

## OLIVER WILLCOX NORTON

What of the young bugler who first sounded the call? There is much known about him and it is fitting that we spend some time reviewing the life of this remarkable man.

Oliver Willcox Norton (O.W. to his family and friends) was born in Angelica, New York (Allegheny County), on December 17, 1839. The son of Oliver William Norton, a Presbyterian minister, and his wife Henrietta, he was named after Henrietta's father. He was the oldest of thirteen children (the elder Norton had seven with first wife Henrietta and six with second wife Sarah Swezey). Reverend Norton moved his family around often in the years before the Civil War and O.W. received his education at the Montrose Academy in Montrose, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. He is listed on the school rolls in 1857, and then he attended a private school in Sherman, New York. The family moved to Chautauqua County, New York, where Reverend Norton preached at Open Meadows near the town of Sherman. O.W. began to teach in the district school at Waites Corner in 1858. The family moved again to Springfield, Pennsylvania, in 1860. It is here that O.W. was teaching and working on a farm when the Civil War began.



**Oliver Willcox Norton as a member of the Eighty-third Pennsylvania**

Norton was among the first to enter the Union army when the Civil War broke out. On April 21, 1861, he was mustered into Company G, Erie Regiment. This regiment was formed for three months of service, and after training at Camp Wilkins near Pittsburgh, the regiment returned to Erie and disbanded in July after seeing no action.

Following the disaster of Bull Run, a new regiment was formed for three years of service. This was the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers. O.W. enlisted with Company K and became the bugler for the unit. The Eighty-third wore colorful French uniforms imported for the war. These were the uniforms of the Chasseur de Vincennes, which consisted of a shako, bright-colored jacket and wide trousers. They proved to be quite colorful on the parade field but unsuited for field use. Those uniforms were left behind and replaced with regulation uniforms when the regiment marched off to war. The Eighty-third was organized into a brigade that consisted of the Seventeenth New York Volunteers, Sixteenth Michigan Volunteers, and the Forty-fourth New York Volunteers. The brigade was under the command of Daniel Butterfield. The Seventeenth New York left the brigade, to return home after its enlistment was complete in May 1862 and was replaced by the Twentieth

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Maine by the time of the battle of Antietam in September 1862. A bond of friendship was formed between the members of the Eighty-third Pennsylvania and the Forty-fourth New York. They became known as the "Butterfield Twins" and fought side by side. These regiments were formed into Third Brigade (Butterfield's Brigade), First Division (Fitz John Porter's Division), Fifth Corps.

The letters O.W. wrote home during the war provide insight about his duties as bugler, orderly, flag bearer, and his life as a soldier. They are collected in a book titled *Army Letters*, which he wrote in 1903 and published for private circulation. Nearly two-thirds of the approximately one hundred and fifty war-time letters were written to his sister Elizabeth (Libby) Lane Norton. She married a farmer, Charles Poss, and moved to Sherman, New York in 1862. According to family legend, she was active in the underground railroad system that help runaway slaves escape to Canada. After the war, Libby became involved with the "Minerva Club," which worked to establish a free library in Sherman.

Camp Leslie, near Falls Church  
Fairfax County VA  
Oct. 9, 1861

*I commenced writing yesterday, but was obliged to stop to attend drill, a very common incident in soldier life. The first thing in the morning is drill, then drill, then drill again. Then drill, drill, a little more drill. Then drill, and lastly, drill. Between drills, we drill and sometimes stop to eat a little and have a roll-call.*

In March 1862, Norton reported to General Butterfield, who taught him some bugle calls. More than likely, these were the brigade calls--the most famous of which was the "Dan, Dan, Dan, But-ter-field, But-ter-field" call.

Cold Harbor, Powhite Swamp, VA  
Saturday, May 24, 1862  
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

*My duty as bugler exempts me from guard and picket duty. While at Yorktown bugles and drums were not used and I had nothing to do, so I went into the ranks again and volunteered to do picket duty and work in the trenches, and took my regular turn in all the work of the regiment except camp guard which I always had an aversion to and wouldn't do when I was not required to. We had a corps of twelve buglers when we left Fort Monroe and I was the leader, but, finding that a good many more than was necessary, the colonel dismissed all but two, Lederer and myself. Now, I'll just give you an idea of our duties. At sunrise buglers at brigade headquarters sound the "brigade call" and the "reveille" (rev-el-lee is the camp pronunciation). The buglers of each regiment as quickly as possible assemble on the color line, give their regimental call and repeat the reveille. The fifes and drums follow and awake the men. This is the signal to rise and fall in for roll call. You may guess that the buglers of an army of 30,000 men all within sound of each other, make some music. At sunset we have another call, "The Retreat." At half past eight the "Tattoo," at nine the "Extinguish Lights." Then there are calls "To Strike Tents," "To Assemble," "To The Color," "Sick Call," "Officers Call," etc. It is our duty to repeat all such calls that are first sounded at headquarters. On the march, the order to march, or halt, or lie down and rest, etc., in fact, all orders are given by the bugle.*

