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George Leonard Andrews: Bridgewater's Forgotten General

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Bridgewater Normal School was still in its infancy when the country turned on itself and went to war in 1861. Though BNS was a teacher preparation school with the vast majority of its students at the time being women, there were a small number of male students—several of whom served in the war and some of whom gained great prestige from doing so. One, an 1860 graduate and son of a sea captain, won a Congressional Medal of Honor during the War and later wrote his regiment’s history. Another, an 1861 graduate, also a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, died in office while serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic. The stories of these men are important contributions to BSU’s nineteenth-century legacy. But arguably the most successful Civil War veteran to come from BNS was a third man, an 1846 graduate and Bridgewater native, George Leonard Andrews.

George L. Andrews was born on August 31, 1828 to local residents Manassah and Harriet (Leonard) Andrews. George’s father had fought in the War of 1812 and worked as a machinist in Bridgewater’s early industrial era. George entered Bridgewater Normal School in July 1845 under the tutelage of the school’s first principal, Nicholas Tillinghast. Tillinghast was a United States Military Academy graduate who, while later teaching there, had had future Confederate commander Robert E. Lee as a student. It was likely through Tillinghast that Andrews became connected to West Point. He attended the Normal School for the 17th, 19th, and 20th terms and finished his program in late 1846 (Ledger, Bridgewater Normal School, 1840–54, BSU Archives).

A month after graduating from BNS, Andrews applied for a cadetship at West Point. In a letter of recommendation to Secretary of War William L. Marcy dated January 16, 1847, Tillinghast wrote: “I feel no hesitation in promising that [Andrews] will take a high stand in the class, be observant of the rules of the Institution, & serve the Government well in any situation to which he may be called” (U.S. Military Academy Cadet Application Papers, 1805–1866, National Archives). Tillinghast’s words proved prophetic. Andrews entered West Point in 1847 and finished the program in 1851 with one of the most sterling records the Academy had ever seen. He ranked first in the order of merit for every subject, and had zero demerits his final year. And his class of cadets was made up of very high achievers. Of the 42 cadets in his graduating class, nine went on to serve as generals in the Civil War (three for the Confederacy and six for the Union; three were killed during the War). Andrews finished West Point ranked first in the entire Academy in the 1851 Conduct Roll, ahead of such notables as future generals O.O. Howard, J.E.B. Stuart, John B. Hood, John M. Schofield, and Philip Sheridan (Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy, June 1851).

In May 1861, when Andrews was serving as a Lieutenant Colonel for the Union Army, a soldier under his command wrote home to his mother: “Both our Col. & Lieut. Col. [Andrews] are West Point men. The latter graduated higher than anyone else ever did” (Duncan, ed. Blue-Eyed
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listed as an Acting Assistant Professor of Military and Civil Engineering. His short time teaching at West Point undoubtedly had him working under Robert E. Lee, West Point Superintendent (1852-55). In curious ways, the paths of Andrews and Lee crossed both before and during the War. Both serious-minded engineers, Lee and Andrews each went into the Civil War with reputations as disciplinarians. Lee had finished as a West Point cadet in 1829 ranked second in his class and with zero demerits over his four years there. Andrews finished as a West Point cadet in 1851 ranked first in his class and with 11 demerits over four years. To put this in comparative perspective, future general George A. Custer finished at West Point in 1861 with a total of 726 demerits over his four years (Official Register, 1858-61).

On April 12, 1861, the first shots rang out over Fort Sumter and civil unrest escalated into civil war. Andrews enlisted in late May 1861 as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Second Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. He was listed as a 33-year-old military engineer from Roxbury, near Boston. At about the same time, two other men enlisted in the 2nd MA who likely influenced Andrews' choices later in the war: Robert Morris Copeland from Roxbury and Shaw from Boston. These three men occupied the same regiment for the following 14 months and must have encountered one another on many occasions. In May 1863, the first “Colored” regiment, the Massachusetts 54th, was organized with Shaw chosen by Governor Andrew to lead it. This was a watershed moment in American history. The brainchild behind this all-Black regiment was Copeland, a landscape architect by profession who envisioned himself as the regiment’s commanding officer. Copeland believed it to be the best hope for a Union victory. Ultimately, it was Shaw who, as its leader, died during the charge on Fort Wagner by the 54th MA in 1863 and has since been glorified for it. Copeland faded into obscurity.

In 1862, Andrews and the 2nd MA were involved in several battles. On August 9, at the Battle of Cedar Mountain,
Andrews conducted the rear guard of the Union retreat. He wrote a substantial paper on that battle in 1895 in which he explained his reasoning for defying orders from General Nathaniel Banks to attack across an open field: “Why it will be the destruction of the regiment and will do no good.” Andrews later learned the order was a mistake, reassuring him that he had made the correct decision (Dwight, ed. Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts [1989]).

