Marker Text

As Indiana’s adjutant general he organized the state for war. He saw action at Ft. Donelson, Shiloh and Monocacy. Later served as governor of New Mexico Territory and minister to Turkey. Author of *Ben Hur*.

Report

The Bureau placed this marker under review because its file lacked both primary and secondary documentation. IHB researchers were able to locate primary sources to support the claims made by the marker and determine that the text of the marker is factually accurate. In the process, they noted two phrases which require further explanation: “As Indiana’s adjutant general...” and “Author of *Ben Hur*.” The following report expands upon the marker points and addresses some omissions, including Wallace’s participation in two important post-Civil War trials and the fame he achieved as an author.

Lewis “Lew” Wallace was born on April 10, 1827 in Brookville, Indiana.1 Wallace grew up in Indiana; his father, David Wallace, was a lawyer and politician and was elected Governor of Indiana 1837-1840.2 Lew Wallace followed in his father’s footsteps and trained as a lawyer himself; he passed the bar in 1847.3

After the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton appointed Wallace state adjutant general on April 15, 1861.4 In this position, he did “organize the state for war.” He structured Camp Morton and arranged the influx of volunteers into companies and regiments in order to fill the six regiment quota set by President Abraham Lincoln.5 However, this catch-all statement is misleading, because Wallace only served in this post for 12 days. When he accepted the appointment of adjutant general, Wallace insisted that he would hold the post until Indiana had fulfilled the President’s initial quota. Then he wished to resign in order to command one of those six regiments. The task of organizing the six regiments being accomplished in less than two weeks, Morton discharged his end of the bargain; on April 26, 1861, he appointed Wallace colonel of the 11th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment.6

By the time of Lew Wallace’s first major engagement, he had distinguished himself in such a manner that President Lincoln approved his promotion to Brigadier General on September 3, 1861.7 Wallace commanded a division during the Battle of Fort Donelson in Tennessee on February 11-16, 1862.8 He acquitted himself well during the fighting; his actions helped prevent a Confederate retreat to Nashville and contributed to the total Union victory.9

Because of his actions at Fort Donelson, the President approved Wallace’s promotion to Major General, effective March 21, 1862.10 Lew Wallace again commanded a division during the Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee on April 6-7, 1862.11 Although the battle ended in Union victory,
contemporaries, such as Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant and Major General Henry W. Halleck, blamed Wallace’s failure to engage his division on April 6 for the number of Union casualties. In spite of his later successes, this blow to his reputation deeply affected Wallace; he spent a great deal of time and effort trying to redress the issue. In 1896, he wrote “No one can conceive what responsibility is until he is made to feel the pressure of a consciousness that now upon his judgment and action a great battle may be dependent. There are kinds of fear, but nothing of that nature can shoot one’s marrow so to the core like the dread of making a mistake in a situation such as [Shiloh].”

The last significant battle Wallace was engaged in was the Battle of Monocacy near Frederick, Maryland on July 9, 1864. While the battle was accounted a Confederate victory, Wallace’s engagement of the enemy throughout the day prevented the Confederates under Lieutenant General Jubal Early from attacking that capital; the fight became known as “The Battle that Saved Washington, D.C.”

The marker neglects to mention the role Lew Wallace played in two post-war courts martial. The first, from May-June 1865, was of the Lincoln conspirators, the eight individuals charged with and tried by military tribunal for conspiring to assassinate President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State William Seward, and Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant. Gail Stephens, one of Wallace’s biographers, argues that while Wallace never specifically stated his opinion on the trial, there is some evidence that suggests he believed all eight conspirators were guilty: he did not join the petition to have Mary Surrat’s death sentence commuted to life imprisonment; he defended one of the trial’s notorious witnesses; and he painted a picture of the trial’s seven male defendants listening to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address which still hangs in his study in Crawfordsville, IN. He titled it “The Conspirators.”