Norton became the brigade's bugler and sounded Taps for the first time while serving under General Butterfield. Butterfield knew the calls and could even sound them as mentioned by Norton:

Stoneman Station, VA  
Sunday, Feb. 8, 1863

*I send you a Harper's, thinking you do not often see them...You see a good portrait of our "Little Dan" (General Butterfield), too. If I ever get home I'll show you the bugle he took from my hand to "sound the charge" at Bull Run. I'm proud to see him now Chief of Hooker's Staff.*



**Oliver Willcox Norton in 1863**

**Chautauqua Institution Photo**

When Butterfield ascended to Army Chief of Staff, O.W. served under Colonel Strong Vincent. Vincent was the third commander of the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers. The first was Colonel John McLane (who formed the regiment in Erie). Colonel McLane was killed on June 26, 1862, during the battle of Gaines' Mill. Captain Hugh Campbell was interim commander after McLane's death, but he resigned from the army in May 1863 to accept an appointment as Provost Marshal of the Ninth Congressional District of Pennsylvania. Vincent was elected Colonel of the Eighty-third in July 1862; in May 1863, Vincent assumed command of the entire brigade after Colonel T.B.W. Stockton resigned.

It was while a member of the regiment that Norton met Vincent, the Erie resident from a family with whom he was to have a lifelong association. What did O.W. think of Vincent on seeing him? Not much. "My first recollection of him is his appearance as adjutant...I confess my first impression of him was not favorable. I thought him a dude and upstart." It goes to show you that sometimes initial impressions can be misleading.

Strong Vincent was born in 1837, educated at Trinity College and graduated from Harvard in 1859. He practiced law in Erie and was a prominent citizen in the community. He enlisted as a private in the Erie Regiment and was promoted to First Lieutenant and adjutant. Vincent proved himself to be an able soldier and adjutant, busy with organizing and training new recruits. When the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers was formed, he was appointed major. He married Elizabeth (Lizzie) Carter on April 25, 1861.

Norton became headquarters bugler and color bearer when Strong Vincent took command of the brigade. Norton had a horse for his duties and enjoyed extra privileges as such. In early April 1863, he was relieved and returned to his regiment by order of Colonel Vincent.

Stoneman Station, VA.,  
Wednesday, April 8, 1863

Dear Sister L.:-

*...I have been moving. Yes moving, for I am returned to the regiment. Colonel Vincent could not be satisfied to let me stay when I had a good berth, but insisted on my coming back. My reward for strict attention is this, retrograde promotion. The Colonel's reason for promoting me was to put me in charge of the bugle corps here to play for dress parade in the place of a band. You may believe I was some vexed about it, and if it were not that I hope to get back to headquarters, I would smash my bugle over a stump and take a musket again...If I had been thrown out of this place for any fault of*

*my own, I would have nothing to say about it, but I did squirm some to find that I was only recalled because Colonel Vincent wanted a good bugler in the regiment and cared nothing about what they had at headquarters. Coming back to the regiment seems almost like leaving the comforts of home and enlisting again. I did not half realize the privileges I did enjoy till I came to be deprived of them.*



**Colonel Strong Vincent**

In June, O.W. returned to Headquarters and was by Vincent's side during the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863. He had a good view of the fighting around Little Round Top on the second day. The Eighty-third Pennsylvania was positioned next to Joshua Chamberlain's Twentieth Maine on Little Round Top when General Gouverneur K. Warren (Chief Engineer of the Army of the Potomac) saw that the hill was unoccupied and open to being captured by the enemy. Warren's call for reinforcements was answered by Strong Vincent and the Third Brigade. Vincent placed the Twentieth Maine on the extreme left of the Union line and ordered them to hold the ground at all costs. He realized the danger of having the position overrun by Confederate forces. Vincent was mortally wounded on Little Round Top later that day and died on July 7. His promotion to brigadier general was quickly authorized and the order read to him before he died. He was buried with full military honors in Erie on July 13.

Headquarters Third Brigade, Berlin MD  
Friday July 17, 1863

*Colonel Vincent died on the 7th, as brave and gallant a soldier as ever fell. His commission as Brigadier General was read to him on his death bed. His loss is felt deeply by the brigade. There is no one to fill his place. No one could march a brigade as he could. Oh, how we loved him! But he is gone.*

Norton so admired Vincent that he named his youngest son after him. The two men were close. They had to have been. They were two years apart in age. Both were educated men. Both had strong views of the war. Both enlisted for patriotic reasons. And it was not uncommon for a bugler and his commander to be familiar. The two would have spent much time together. The duties of a bugler required him to be near at all times. They must have talked, exchanged ideas, and grown to like each other's company. Years later, Vincent's sword was given to O.W. to hand down to his son, but the younger Norton had no desire to keep it. It is now in the vaults of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. It is fitting that it should one day be returned to the citizens of Erie, Pennsylvania, who gave one of their sons so that the Union might survive.

Not all bugle duties were ones that Norton looked forward to performing.

