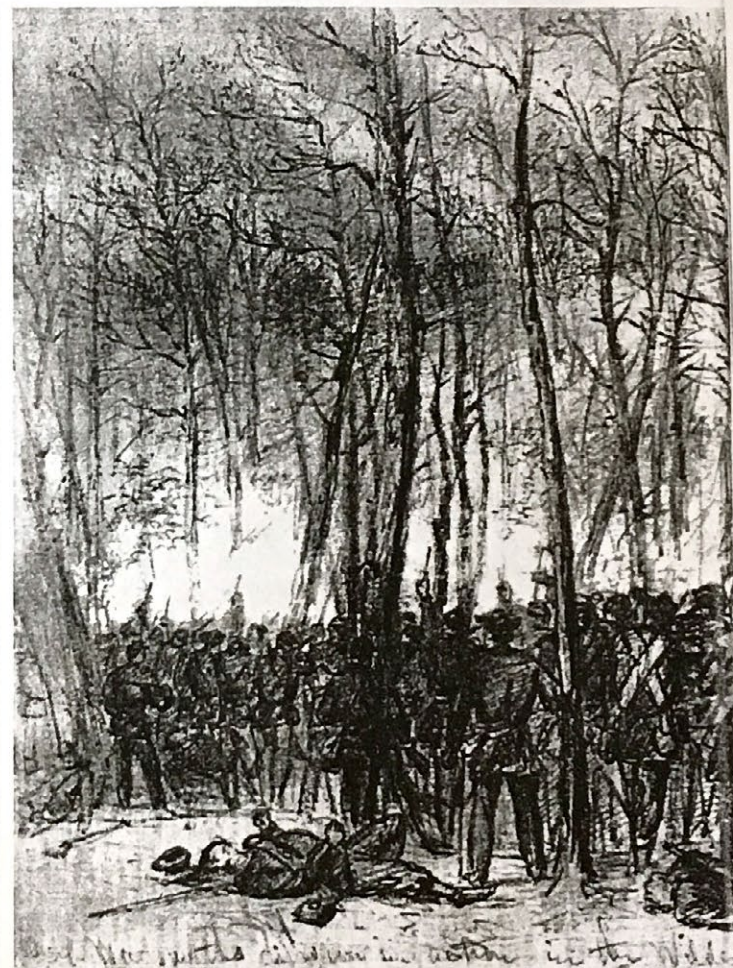
Hooker immediately made his presence known, most importantly by restoring the Army of the Potomac's confidence. During this salutary lull, Wadsworth, the new division commander, became acquainted, re-acquainted in some cases, with the four brigades assigned him.

#### CHANCELLORSVILLE

In late April 1863, Hooker ordered the I and VI Corps to cross the Rappahannock below Fredericksburg and to make a "strong demonstration" downstream to distract Lee. The bulk of the army, the V, XI, XII and Cavalry Corps, would move up from Fredericksburg, cross the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford, then split. Thus, while trying to fool General Lee, Hooker would envelope Fredericksburg, forcing Lee's army to retreat toward Richmond, with both wings of the Army of the Potomac in pursuit. Even Hooker's harshest critics would have to give him credit.

Relegated to making a "demonstration," General Wadsworth was mostly a spectator—with the exception described earlier. That exception occurred when his men were ordered to cross the Rappahannock to flush out Confederates.

Because of foul-ups that seemed to characterize so many campaigns, plans to build bridges to cross the Rappahannock River had to be abandoned temporarily. The alternative, cross-



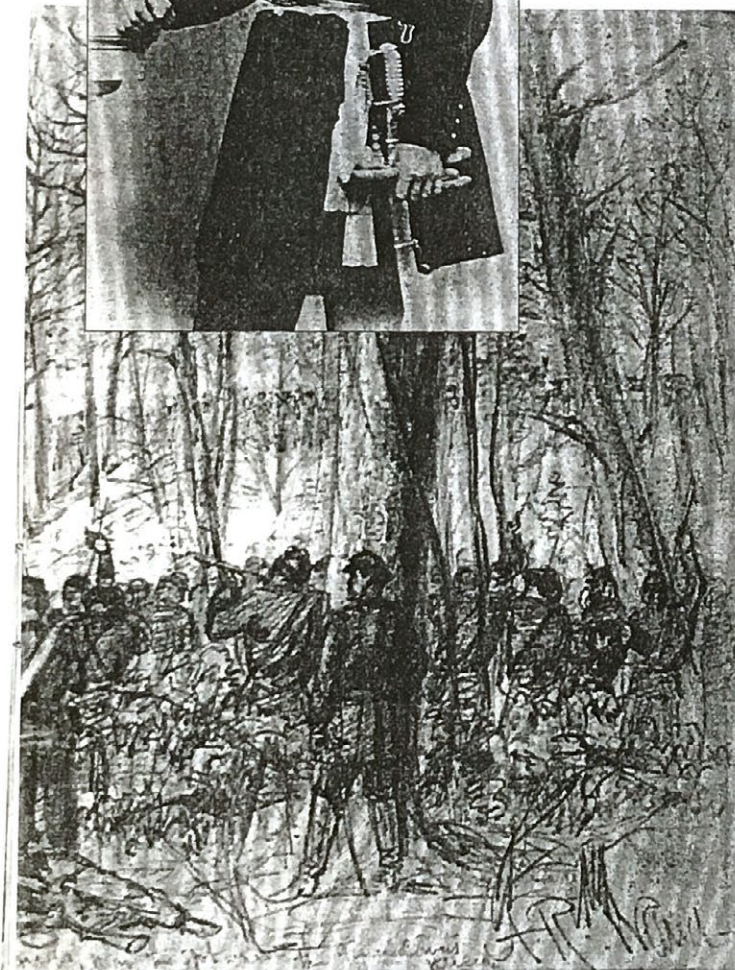
Wadsworth's division in action in the Wilderness.  
Library of Congress