Less than two months after the September 17 Battle of Antietam, in which Andrews led troops involved in the notorious massacre at Miller’s Cornfield, he was again promoted—this time to the rank of Brigadier-General.

Andrews’ part in the war took a new direction in November and December 1862, when Major-General Nathaniel P. Banks was assigned to Louisiana to relieve Benjamin Butler of command of the Department of the Gulf. After helping with the logistics of this expedition, Andrews was named Banks’ Chief of Staff of the Nineteenth Corps, Department of the Gulf, on March 6, 1863. He remained in Louisiana for the duration of the war, where he helped the Union open up and take control of the Mississippi River.

As Union troops under General Ulysses S. Grant attacked Vicksburg, Mississippi, in summer 1863, General Banks’ troops attacked and held siege to Port Hudson, Louisiana. Still acting as Banks’ Chief of Staff, Andrews took over a division for a day when General Thomas Sherman was wounded. This was the same day—May 27, 1863, nearly two months before the 54th MA’s famous charge at Fort Wagner—that black Union soldiers made national headlines for bravery in battle (Welcher, The Union Army, 1861-1865 [1993]). Two regiments of New Orleans free blacks and ex-slaves from Louisiana led a failed attack on Confederate-held Port Hudson. Back in Andrews’ Massachusetts, the Taunton Union Gazette and Democrat declared on June 11, 1863: “These sable soldiers provoked the most frenzied hatred on the other side, and the rebels bent all their energies to their annihilation; and since the first they have missed no chance to kill negro pickets. In one instance they pounced upon a single black sentry, captured and forthwith hung him.” Another article in the same paper touted the “Bravery of the Negro
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Regiments.” The Confederates at Port Hudson officially surrendered on July 9, giving the Union control over the Mississippi. On the same day, Andrews was given a new assignment that was to bring colored troops even further into the national spotlight.

In May 1863, General Banks proposed General Order No. 40—the creation of an all-black corps, the “Corps d’Afrique” (New York Times, May 18, 1863), whose command Andrews was given after Port Hudson fell to the Union. The soldiers in the corps consisted of those already involved in the Louisiana campaign, as well as freedmen and runaway slaves recruited from the surrounding area. By August 15, Andrews had 19 regiments of infantry and two regiments of engineers under his command, all of them made up of “colored” troops. At one point, he had more than 19,000 soldiers under his command. On April 19, 1864, the Corps d’Afrique was renamed the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The USCT, Department of the Gulf, remained under Andrews’ command with headquarters at Port Hudson until February 1865. In all, he spent more than 20 months as the commander of the Corps d’Afrique/USCT. After he left this position, he stayed in the South and was involved in the capture of Mobile, for which he was later breveted brigadier-general for his display of distinguished bravery.

After the war, Andrews tried his hand at a couple of different jobs before his original calling in life came back to him. After stints as a planter in Mississippi and a United States marshal in Massachusetts, Andrews found the job that combined his love of teaching with his love of the military: professor of French and Foreign Languages at West Point. He remained in it until his retirement in 1892.

The theories of pedagogy and the academic discipline that Andrews learned years earlier during his time at Bridgewater Normal School can be found in full bloom in an 1883 speech he read before the United States Military Service Institute at West Point titled “The Military Academy and its Requirements.” Andrews’ speech was in response to a furor over West Point’s academic curriculum, in particular the public and past graduates’ outcry that it was too rigorous and only catered to society’s elite because acceptance standards were too difficult to reach.

Andrews’ reaction was plain: “Present requirements for admission should be not only maintained, but increased as circumstances shall permit … The result of relaxing the traditional discipline may be seen by the condition of the Corps of the Cadets in 1860. At that time the War Department, instead of sustaining the authorities of the Academy, saw fit to continue at the institution, or to restore to it after dismissal, cadets found deficient in studies or guilty of serious misconduct.” Andrews specifically pinpointed the era at West Point after Robert E. Lee had left as superintendent, which saw standards fall and when cadets with atrocious records, such as George Armstrong Custer, were pushed through the program and allowed to graduate. For Andrews, strict discipline and rigorous mental training were the foundation of education and the complaints of people and past graduates over their children failing the entrance exam did not expose the faults of the Academy. Both rich Easterners and poor Westerners were rejected because of poor preparation and not because of where they came from or who their parents were (Andrews, “The Military Academy and its Requirements” [1883]).

By 1892, Brigadier-General and scholar George Leonard Andrews’ career had come full-circle. Forty-seven years after graduating from Bridgewater Normal Academy, where he began rigorous training to become a teacher, he retired from the field. With guidance from one of the nation’s first Normal Schools as his foundation, he went on to have a very diverse, demanding, rewarding, and highly successful career in teaching, engineering, the military, government work and, finally, teaching again. On April 4, 1899 he passed away while living in Brookline, Mass. He is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge.

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