The second trial of note was the court martial of Captain Henry Wirz, Confederate commander of Andersonville Prison. The War Department named Wallace president of the proceedings in August 1865. The commission, which felt Wirz’s defense of ‘just following orders’ insufficient, found him guilty and sentenced him to death. Stephens states that charges that Wallace acted improperly in an attempt to please superior officers and repair his reputation are false. She argues that he presided over the trial fairly and impartially within the context of 19th century military tribunals.

In 1878, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Lew Wallace Governor of New Mexico Territory. During his tenure, Wallace authorized the capture and execution of outlaw Billy the Kid and oversaw the end of the Lincoln County War. He also called on the government to send more troops to help quash fighting amongst settlers and Native American tribes, especially the Navajo and Apache. When Wallace’s term ended, the Las Cruces Semi-Monthly reported “Gov. Wallace [...] has made the best executive New Mexico has had for many years.”
In 1881, Wallace refused President James A. Garfield’s offer of a reappointment as New Mexico’s territorial governor. Instead, the president appointed the general U.S. minister to Turkey. While there, Wallace protected American citizens and missionaries and soothed relations between Great Britain and Egypt during an Egyptian revolt that imperiled European access to the Suez Canal. His efforts during this crisis earned him a promotion, from ‘Minister Resident’ to ‘Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary.’ Overall, Lew Wallace fostered cordial relations with sultan Abdul Hamid II. The sultan insisted that Ben-Hur, one of Wallace’s novels, be translated into Turkish. He also tried to award Wallace several positions in his court.

While the marker correctly identifies Wallace as the “author of Ben Hur,” this statement is not inclusive of his broader work. While he was most well-known for the writing of this novel, it was not his first or only publication. The general published The Fair God or, The Lost of the ‘Tzins: A Tale of Conquest in Mexico in 1873, but he had begun writing it as an exercise in the late 1840s. The Fair God was well-received and sold well. Wallace completed and published his next endeavor, which is actually titled Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, in 1880 while still Governor of New Mexico. The novel was a great success; by 1897, 500,000 copies had been sold, and by 1905, it had been translated into ten languages. Wallace believed that the book’s subject matter and research involved were partially responsible for his posting as minister to Turkey. Lew Wallace finally granted consent to have the novel adapted for the stage; the stage production opened on November 29, 1899 in New York City. After the New York City production closed, the play toured the U.S. and Europe; when the final performance was staged in 1921, the play had been shown about 7,000 times to an audience of 20,000,000 people. An unlicensed silent film version of the novel appeared in 1907. MGM produced two major film versions: a 1925 silent movie and a 1959 live action one. The 1959 film won 11 of the 12 Academy Awards it was nominated for in 1960.

General Wallace continued to write after the success of Ben-Hur. After his return from Turkey, he continued his publishing achievements with two books in 1888: The Life of Gen. Ben Harrison and The Boyhood of Christ; both were well-received. Wallace had selected the subject of his last novel, The Prince of India or Why Constantinople Fell, before he departed for Turkey and therefore started researching and writing while there. He published the book in 1893. It was critically acclaimed and produced as a stage play in 1906. The general’s final book was his autobiography. After Lew Wallace died at home on February 15, 1905, his wife Susan completed the book and had it published in 1906.

Further Reading:


---


Stephens, *Shadow of Shiloh*, 223; Morsberger and Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 172-173. [Note: Wallace stated that the only reason he had not included Mary Surratt’s likeness in the oil painting was because she wore a heavy veil in court and he was therefore unable to determine her features.]


21 Stephens, Shadow of Shiloh, 225-227.


30 Fort Wayne Sentinel, February 20, 1885, 2, accessed Fold3; Morsberger and Morsberger, Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic, 325.


39 Note: Henry Wallace, Lew Wallace’s son, and others sued Kalem, the company that produced the silent film in 1907. The case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes affirmed the lower courts' opinions that the film’s production constituted copyright infringement and Kalem had to pay royalties. “Must Pay Royalties on Moving Pictures,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1908, 5, accessed ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “‘Ben Hur’ Picture Breaks Copyright,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 14, 1911, 8, accessed ProQuest Historical Newspapers.