ing by boat, seemed equally suicidal. In fact, Wadsworth viewed the whole plan as suicidal. "It was all wrong from the first," Wadsworth wrote his eldest daughter, Cornelia. Hooker was ordering the Union corps "thrown across on one side of the enemy & form[ed] on the other[,] giving [Lee] a chance to crush first one & then the other..." Nonetheless, Wadsworth ordered the crossing, which required one group to cross under fire, after which the boat would make the perilous return trip, and another crossing would begin.<sup>13</sup>

Then, as already related, the intrepid Wadsworth joined his men in the boat and braved enemy fire. While one observer prophesied his demise, Wadsworth brushed off the whole affair, claiming that he did not think he exposed himself "unnecessarily." Rather, faced with a "very difficult task assigned" to him, it was his "place to organize and direct [the men]."<sup>14</sup>



Wadsworth was tired after lack of sleep in over thirty-six hours—eighteen of which had seen heavy fighting. Mathew Brady photograph, Library of Congress



#### GETTYSBURG

Still itching to prove himself, Wadsworth's chance finally came less than two months later. Confederate army commander Robert E. Lee had taken the war north again, this time into Pennsylvania. He intended to test the Union army's resolve and to force the conflict to take a new direction. His three corps took different paths, which initially confused the Union command. Shortly, however, there would be another stand-up battle, with Major General George G. Meade, rather than Hooker, commanding the Army of the Potomac.

General Wadsworth now commanded only two brigades, both battle-tested and familiar to him. The first, the Iron Brigade, had acquired its sobriquet during the South Mountain campaign. It consisted of Westerners, the 2nd, 6th and 7th Wisconsin, the 19th Indiana and the 24th Michigan, and was commanded by lanky Brigadier General Solomon Meredith. (The brigade's previous commander, Brigadier General John Gibbon, whose star resulted from Wadsworth's sponsorship, is credited with instilling its fighting spirit and military discipline.) The second brigade was commanded by Lysander Cutler, who also owed his star to Wadsworth's intercession and who had originally commanded the 6th Wisconsin. Cutler's brigade consisted of the 76th, 95th, 147th and 84th New York (the 14th Brooklyn), the 7th Indiana and the 56th Pennsylvania.

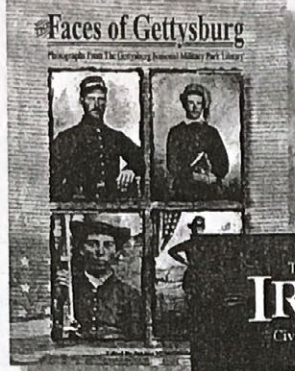
On July 1, 1863, Wadsworth's small division was ordered by General Reynolds, commanding the left wing of the Army of the Potomac, to stop the Confederates who had been heroically, but momentarily, delayed by Brigadier General John Buford's cavalry division west of Gettysburg. Because Wadsworth's division was closest to the conflict, his was rushed forward, with Cutler's brigade in the lead. The Iron Brigade followed on their heels and was positioned by Reynolds personally.

The brigades of Brigadier Generals James Archer and Joseph Davis, Major General Henry Heth's division of Lieutenant General A. P. Hill's corps, had stumbled onto Buford's cavalry. Reynolds decided this was the place to stop the Confederate thrust. Furious fighting erupted, with the Iron Brigade repulsing Archer's attack and capturing Archer by noon. Similarly, Cutler's brigade, north of the Chambersburg Pike, was successful, though the 147th New York had to fight for its very life to escape the trap into which it had fallen. Subsequently, some of Wadsworth's men were heralded for the spontaneously organized attack on the railroad cut by the 14th Brooklyn, the 95th New York and the 6th Wisconsin, which had been in reserve. It resulted in the capture of a number of Brigadier General Joseph Davis' Mississippians. For two hours, Wadsworth would subsequently proclaim, his two brigades "alone" had contended with a much larger force.

An ebullient Wadsworth enjoyed a brief pause around noon, which in early afternoon was broken by a double thrust. The remaining brigades of Heth's division, coming from the west, were joined by Lieutenant General Richard Ewell's corps from the north. The combined attack not only tore into Wadsworth's division and that of Brigadier General John Robinson, which had linked up with Wadsworth's, but routed Major General O. O. Howard's XI Corps, which had attempted to reinforce the beleaguered I Corps.

*The Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), vol. 2, pp. 424, 413.

