



81.1963.1 Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside 1824-1881
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Marker Text Review Report
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Marker Text

Born in Liberty, Indiana, Ambrose E. Burnside invented the breech-loading rifle in 1856. Commanded a brigade at First Bull Run and the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg. He was commander of the Army of Ohio when Morgan's Raiders were captured.

Report

This marker was placed 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 except for the phrase “Army of the Ohio” to describe the men he commanded when Morgan’s Raiders were captured. The following report expands on the marker points and addresses various omissions, including Burnside’s war-time order suppressing various newspapers and orators and his service as governor and senator from Rhode Island.

Ambrose E. Burnside was born in Liberty, Indiana on May 23, 1824.¹ He attended West Point Military Academy from 1843-1847 and graduated eighteenth in his class of thirty-eight.² Burnside, who had been conferred the rank of second lieutenant upon his graduation in the spring of 1847, joined his unit, Company C of the 3rd U.S. Artillery, in Mexico City just after the official battles of the [Mexican War](#) had ended. He remained in the Mexican capital until the peace treaty was signed in the spring of 1848 and was then transferred to Fort Adams in Rhode Island. A year later, he returned to Company C, 3rd U.S. Artillery, which was stationed in Las Vegas, New Mexico; their main role was escorting the U.S. mail service, acting as cavalry. In skirmishes with Apache Indians during these mail runs, Burnside began to consider the difficulties cavalry faced in reloading muzzle-loading weapons while mounted. He was wounded during one of these skirmishes and promoted to first lieutenant in December 1851.³

Burnside resigned his commission in 1853, settled in Bristol, Rhode Island, and started developing the [Burnside carbine](#), a breech-loading rifle, which he [patented](#) in 1856. The idea for the improvements to breech-loading rifles that he patented had germinated since his service in New Mexico. The time he spent acting as cavalry protecting the U.S. Mail gave him appreciation for the impossibility of reloading muzzle-loading rifles while mounted. Burnside’s improvements to the breech-loading rifle made it ideal for cavalry usage. He started the Bristol Rifle Works in 1857 and entered talks with John B. Floyd, the Secretary of War, about the possibility of supplying the army. According to Burnside biographer William Marvel, Floyd assured Burnside an army contract worth \$90,000 if the carbine withstood testing. Burnside’s carbine emerged victorious from the government test and he began manufacturing the weapon on a large scale in anticipation of the army’s order. Floyd required a second test, which the carbine also passed. Despite these successes, Floyd awarded the contract to another manufacturer. This news came as the [Panic of 1857](#) broke, stretching Burnside’s credit beyond



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its limit. He was forced to declare bankruptcy.⁴ In order to earn money to pay off his debts, Burnside then found a position as treasurer of the Illinois Central Railroad, where he worked for former West Point classmate (and future commander) [George B. McClellan](#).⁵

When the [Civil War](#) broke out in 1861, Burnside raised a regiment and commanded these men, the first Rhode Island Volunteers, as colonel.⁶ President Abraham Lincoln had given Major General George B. McClellan, Burnside's old classmate, command of the Army of the Potomac. McClellan made Burnside a brigade commander just before the [First Battle of Bull Run](#). When Burnside's three month enlistment expired in August 1861, McClellan oversaw his promotion to brigadier general of volunteers and placed him in command of the [North Carolina Expeditionary Force](#) and the Department of North Carolina.⁷ His efforts there closed most of the North Carolina coast to Confederate shipping for the remainder of the war.⁸ In recognition of his successes, Burnside was promoted to major general in March 1862.⁹ His forces returned to Virginia and McClellan absorbed them into the Army of the Potomac. After McClellan's failure in the [Peninsula Campaign](#), Lincoln offered Burnside command of the Army of the Potomac in July 1862, which he refused. Lincoln offered him command of the Army again after [Major General John Pope's](#) defeat at the [Second Battle of Bull Run](#).¹⁰ Burnside led the Ninth Corps during the [Battle of Antietam](#) in September 1862; various elements of his Corps failed to take a bridge over Antietam Creek that was guarded by about 500 Confederates. The bridge quickly earned the name 'Burnside's Bridge.' After the battle, the bloodiest single day in American history, ended in stalemate, President Lincoln replaced General McClellan with Burnside as commander of the Army of the Potomac. His first engagement, the [Battle of Fredericksburg](#), ended in disaster, and he was relieved of command in January 1863.¹¹ It is worthwhile to note that Burnside's failure was [not unique](#) in the conflict. President Lincoln appointed and subsequently removed six Army of the Potomac commanders in the course of three years until he placed [Major General Ulysses S. Grant](#) in charge in 1864.