Beverly Ford, VA  
Aug. 30, 1863  
Dear Sister L.:-

*The great event of last week was the execution of five deserters from our division, which took place yesterday afternoon. General Griffin sent for me to bugle.*

Home of the Sanitary Commission  
Washington DC  
October 15, 1863  
Dear Sister L.:-

*...You know that, with my restless disposition, I could not be contented as brigade bugler while there was a possibility of doing better. As long ago as May I began to work for a commission in a colored regiment.*



**Oliver Willcox Norton as a first lieutenant, November 1863**

**Chautauqua Institution Photo**

In November 1863, Norton was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Eighth U.S. Colored Troops. This spoke highly of the man, as he was fully aware that serving in such a position at that time was a death sentence should he ever be captured. For the remainder of the war, O.W. served as a staff officer and Regimental Quartermaster officer for the Eighth U.S. Colored Regiment, which fought in the Battle of Olustee. His letters of the time complain about the poor leadership by some of the officers. He put away his bugle for his new duties. This was a task he enjoyed, and he worked hard to learn the business end of supplying an army. This lesson surely aided him in the future. When the war ended, the Eighth U.S. was deployed to Texas for garrison duty.

On November 10, 1865, O.W. was discharged from the army. After the war, he belonged to the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and served as commander of the Illinois Commandery of The Military Order of The Loyal Legion. He wrote of his wartime experiences in three books, and was instrumental in bringing the true origin of Taps to light in 1898.

Following his discharge from the army, Norton worked as a clerk for the Fourth National Bank in New York City. He lived at 412 Henry Street in Brooklyn, near the ferry to Manhattan, and met Lucy Coit Fanning. Lucy was born in Albion, New York, in 1842. Both attended Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn. They were married on October 3, 1870. The minister at the wedding was Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, the famous orator and antislavery preacher and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. O.W. and Lucy had five children--Gertrude H. (died in infancy), Ralph Hubbard (1875-1953), Elliott Salonestall (1878-1932), Ruth W. (1880-1919), and Strong Vincent (1882-1959).

O.W. moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he went into business with his younger brother Edwin. This venture added two other partners and became the company of Norton and Fancher, which manufactured cans and sheet metal goods. The name changed to Norton Brothers when a partner retired in 1872, and the company prospered under Oliver and Edwin. In 1901, Norton helped found the American Can Company, formed from many smaller companies, which took over Norton Brothers. It was about this time that his eyesight began to fail. His blindness may have been hereditary, as his sister Elizabeth (Libby), to whom he had written many times during the war, also became blind in her latter years. He spent the last part of his life totally blind but not handicapped. He wrote and was involved in social activities. He and Lucy lived at 4823 Lake (later Lake Park) Avenue in a large house.

Norton's book on Gettysburg, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top*, has been for many years the best eyewitness account of what happened on the Gettysburg hill on July 2, 1863. Norton was persistent in writing to those who were present at the battle, to capture the historic day's correct order of events.

In September 1889, Norton returned to the hills at Gettysburg as the main speaker for the dedication of the monument for Strong Vincent and the Eighty-third Pennsylvania. He brought his bugle with him. Standing on the rocks near where Vincent fell, he sounded the old brigade call. A great shout went up from the many veterans below and they came charging up to the hill (many with tears in their eyes), asking him to again sound the call.

O.W. wrote:

*That familiar sound echoing among the rocks where they had fought brought back, perhaps more vividly than words could do, the memories of the days when they had answered so often to its sound.*

While in Chicago, O.W. became acquainted with George Vincent, a professor whose father, Bishop John Vincent, was a cousin to Colonel Strong Vincent. Bishop Vincent was the co-founder of the Chautauqua Institution in Western New York. This friendship must have led to Norton's interest in Chautauqua and his building a summer home there in 1901. The house still stands at Chautauqua and a relative (Mrs. Florence Hedges Norton) makes her home there. After O.W.'s death, Lucy contributed money to build a concert hall on the grounds. Norton Hall, dedicated to the performing arts, opened in 1929. A stipulation to the gift was that opera would be performed in English. The hall still stands today.



**Oliver Willcox Norton in the 1890s**

O.W. contributed to the building of the Minerva Free Library in Sherman, New York, which opened in 1908. He gave money for its construction, upkeep, and renovations. He also donated books from his personal collection, many of which were inscribed with a brief notation and a signature on the front cover. The library holds original letters written to his sister during the war, along with many postwar letters to Mrs. Thayer (board of trustees) that dealt with the construction. Norton also remained in touch with Colonel Vincent's widow Elizabeth. She left him \$250 in her will to be spent on cigars, since he was an avid cigar smoker all his life. When the check arrived from the will's executor, O.W. asked that the money be donated to a black church in Cincinnati, Ohio. A devoted music lover, he was a staunch supporter of the Theodore Thomas Orchestra. (Thomas was to the orchestra world what Sousa was to the band world.)

O.W. passed away on October 1, 1920, in Chicago, at the age of 81. His body was cremated and the ashes were scattered by his family. His wife Lucy died in 1933. She left money in her will to the Orchestra Society of Chicago and to the Chautauqua Institution. There is no monument to him anywhere.