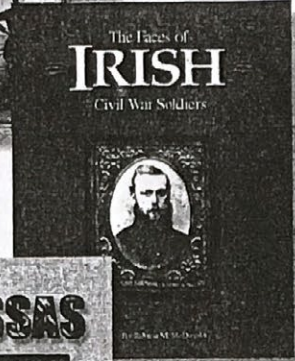
11. Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, p. 151.
12. *Ibid*, 166.
13. Letter of James Samuel Wadsworth to eldest daughter Cornelia, May 9, 1863, WFP; Kress, *Memoirs*, p. 11; Rufus R. Dawes, *Service With the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1991), p. 137; Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, p. 181.
14. Kress, 11; Letter of James Samuel Wadsworth to daughter Cornelia, May 9, 1863, WFP.
15. Wadsworth's report, O.R., vol. 27, pt. 1, p. 266; Charles H. Morgan, "Report of Lt. Col. Charles H. Morgan," David Ladd and Audrey J. Ladd, *The Bachelor Papers* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1994), vol. 3, pp. 1351-1352.
16. Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1972), pp. 67-68 (reprint of 1939 book); Wadsworth's letter to Stanton, Record Group 94, Office of the Adjutant General, Commission Branch, File No. W17 CB 1863, National Archives.
17. Undated memo, Record Group 94, Office of the Adjutant General, Commission Branch, File No. W17 CB 1863, National Archives; James S. Wadsworth's report to the Adjutant General was dated December 16, 1863, a copy of which was forwarded to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, Berlin *et al.*, *The War-time Genesis of Free Labor: the Lower South*, pp. 760-761.
18. Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p. 364; Alexander S. Webb, "Through the Wilderness," in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders*, vol. 4, p. 160; O.R., vol. 36, pt. 1, pp. 437, 438; Charles A. Stevens, *Berdan's United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac, 1861-1865* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1984), pp. 404-405.
19. Dawes, *Service With the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers*, p. 262; Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness*, p. 364. Compare Clifford Dowdey, who picked up on this in *Lee's Last Campaign* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994, reprint), p. 158, claiming that "Wadsworth evidently broke under the strain." Wadsworth's impetuosity is a better explanation.
20. From James Wadsworth Symington's foreword to my forthcoming biography of General Wadsworth.



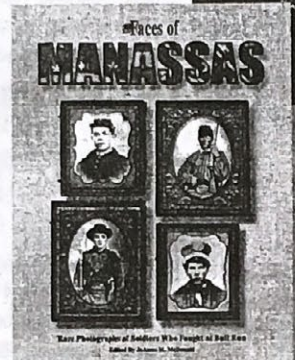
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## Abolitionism as Logical Conclusion: General James S. Wadsworth as a Case Study in Anti-Southern Sentiment and the Radicalizing Experience of the Civil War

By *Judith A. Hunter, PhD*  
Senior Research Scholar in History  
*SUNY Geneseo*

When James S. Wadsworth, a prominent Union general well known for his military exploits, his politics, and his background, died after the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864, it startled a North that had seen all too many deaths. In fact, John Hay remarked that Abraham Lincoln felt the loss of Wadsworth keenly.

"I have not known the President so affected by a personal loss since the death of [Colonel Edward D.] Baker, as by the death of General Wadsworth. ... [Lincoln said] no man has given himself up to the war with such self-sacrificing patriotism as Gen. Wadsworth. He went into the service not wishing or expecting great success or distinction in his military career and profoundly indifferent to popular applause, actuated only by a sense of duty which he neither evaded nor sought to evade."<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln's respect and the public's acclaim for Wadsworth were shaped in large part by the fact that he had volunteered for the war as soon as it began, leaving behind an enormous agricultural empire in western New York, serving without pay, and volunteering to start as close to the bottom as a politically prominent man in his 50s could, as a major. Quickly promoted to brigadier general, both for his performance at Bull Run and his eminence in New York politics, Wadsworth was passionate in his defense of the Union and his opposition to slavery.<sup>2</sup> But his abolitionist position was an end point in a long process, one that has not been examined and one that might be illustrative of how the attitude about slavery in the North generally changed and hardened in response to events, especially the experience of the Civil War itself.

Because Wadsworth's endpoint was as a member of the Republican faction known as the Radicals, it has been tempting for scholars to assume that he always had "radical" positions on the subject of slavery. This, however, was not the case. Although he left scant records to examine, those that do exist show no concern for the condition of slaves or indignation at the immorality of slavery until the war had begun. Wadsworth had had a long political career in the antebellum period, and what prompted him to speak out in the 1840s and 1850s was not so much slavery as "the slave power." It seems Wadsworth became convinced, as did many Northerners during the antebellum period, that a cabal of powerful pro-slavery Southerners was endangering the freedoms and very existence of the republic in its zeal to protect and promote the institution of slavery. This, more than concern about slavery's iniquity, was his main motivation.<sup>3</sup>

The first event to goad James Wadsworth toward antislavery had more to do with political infighting among Democrats than anything else. Although his father, the founder of the family fortune and his hometown, was, unsurprisingly, a Whig, James S. Wadsworth's earliest known political allegiances were to the Democrats and to Martin Van Buren. He was outraged when former President Martin Van Buren was, as he saw it, cheated out of the Democratic nomination in 1844 in favor of James K. Polk, primarily because Van Buren had come out against the annexation of Texas (which, all sides assumed, would add vast new slave territories to the United States and provoke war with Mexico). After the nominating convention Wadsworth wrote a livid letter to Van Buren.