Lincoln refused to accept Burnside's tendered resignation and instead ordered him to take command of the Department of the Ohio.¹² There, Burnside issued [General Order No. 38](#), which made criticizing the war a crime.¹³ When former Ohio congressman [Clement Vallandigham](#) made a speech denouncing the war, the President, and the order, he was arrested and brought to trial before a military tribunal.¹⁴ Vallandigham was found guilty of the charges brought against him and sentenced to spend the remainder of the war in a military prison at Fort Warren. President Lincoln, fearing that the trial and sentence would give Democrats too much political incentive, but also wishing to maintain Burnside's authority in the Department of the Ohio, amended Vallandigham's sentence; he was to be sent across enemy lines. If he returned to the Union, he would be arrested again.¹⁵ Burnside also ordered the closing of a number of newspapers which had printed articles or editorials in defiance of General Order Number 38.¹⁶

On June 11, 1863, Confederate raider [John Hunt Morgan](#) invaded Kentucky. Over the next month and a half, his men rode through middle Kentucky, southern Indiana, and southern Ohio, encountering varied resistance. Burnside was not personally involved in Morgan's capture but



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commanded the men who assisted in the effort. He sent General Henry M. Judah to work with [General Lew Wallace](#) and General Edward H. Hobson and they helped corner Morgan on July 26, 1863.¹⁷

In the fall of 1863, Burnside played a major role in the [Knoxville Campaign](#). His forces occupied and kept hold of Knoxville over a period of months and forced Confederate [Lieutenant General James Longstreet](#) to besiege the city. Burnside therefore prevented Longstreet from reinforcing [General Braxton Bragg](#), which helped Major General Grant win the [Battle of Chattanooga](#).¹⁸ Tennessee had been the last state to secede in 1861; by retaining control of Knoxville and winning at Chattanooga, the Union army regained the allegiance of East Tennessee for the remainder of the war. Both campaigns also refocused northern and southern attention on the Western theater and helped make [Major General William T. Sherman's Atlanta Campaign](#) possible.

In early 1864, Burnside was ordered east to Annapolis, Maryland, where he built his corps up to 21,000 men. Burnside and his newly reinforced Ninth Corps participated in the [Overland Campaign](#) in May 1864.¹⁹ He next participated in the Siege of [Petersburg](#) in June 1864. On July 30, a regiment of former miners in Burnside's corps successfully dug a mine under Eliot's Salient, one of the forts in the Confederate entrenchments, and blew it up, starting the [Battle of the Crater](#). The battle ended in a Union slaughter with Burnside's men taking serious casualties.²⁰ On August 14, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant relieved Ambrose E. Burnside of command. He remained on leave until the end of the war and resigned his commission on April 15, 1865.²¹ A court of inquiry originally blamed Burnside and his subordinates for the carnage at the Battle of the Crater, but [the United States Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War](#) later blamed Major General Meade.²²

Burnside's post-war career is missing from the marker. After the war, Ambrose E. Burnside served as president of several railroads.²³ The Civil War had forced Burnside to reconsider his political beliefs. Before the war, he had been a Democrat. In 1866, he was elected Republican governor of Rhode Island, a posting for only one year. He was reelected twice more and served until 1869.²⁴ In 1875, the Rhode Island Senate elected Burnside U.S. Senator. Burnside served on three different committees during his senatorial tenure: the Committee on Military Affairs, as chair of the Committee on Education and Labor, and as chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Continuing in this military vein, he served as the first president of the National Rifle Association when the organization was founded in 1871.²⁵ He was reelected to the Senate in 1881, again as a Republican, and served in that post until his death on September 13, 1881.²⁶

Further Reading

Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, Volume 1: Fort Sumter to Perryville* (New York: Random House, 1958).



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Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, Volume 2: Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Random House, 1963).

Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, Volume 3: Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Random House, 1974).

Earl J. Hess, *The Knoxville Campaign: Burnside and Longstreet in East Tennessee* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012).

William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Benjamin Perley Poore, *The Life and Public Services of Ambrose E. Burnside, Soldier – Citizen – Statesman* (Providence, RI: J.A. and R.A. Reid, 1882).

