

# Origin of the Grand Army of the Republic

By Major General Joseph Wheeler.

**O**RIGIN of the Grand Army of the Republic was in the soldier's tent, the soldier's bivouac and in the fraternal feelings which were created in the hearts of soldiers as they stood side by side in line of battle. This association established ties of friendship stronger and more lasting than any other which is enjoyed by human beings. When Washington took leave of the army which he had commanded during the seven years' war of the revolution a society was organized which has been perpetuated and called the Society of the Cincinnati. When peace was proclaimed after the triumphant close of the war of 1812 a similar society was organized, composed of the veterans of our second struggle with Great Britain, and again after the victories of our army in Mexico the officers, surrounding their commanding general, Scott, organized the society called the Aztec society, and the same character of feelings which inspired the creation of these societies was fresh in the hearts of the officers and soldiers of the army which was disbanded in 1865 at the close of the great four-years' war. This feeling first manifested itself by the officers and soldiers of the different regiments as they bade each other goodby and pledged to each other that they would arrange at a convenient time not far distant to again meet together and talk over the stirring events through which they had so recently passed. These meetings were had and have been continued to this time, almost all of the regiments having held annual reunions from the date of the close of the war to this day. These regimental organizations or societies soon suggested the organization of army corps societies, each corps forming a separate society of its own. This was followed by the organization of societies of each army.

## Society of the Army of the Tennessee.

I believe the first society of this character was the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, the preliminary meeting for its formation being held in the senate chamber of North Carolina on April 14, 1865. Brevet Brigadier General W. B. Woods, afterward United States circuit judge, presided, and Major L. M. Dayton, who since became very prominent in the affairs of the government, acted as secretary. Major Generals Frank P. Blair, Jr., John A. Logan and Andrew J. Smith and Brevet Major General Giles A. Smith and Brevet Brigadier General W. B. Woods were appointed a committee to prepare a plan of organization. General Blair reported the plan of organization at an adjourned meeting held April 25. The membership of the society was restricted to the officers who had served with the "Old Army of the Tennessee." The objects were stated as follows:

"To keep alive and preserve that kindly and cordial feeling which has been one of the characteristics of this army during its career in the service and which has given it such harmony of action and contributed in no small degree to its glorious achieve-

ments in our country's cause. The fame and glory of all officers belonging to this army who have fallen, either on the field of battle or in the line of their duty, shall be sacred trust to this society, which shall cause proper memorials of their services to be collected and preserved, and thus transmit their names with honor to posterity. The families of all such officers who shall be in indigent circumstances will have a claim upon the generosity of the society and will be relieved by the voluntary contributions of its members whenever brought to their attention. In like manner the suffering families of those officers who may hereafter be stricken by death shall be a trust in the hands of the survivors."

These generous and noble expressions came from the hearts of soldiers fresh from scenes of carnage and battle. Major General John A. Rawlins was elected president of the society and he remained its president until his death, September 6, 1869, when he was succeeded by General William T. Sherman. The society has faithfully carried out its purposes and prominent among the work it has performed is the erection of magnificent equestrian statues to Major General Rawlins, Major General McPherson and General John A. Logan in the city of Washington and in addition a memorial to General McPherson at his home at Clyde, O.

## Society of Army of the Cumberland.

The Society of the Army of the Cumberland was organized February 16, 1868; Major General George H. Thomas was elected and remained president until his death, April 28, 1870. Its purposes were in all respects similar to those of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee. The society has already erected equestrian statues to Major General George H. Thomas and President Garfield.

The Society of the Army of the Potomac was organized in New York City July 5, 1869. Its first president was Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan.

I had the good fortune to be present as an invited guest at the thirty-first annual reunion of this society held in the city of Fredericksburg May 25, 1900. This was the first meeting of the society upon southern soil and the address of welcome was made by Major St. George R. Fitzhugh, who was a distinguished officer under General Robert E. Lee. It was eloquent and patriotic in the highest degree and, while it was applauded by the president, his cabinet and the members of the society, it also received the warm applause of the thousands of ex-confederates who joined in the hearty welcome of the soldiers they had often faced upon sanguinary and historic fields.

These were the principal societies of this character. Others have been organized, including the Society of the Army of the James, afterward merged into the Society of the Army of the Potomac; the Society of Burnside's Expedition and of the Ninth Corps, the Society of the Army and Navy of the Gulf, the Society of the Army of West Virginia, the Cincinnati

Society of ex-Army and Navy Officers and the Pennsylvania Reserve association.

The military order of the Loyal Legion of the United States was the first society formed by officers honorably discharged from the service. It was organized the day after the assassination of President Lincoln.

The success which attended the various separate organizations brought into prominence and gave renewed impetus to the plan already inaugurated for the establishment of one grand association, the membership of which should include all hon-

A constitution and ritual was agreed upon and a plan of organization adopted. The declaration of principles in the constitution, written by Adjutant General Robert M. Woods, are of much historic interest.