“I have seen no full account of the debates, but I do not perceive that the dictation and selfishness of the South were properly rebuked. They have filled the Executive Chair 44 years, the North 12, and yet because we are not prepared to embark in a most unjust and iniquitous war to extend their “Institutions” – meaning Slavery – our rights are again to be deferred.”<sup>4</sup>

Had Wadsworth’s political concerns revolved primarily around slavery at this point, he could have supported the third-party candidacy of the Liberty Party’s James G. Birney, who garnered enough votes in western New York to help throw the state into Polk’s column. There is no record of Wadsworth’s having done so. In fact, he expressed approval of Polk as vice-presidential timber in the same letter to Van Buren, saying, “I have a favorable opinion of Mr. Polk and hoped to have seen him nominated, but not where he is.” Antiquarian accounts of Wadsworth’s placing wagers on Polk’s victory suggest Wadsworth eventually became reconciled enough to the Democratic nominee to support his presidential candidacy.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, a sense of outraged honor – in this case that Van Buren had been unfairly deprived of the Democratic presidential nomination by scheming Southerners – often seemed to motivate Wadsworth to take his strongest political positions. He was not at all typical of the rest of the Van Buren supporters who split from the New York Democracy. Jonathan Earle’s careful examination of Northern Democrats who pushed for the limitation of slavery to its existing boundaries (so-called “free soilers,” because they objected to allowing the expansion of slavery into new territories,) suggests that many of Van Buren’s defenders in New York came from a very different background than James Wadsworth did. Most of them came from rural areas that were economically stagnant and isolated; Earle finds them to have been outside the economically, politically, socially, and religiously fertile area of upstate New York historians refer to as the “burned-over district.” Although there is no evidence that suggests Wadsworth took part in the religious or social “enthusiasms” of his region, he was surrounded by them in the prosperous Genesee Valley, a part of the burned-over district. His great wealth and its source were also unusual for the “Barnburners” (New York Democrats who bolted their party to remain loyal to Van Buren), whom Earle argues were involved in the anti-rent agitations against large landholders that characterized the state in this period. Wadsworth’s role as a land baron made him a most anomalous Barnburner.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, abolitionist Henry B. Stanton recounted an anecdote in his memoirs about Wadsworth’s activities as a Barnburner that strongly suggests free soil activity was chiefly motivated by his feelings of indignation at the time, rather than an ideological position on slavery. The 1847 New York Democratic Convention in Syracuse was marked by bitter recriminations between the Barnburners and their anti-Van Burenite rivals, the “Hunkers.” Wadsworth’s faction was especially angered by the Hunkers’ treatment of Silas Wright, the unsuccessful Barnburner candidate for governor the previous year; the Barnburners blamed the Hunkers for his defeat. Wright’s death just a short time later increased the bitter feelings. As Stanton recalled, James Wadsworth dramatically and physically let everyone know who it was he held responsible for his leader’s demise.

In the convention some one spoke of doing justice to Silas Wright. A Hunker sneeringly responded, “It is too late; he is dead.” Springing upon a table, Wadsworth made the hall ring as he uttered a defiant reply: “Though it may be too late to do justice to Silas Wright, it is not too late to do justice to his assassins.”<sup>7</sup>

New York Democrats remained divided over the support of Van Buren and had difficulty working together from that point. The Barnburners, Wadsworth’s faction, bolted the 1848 Democratic national convention over the Wilmot Proviso (a free soil measure they supported and the national party did not) and spurned the Democratic nominee, Lewis Cass, in favor of Van Buren, whom they helped to put at the head of the third-party Free Soil ticket.

Wadsworth’s public statements on the issue prompted Francis Preston Blair, the Maryland politician who later became an early Republican leader, to write him approvingly, commending him for avoiding even the appearance of abolitionism. “You make an admirable distinction when you point the attention to the fact that the true Democrats of the country aim to extend its prosperity by providing for the white race, whilst abolitionism is only concerned for the black.” Blair continued in a vein that made it clear that he did not consider James Wadsworth to be a radical in any way on the subject of slavery. “The truth is that the abolitionists and the slave propaganders [sic] are much nearer allies in their sympathies than we with either. They are both Negro lovers – the first because they are political property – the second because they are personal property.”<sup>8</sup>

Another strong indication that James Wadsworth was not deeply and personally concerned with actual slaves, rather than the expansion of slavery, comes from his philanthropic activity during the antebellum period. Wadsworth was renowned for his support of charitable causes. For instance, during the height of the Irish potato famine, he provided a full shipload of grain to the famine relief effort. In the 1850s he donated sums of three to five thousand dollars annually to benevolent organizations. Yet Wadsworth was noticeably inactive in funding antislavery efforts. The only exceptions were \$50 he contributed toward the fines levied against a fugitive slave in Wisconsin in 1855 and a fairly mysterious reference in a letter written by an Albany activist to Wadsworth’s providing financial support to the Underground Railroad in the Albany area.<sup>9</sup>

Although Wadsworth and the rest of the Barnburners temporarily re-entered the Democratic fold after 1848, they left it permanently following the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Wadsworth presided over a “Democratic-Republican Convention” in July of 1856 at Syracuse, the result of which was the final transfer of the Barnburners into the new Republican Party. Wadsworth came close to the Republican gubernatorial nomination that year. All of these activities would be consistent with Wadsworth’s free soil proclivities and his frustration with what he saw as Southern domination of the federal government (and his former party).<sup>10</sup>

As the sectional crisis deepened in the immediate aftermath of Abraham Lincoln’s election as president in 1860, the governor of New York appointed James Wadsworth one of New York’s delegates to the peace conference that met that winter in Washington in an attempt to forge some kind of solution that could avert civil war. The New Yorker heard nothing as a member of the Peace Convention of 1861 that softened his views of Southern leadership, and he refused to compromise on the issue of slavery’s extension. L. E. Chittenden, a delegate from Vermont, later recalled a furious outburst by Wadsworth, who was angered by what he saw as Southern bad faith at the convention. According to Chittenden, the New Yorker demanded of a Virginian delegate, “Why do you persist in your attempt to deceive the North? You secessionists mean fight! You will keep right on with your treasonable schemes until you either whip us or we discipline you.” Although he had given up any hopes for the convention’s success, Wadsworth went on to say that he would remain in Washington until its conclusion. “I shall stay here until Congress adjourns on the 3d of March, because I cannot honorably resign from the Conference. Then I shall go home and help my people to get ready for the war in which you slaveholders intend to involve the republic!”<sup>11</sup>