Stephen E. Towne, "Worse than Vandalism: Governor Oliver P. Morton, Lambdin P. Milligan, and the Military Arrest and Trial of Indiana State Senator Alexander J. Douglas during the Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History* 106, no. 1 (March 2010), accessed <http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/12536>.

Ambrose E. Burnside, Boxes 1-23, Ambrose E. Burnside Papers, Generals' Reports and Books, Record Group 94, National Archives.

Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Ambrose E. Burnside (A Senator from Rhode Island) Delivered in the Senate and House of Representatives, Forty-Seventh Congress, First Session, January 23, 1882, with the Proceedings Connected with the Funeral of the Deceased (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882).

¹ "Ambrose Everett Burnside," accessed [Find a Grave](#). Passport, Ambrose E. Burnside, August 2, 1870, accessed [Fold3](#).

² "Ambrose Burnside," *Name Index to U.S. Military Academy Cadet Application Papers, 1805-1866*, Microfilm Serial M688, Roll 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., accessed [Ancestry.com](#). "Ambrose Burnside's cadet application," *United States Military Academy Records*, Records Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Merit Book, 1836-1853* and *Register of Delinquencies, 1843-1847*, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point, NY, as cited in William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 4-5.

³ "Returns from Regular Army Artillery Regiments," Second Artillery, Reel 11 and Third Artillery, Reel 19; "Returns from U.S. Military Posts, 1800-1916," Las Vegas, N.M., 1848-1851, Reel 602; and George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy 2 1841-1867* (New York: James Miller, 1879),



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191-192, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 5-6, 9. Burnside married Mary R. Bishop of Providence on April 27, 1852, thirty days after he reported to Fort Adams for a second time; they likely met when he was stationed there in 1848-1849. *Rhode Island, Marriages, 1851-1921* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2000) accessed Ancestry.com.

⁴ Ambrose E. Burnside, "Improvement in Breech-Loading Fire-Arms," Patent US 14491, March 25, 1856, accessed Google Patents. Ambrose Burnside to George McClellan, May 4, 1858, Reel 5, McClellan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Promissory note to Bristol Fire Arms Co. from A. Van Valkenburgh & Co., July 9, 1856, with endorsement of Mechanics Bank, New York, indicating payment was refused, January 12, 1857; and undated bankruptcy offer of A. van Valkenburgh to Bristol Fire Arms Co., Box 22, Ambrose E. Burnside Papers, Generals' Reports and Books, Record Group 94, National Archives, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 13. Marvel, *Burnside*, 11.

⁵ Ambrose Burnside to George McClellan, May 4, 1858, and George McClellan to Ellen Marcy, undated (but 1859), Reel 5, McClellan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 14.

⁶ "Ambrose Burnside," *Annual Report of the Adjutant General*, 1865, California State Library, accessed Ancestry.com.

⁷ *Ibid.* *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* series 1: 6, Roll 0006, Record Group 45, National Archives, accessed Fold3.

⁸ *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co., 1884-1888), 1: 660-670.

⁹ "Ambrose Burnside," *Annual Report of the Adjutant General*, 1865, California State Library, accessed Ancestry.com. *U.S. Army Military Registers, 1798-1969*, Boston Public Library, 1863, 65, accessed Fold3.

¹⁰ *Report of Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1865), 650; *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 9: 404-407; Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911), 1: 104-105, 110, 124; and *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), 1: 650, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 98, 100, 111.

¹¹ Marvel, *Burnside*, 128-148; "Gen. McClellan: How He was Relieved from the Command of the Army – A Statement by Gen. Buckingham," *Chicago Tribune*, September 6, 1875, 7, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 160. "Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside," *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, November 13, 1862, accessed Gale's Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers. "General Burnside The New Commander of the Army of the Potomac," *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, November 15, 1862, 3, accessed Newspaper Archive. "The Retreat to Falmouth, VA," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 3, 1863, accessed Gale's Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers. Burnside once more tried to refuse this advancement, but accepted because the President commanded, rather than requested, and, had he again refused, command of the Army of the Potomac would have devolved to Major General Joseph Hooker, whom Burnside disliked.

¹² Burnside consolidated his forces in the area as the Twenty-Third Corps, which was only occasionally referred to as the Army of the Ohio; not to be confused with the more well-known Army of the Ohio led by Union General Don Carlos Buell at the start of the war.