Wadsworth was certainly willing to fight, but it would appear he wanted to fight slaveholders rather than slavery. Indeed, one of the most explicit statements we have by Wadsworth on his feelings about slavery prior to the war supports the notion that abolition was more radical than he was prepared to be. In testimony to the American Freedman’s Inquiry Commission only a few months before he died, Wadsworth claimed, “At the beginning of the war, I was hardly a Republican. I thought slavery should be restricted to the ground where it stood, but was opposed to interfering with it there. I dreaded insurrections, massacres, and violence. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is clear that James Wadsworth’s participation in the Civil War soon convinced him that any social unrest accompanying abolition paled in comparison to disunion, and he quickly became a champion of the “radical” position in Washington. Enlisting in the Union effort at the rank of major, Wadsworth saw action at Bull Run, the first significant battle of the war. After acquitting himself admirably in the fight as a volunteer aide to the commanding

general, Irvin McDowell, he won quick promotion to the rank of brigadier general. Obviously, his eminence and political status were large factors in his elevation, but Wadsworth worked diligently to be worthy of command. During the long winter of 1861–1862, when the public chafed because the Army of the Potomac did not go on the offensive, Wadsworth and his brigade were stationed at Upton's Hill, the closest point on the Union lines to the rebel army. There, he worked hard to protect the welfare of his men, but he also became concerned for the welfare of individual slaves who came to his attention. Several were suffering great privations, having been abandoned by their Virginian owners who fled the Union occupation of their region, leaving their slaves to fend for themselves. Wadsworth wrote to Charles Sumner, the Republican senator from Massachusetts who was well known for his anti-slavery views, to secure his help in getting three or four families who were "practically emancipated" safely north. Ignoring his technical obligation to return such "property" to their owners, as the Fugitive Slave Law was still in effect, Wadsworth helped other slaves by employing them in his camp. No longer a faraway abstraction, slaves became an everyday presence whom Wadsworth treated with both his natural beneficence and pragmatism.<sup>13</sup>

That pragmatic approach also caused Wadsworth to appreciate the slaves he met as valuable sources of intelligence. He interviewed as many of them as he could about the strength of the enemy forces in nearby Centreville and Manassas and got consistent enough answers that he became very confident in his estimate of the size of the Confederate army that he, along with many other frustrated Northerners, was eager to attack. As he would testify to Congress, "I think we are largely superior to our enemies in numbers." This testimony clearly aligned Wadsworth with the political faction upset with the overall command and approach of General George B. McClellan, a known conservative on slavery, but it may very well be that Wadsworth joined the Radicals' opposition to McClellan's policies out of personal experience as much as political conviction. During the long period after Bull Run in which the Army of the Potomac was basically inactive (although doing the necessary work of getting equipped and trained), McClellan repeatedly insisted that his army could not attack because it faced such a huge opposing force. Wadsworth's intelligence activities, which included scouting and interviewing prisoners as well as refugee slaves, led him to conclude that the Federals faced somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 men. He reported this up the chain of command, only to be rudely dismissed by his commander, who was sure the Confederate strength was closer to 150,000 men. As later events showed that correct number was within five hundred of Wadsworth's estimate, it is not surprising that Wadsworth's attitude toward McClellan thereafter was one of suspicion.<sup>14</sup> The well-known conflict between them in the spring of 1862 over the number of troops left to defend Washington during the Peninsula Campaign needs to be interpreted with the dispute of the previous winter in mind, when Wadsworth learned to doubt McClellan's wisdom and judgment.

Another personality issue that needs to be taken into account in tracing Wadsworth's growing radicalism has to do with how James Wadsworth defined himself as being in opposition to others besides "Little Mac." It was a repeated pattern. Much as his activities as a Free Soil Democrat were due to his conflict with those who betrayed Martin Van Buren, many of his activities as a Republican must be understood keeping in mind the divisions that existed in the new party between former Democrats and former Whigs. As a New York Republican who began as a Democrat, Wadsworth's relations with former Whigs in the New York party were not always smooth. Since William Seward, the leader of that faction, was a leading moderate in his position as Lincoln's secretary of state, Wadsworth may have instinctively avoided that camp. In fact, Wadsworth had actively worked against Seward's getting the Republican nomination for president in 1860, helping to diminish the viability of the former Whig, who was widely expected to become the nominee, by asserting that Seward would not be able to carry New York in the general election. Wadsworth would hardly be inclined to become a close ally once the war began.<sup>15</sup>

General Wadsworth was concerned about the capital when the Army of the Potomac finally began to leave Washington for the Peninsula campaign, because Lincoln had appointed Wadsworth military governor of the District of Columbia when he reorganized the federal army in March of 1862. In this capacity, Wadsworth found

that he had to deal with the legal and practical issues that immediately arose as "contrabands," enemy property in the form of runaway slaves, showed up in Washington. At that point the national government was still bound by the Fugitive Slave Act and obliged by the Constitution to return "property" to owners, many of whom appealed to the government for help in getting back their slaves. This was an awkward issue for the Lincoln administration, particularly with Maryland slaveholders, whose state was so important to Lincoln's border state policies.

In addition to the weight added to the Union cause by the support of some slave states, simple geography made it impossible for Lincoln to lose Maryland to the rebels. The District of Columbia was surrounded by Virginia, a state which had already seceded, and Maryland, which Lincoln had to treat gingerly to keep in the Union. This made him careful not to alienate Maryland's slave owners in the early phases of the war. This created some awkward situations, for Wadsworth insisted that contrabands whose owners he determined to be disloyal were under his jurisdiction and issued each written certificates of military protection. But the civil authorities (usually Lincoln's old friend from Illinois, Marshal Ward Lamon,) disagreed and on several occasions jailed such fugitives. Wadsworth was continually involved in bureaucratic and legal disputes on this issue, and in one case he actually ordered soldiers to the jail in the middle of the night to free all the imprisoned contrabands. The general was also responsible to some degree for the feeding, shelter, and employment of the great numbers of fugitive slaves in the District of Columbia, another experience that must have helped shape his feelings on abolition. He soon gained a reputation as their advocate and protector. Adam Gurowski, a Polish diarist who seemed to exist to pass judgment on the important players in Civil War Washington, was an unabashed admirer of Wadsworth's actions (which he exaggerated as he praised): "General Wadsworth is the good genius of the poor and oppressed race. But for Wadsworth's noble soul and heart the Lamons and many other blood-hounds in Washington would have given about three-fourths of the fugitives over to the whip of the slavers."<sup>16</sup>

One tantalizing anecdote survives that suggests Wadsworth felt great frustration with Lincoln's very slow movement on the issue of slavery during the early period of the war. Adams S. Hill, a New York Tribune reporter in the capital, wrote to his editor an account of a conversation he had one evening in July of 1862 with the general.

He is cheerful in view of military prospects, but thinks political signs gloomy. ... He says that the President is not with us; has no Anti-slavery instincts. He has never heard him speak of Anti-slavery men, otherwise than as 'radicals,' 'abolitionists,' and of the 'nigger question' he frequently speaks.

In fact, Wadsworth predicted, "that if emancipation comes at all it will be from the rebels, or in consequence of their protracting this war." Although Hill never included the disgruntled New Yorker's assessment in a story, he nevertheless gave it great credence. "I value his testimony because he has, as he says, been with the President and Stanton [the secretary of war] every day at the War Department – frequently for five or six hours – during several months."<sup>17</sup>

His experiences with fugitives may have given Wadsworth a spur toward outright abolitionism, and he was relieved when Lincoln finally did make his move against slavery with his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, but it was Wadsworth's anti-Southern feelings that he publicly spoke and wrote about when he addressed the issue rather than any concern for African-Americans. His position on the slavery question became a matter of public consequence, as the New York Republicans nominated James Wadsworth for governor in 1862. He agreed to stand on the condition that he would remain in his post in Washington. This meant he did little active campaigning; when he did, he justified abolition as a means to preserve the union and punish the South, not as an end in and of itself. He gave only one speech in New York during the campaign, an address to a mass meeting at Cooper Union in New York City a few days before the election, and in it he responded to Democrats' criticisms of Lincoln's new emancipation policy, announced the previous month:

Mr. Lincoln has told you that he would save this country with slavery if he could, and he would save it without slavery if he could; he has never said to you that if he could not save slavery he would let the country go. ... He has said to those in rebellion against the United States: "I give you 100 days to return to your allegiance; if you fail to do that, I will strike from under you that institution which some of you seem to think dearer than life, than liberty, than country, than peace." ... Gentlemen, I stand by Abraham Lincoln. [Tremendous applause.] It is just, it is holy so to do.<sup>18</sup>

Although it was perhaps politically prudent to omit any concern for the injustice of slavery when speaking to voters of a city that would see horrific race riots within a year, prudence was not a quality he possessed. Despite the care Wadsworth took to make it clear that he saw emancipation more as a smart tactic in the fight against rebels than as justice to slaves, in that same speech he at last embraced the label "abolitionist" for the first time. Finally reaching this conclusion was consistent with his sense of honor and his sense of where the slave power and the war had brought the nation.

"I know, for I have sometimes felt, the influence of the odium which the spurious aristocracy, who have so largely directed the destinies of this nation for three-quarters of a century, have attached to the word "abolition." They have treated it, and too often taught us to treat it, as some low, vulgar crime, not to be spoken of in good society or mentioned in fashionable parlors. I know there are many men still influenced by this prejudice; but let those who, in this hour of peril, this struggle of life and death, shrink from that odium stand aside. The events of this hour are too big for them."<sup>19</sup>

He lost the race by fewer than 11,000 votes, despite his almost total absence from the hustings, the absence of soldiers who were at the front (a significant potential voting bloc in his favor), the absence of real support from New York kingmakers William Seward and his colleague Thurlow Weed, and the absence of activity on the part of McClellan and the Army of the Potomac after Antietam, frustrating northerners who had wanted the Federals to follow up and press their advantage once the battle was done. Gideon Welles, Lincoln's secretary of the Navy, recalled in his diary when he lamented Wadsworth's death in 1864 the fatal infighting that had defeated Wadsworth in New York. "He should, by good right and fair-dealing, have been at this moment Governor of New York, but the perfidy of Thurlow Weed and others defeated him. I have always believed that Seward was, if not implicated, a sympathizer in that business."<sup>20</sup>

James Wadsworth finally converted to abolitionism because he saw it as an effective war measure. As he told supporters who came to see him shortly after his nomination,

"I have never failed, gentlemen, previous to the outbreak of this rebellion ... to declare my earnest devotion to the Constitution of the United States, and my desire to uphold it, with what are called compromises and concessions on behalf of Slavery. But, gentlemen, Secession and War, bloody and relentless war, have changed our relations to that which is the cause and the source of the war. ... We have the right, we are bound, moreover, by the most solemn obligations of duty, to use this agency [emancipation], so far as we can, to put an end to this struggle, and to save the lives of white men who are perishing by thousands in this country."