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- ¹³ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 9: 380 and series 2, 5: 480, 485, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 232.
- ¹⁴ "Proceedings of a Military Commission Convened in Cincinnati May 6, 1863 – Trial of Clement L. Vallandigham," *Union Provost Marshal's File of Paper Relating to Individual Civilians*, 1863, Roll 0273, Record Group 109, National Archives, accessed [Fold3](#). "Trial of Hon. C. L. Vallandigham: The Testimony in the Case," *New Albany Daily Ledger*, May 11, 1863, 1, accessed [Newspaper Archive](#). *Indianapolis Indiana State Sentinel*, May 18, 1863, 4, accessed [Newspaper Archive](#).
- ¹⁵ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* 2: 5 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 656-657, as cited in Craig D. Tenney's "Major General A. E. Burnside and the First Amendment: A Case Study of Civil War Freedom of Expression," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1977), 165.
- ¹⁶ Tenney, "Major General A. E. Burnside of the First Amendment: A Case Study of Civil War Freedom of Expression," 175-184. "Department of the Ohio: Gen. Burnside Restricting the Circulation of The Copperhead Journals – The Case of Dr. Olds Against Gov. Tod," *The New York Times*, June 3, 1863, accessed [Proquest's NY Times, Historical with Index](#). For more information on censorship during the war, see Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
- ¹⁷ William E. Wilson, "Thunderbolt of the Confederacy, or King of the Horse Thieves," *Indiana Magazine of History* 54, no. 2 (June 1958): 127, accessed [Indiana Magazine of History Online](#). Marvel, *Burnside*, 252-263. Hobson and Judah finally cornered Morgan in mid July; they captured most of his force, but the general and some of his men escaped. On July 26, men under General William Brooks, who commanded the Department of the Monongahela (headquartered in Pittsburg), captured Morgan and his remaining men in New Lisbon, OH (which was technically within Burnside's jurisdiction – Burnside had surrendered his authority to Brooks, who was subordinate to him, in favor of expediency).
- ¹⁸ Earl J. Hess, *The Knoxville Campaign: Burnside and Longstreet in East Tennessee* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012).
- ¹⁹ Daniel Reed Larned to "My Dear Sister," January 8 and 10, 1864, Daniel Reed Larned Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 33: 363, 428-429, as cited in Marvel, *Burnside*, 338-339. Marvel, *Burnside*, 351-385.
- ²⁰ *Report of the Committee on the Conduct of the War on the Attack on Petersburg on the 30th Day of July, 1864* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1865), accessed [Google Books](#). At the last moment, [Major General George G. Meade](#) insisted that Burnside replace the division of [United States Colored Troops \(USTC\)](#) who had been trained to launch the attack after the explosion. Unable to decide which white division should go in its stead, Burnside had his other division commanders draw lots. [Brigadier General James H. Ledlie's](#) division was chosen; he failed to brief his men on the plan of attack, so they marched into the crater and then remained there to avoid oncoming fire instead of marching through, leading to a massive slaughter, while Ledlie was seen drunk far behind the lines.



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²¹ Marvel, *Burnside*, 412-413. *U.S. Army Military Registers, 1798-1969*, Boston Public Library, 1863, 65, accessed [Fold3](#).

²² *Report of the Committee on the Conduct of the War on the Attack on Petersburg on the 30th Day of July, 1864*, accessed [Google Books](#).

²³ Marvel, *Burnside*, 420-421. "Ambrose E. Burnside," 1870 United States Federal Census, Roll M593_1478, 267A, Family Number 420, Ward 2, Providence, Rhode Island, accessed [Ancestry.com](#).

²⁴ *1867 City Directory for Providence, Rhode Island* (Sampson Davenport and Co.), 334, accessed [Fold3](#).

²⁵ "A Brief History of the NRA," The National Rifle Association Headquarters, accessed <http://www.nrahq.org/history.asp>.

²⁶ *1875 Directory for Providence, Rhode Island* (Sampson Davenport and Co.), 490, accessed [Fold3](#). "Ambrose E. Burnside," 1880 United States Federal Census, Roll 1209, 75B, Bristol, Rhode Island, accessed [Ancestry.com](#). Marvel, *Burnside*, 419-423. *Rhode Island Deaths, 1630-1930* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2000), accessed [Ancestry.com](#).