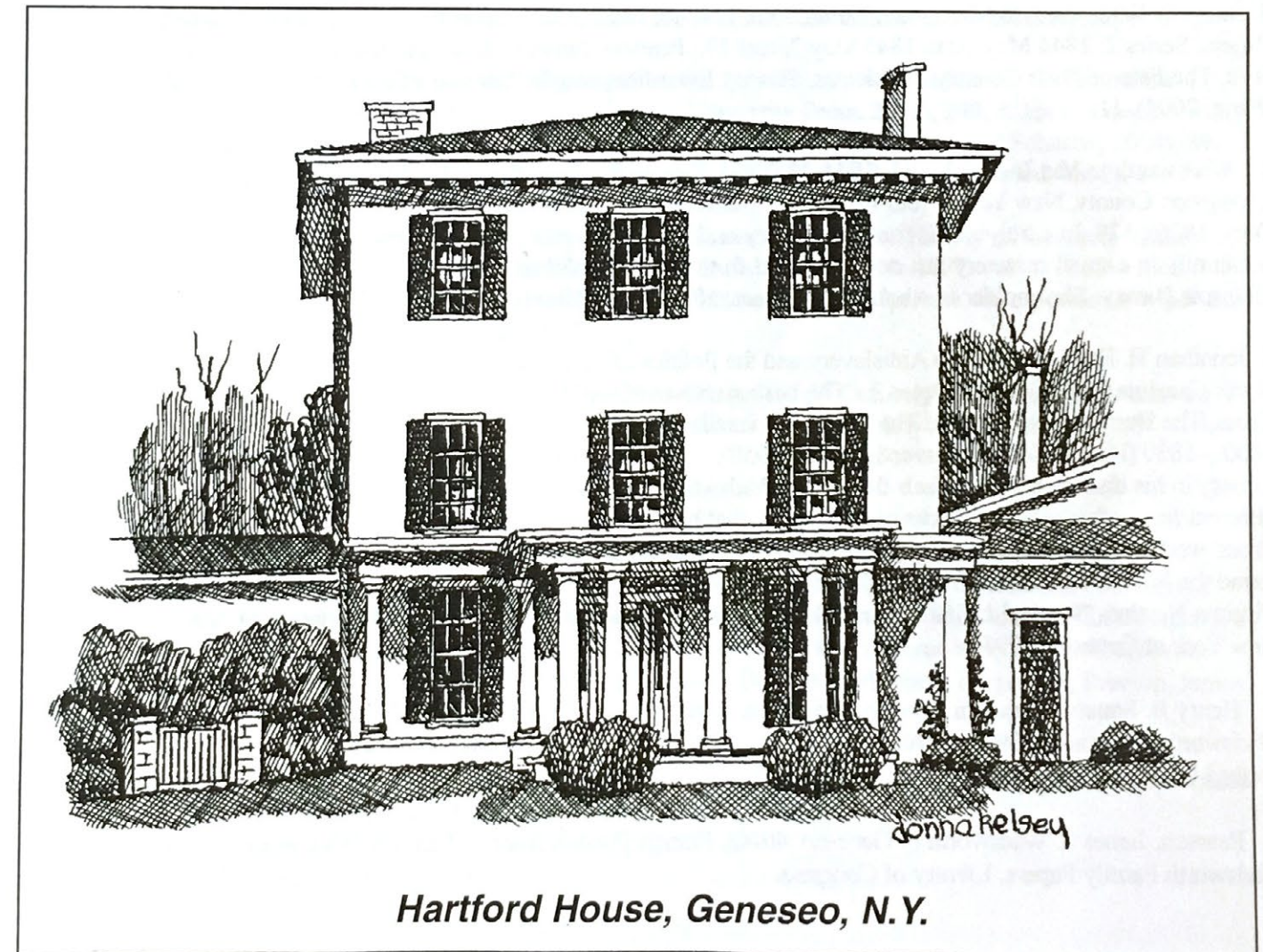
Unfortunately for his political career, Wadsworth came to accept this before the Northern electorate did (1862 was a poor year for many Republican candidates). Yet the argument that emancipation diminished the Southern capacity to wage rebellion ultimately did largely reconcile skeptical Northern opinion.<sup>21</sup>

The anger at the South that prodded James S. Wadsworth along the path to abolitionism does create a paradox.

In his Washington speech, the general-turned-candidate touched on a theme that was a constant refrain in his wartime correspondence:

How long are we to bear the insolence of this Southern aristocracy? Have we not borne it long enough? Has it not long enough disturbed and distracted our councils, and paralyzed our energies? Has it not long enough paralyzed the energies of the country? Nay, more, has it not long enough, in the eyes of the other civilized nations of the world, covered us with infamy?

Wadsworth used the term "aristocracy" with real distaste here and elsewhere, yet there were few Americans with a more aristocratic pedigree than his. Besides his great wealth and illustrious ancestry, one fact from his biography that goes far to prove his own qualifications as an aristocrat would be that he built his impressive home in Geneseo, New York, Hartford House, after he returned from his multi-year honeymoon abroad, exactly on the plans of the estate of Britain's Lord Hertford, which he and his wife had visited and admired. Yet his zeal for the war effort and his support for abolition rested on republican distaste for the South's slave-owning class. Wadsworth followed his questions about those Southerners to his Washington supporters with the statement, "We are in the pangs of dissolution, or we are in the pangs of exorcism. If we would save ourselves, we must cast out the devil which has tormented and disgraced us from the hour of our national birth." To James S. Wadsworth the devil was not slavery, it was the aristocracy of the South.<sup>22</sup>



## Endnotes

1 John Hay, *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay*, ed. Tyler Dennett (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1939; reprint ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 182.

2 James Wadsworth has been the subject of three biographies, none of which analyzes his changing politics. Henry Greenleaf Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo: Brevet Major-General, U.S.V.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913); John F. Krumwiede, "Old Waddy's Coming": *The Military Career of Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth, Army of the Potomac Series* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 2002); Wayne Mahood, *General Wadsworth: The Life and Times of Brevet Major General James S. Wadsworth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2003).

3 The concept of the "slave power" is best set out in David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). One could make a fascinating comparison between Wadsworth's anti-slavery career and that of a true radical's on the subject, Gerrit Smith's. Both men had immense fortunes in upstate New York real estate (Wadsworth's in the Genesee Valley and Smith's in the Utica area), and both men ended up as abolitionists. Yet Smith was a vital leader of the "Burned-over district's" anti-slavery movement from the 1830s, active in the single-issue Liberty party (and elected to Congress), and ultimately went so far in his efforts to eradicate slavery that he provided financial support for John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. See Ralph Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1939; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1972). Wadsworth never got near to the abolitionist wing of the anti-slavery spectrum before the Civil War.

4 James S. Wadsworth to Martin Van Buren, June 1, 1844, *Presidential Papers Microfilm, Martin Van Buren Papers, Series 2: 1844 May 30 to 1845 May 7, reel 29.*; Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 35-37; Michael F. Holt, *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 11.

5 Wadsworth to Van Buren, June 1, 1844: Mahood, *General Wadsworth*, 46; Lockwood L. Doty, *A History of Livingston County, New York: From Its Earliest Traditions, to Its Part in the War for Our Union* (Geneseo: Edward E. Doty, 1876), 528. In a truly ironic footnote, Birney ended up being reinterred by his wife alongside other members of her family in a small cemetery just down the road from Wadsworth's birthplace in Geneseo. Betty Fladeland, *James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 293n.

6 Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824 – 1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chapter 2. The best overview of the "burned-over district" of New York remains Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800 – 1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950). Cross, however, does not include Wadsworth's Livingston County in his discussion, as he feels the role of Wadsworth and his father as landlord for so much of the county made it different from other areas he discusses. Yet work that has been done on Livingston County since the publication of Cross' work suggests that it was very much like the rest of the burned-over district. For example, Virginia Nestlen found the local Presbyterian church experienced a significant revival episode: Virginia Nestlen, "Revival in 1825: The Role of the Wadsworth Family in Geneseo" (Honors thesis, State University of New York at Geneseo, 1998).

7 Henry B. Stanton, *Random Recollections* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887), 160; Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 39; John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 574.

8 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 40-42; Francis Preston Blair to James S. Wadsworth, 28 June 1848, *Wadsworth Family Papers*, Library of Congress.

9 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 29; Frank A. Abial, *History of the Republican Party, Embracing Its Origin, Growth and Mission* (Springfield, IL: Union Publishing Company, 1884), 126; Tom Carlaco, *The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 191.

10 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 45 – 47.

11 Mahood, *General Wadsworth*, 58 – 59; L. E. Chittenden, *Personal Reminiscences, 1840 – 1890* (New York: Richmond, Croscup & Co., 1893), 303.

12 "Testimony of a War Department Special Inspector," in Ira Berlin, et al, eds., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867, Series I, vol. III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 492.

13 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 95 – 97; Wayne Mahood, *General Wadsworth*, 69-74.

14 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 97, 99, 101, 104, 105; Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 112, 113, 129; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 212.

15 Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 182.

16 Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 46, 48, 134-141; Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1860 – 1865* (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1941), 247; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 249; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 89-90; Adam Gurowski, *Diary from March 4, 1861 to November 12, 1862* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1862), 246.

17 Letter of Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, quoted in James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of Home Rule at the South in 1877*, vol. 4, 1862 – 1864 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 64n. Rhodes indicates that he is quoting "private correspondence which has been kindly placed at my disposal by Professor Hill."

18 Speech of James S. Wadsworth at the Cooper Union, New York City, 30 October, 1862, "Compiled from the reports in New York papers of October 31" and reprinted in Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 158 – 163, quotation 160.

19 Ibid.

20 Speech of James S. Wadsworth at the Cooper Union, reprinted in Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, 158-163, quotation 160; Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, vol. II (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1911), 27. For an overview of the 1862 gubernatorial race, see Stewart Mitchell, *Horatio Seymour of New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), chapter 12; Mahood, *General Wadsworth*, chapter 11; Pearson, *James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo*, chapter 5.

21 "Speech of General Wadsworth at Washington, Friday Evening, September 26, 1862," (Geneseo, N.Y.: Genesee Valley Collection, Milne Library, SUNY-Geneseo).

22 Ibid.; Mahood, *General Wadsworth*, 34.



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