Section 1. The soldiers of the volunteer army of the United States, during the rebellion of 1861-5, actuated by the impulse and convictions of patriotism and of eternal right, and combined in the strong bands of fellowship and unity by the toils, the dangers and the victories of a long and vigorously waged war, feel themselves

labor and toil, so as to benefit the deserving and worthy.

Section 2. The results which are designed to be accomplished by this organization are as follows:

1. The preservation of those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together, with the strong cords of love and affection, the comrades in arms of many battles, sieges and marches.

2. To make these ties available in works and results of kindness, of favor and material aid to those in need of assistance.

3. To make provision, where it is not already done, for the support, care and education of soldiers' orphans and for the maintenance of the widows of deceased soldiers.

4. For the protection and assistance of disabled soldiers, whether disabled by wounds, sickness, old age or misfortune.

5. For the establishment and defense of the late soldiery of the United States, morally, socially and politically, with a view to inculcate a proper appreciation of their services to the country, and to a recognition of such services and claims by the American people.

The principal work of the first national convention held in Indianapolis November 20, 1866, was the change of the title of the constitution to "Rules and Regulations," the fixing of representation in national encampments on the basis of one representative-at-large for each 1,000 members. It also provided that department encampments should be composed of one delegate for every twenty-five members of the several posts therein. The following resolution was also adopted:

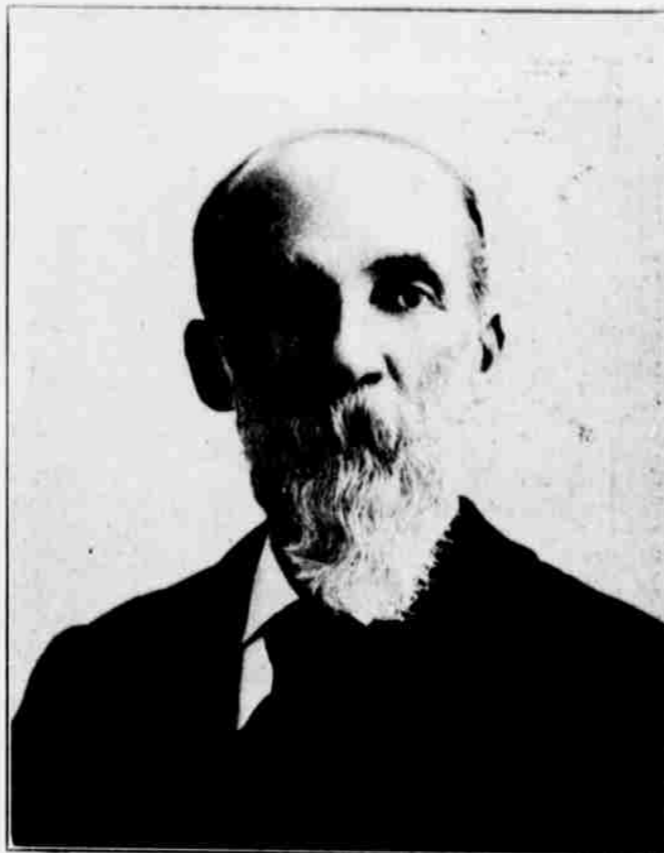
"That in our opinion no man is worthy to be a free citizen of a free country who is not willing to bear arms in its defense and we therefore suggest to congress the passage of a law making it the inextinguishable duty of every citizen to defend his country in time of need in person and not by substitute."

General Stephenson, the adjutant general, presented a very concise and interesting account of the origin, purpose and history of the organization.

General John A. Logan, although not present, was elected commander-in-chief to succeed General Hurlbut and a long list of distinguished men have since held this post of honor.

The membership of the Grand Army of the Republic has gradually increased, reaching its maximum in 1890, when its membership was 409,489. From that time the deaths have exceeded the increase by new members, the reported deaths during the last nine years having been 63,747. At the last meeting in 1899 the membership was only 287,981. The amount expended for relief has sometimes reached \$300,000 in a single year.

The approaching encampment at Chicago, August 26 to 30, will probably be one of the largest and most important in the history of the organization. More than 10,000 invitations have been issued and replies which have been received give assurances of a most distinguished attendance.



MAJOR GENERAL JOSEPH WHEELER.

orably discharged soldiers of the war of 1861-5. The early conception of this organization is largely due to Major B. F. Stephenson and Chaplain W. J. Rutledge, who, a year before the close of the war, commenced laying plans for an organization of this character. The plan proposed separate army posts of the Grand Army, and on April 6, 1866, the first post of the Grand Army of the Republic was organized at Decatur, Ill.

called upon to declare in definite form of words and in determined co-operative action, those principles and rules which should guide the earnest patriot, the enlightened freeman and the Christian citizen in his course of action; and to agree upon those plans and laws which should govern them in a united and systematic working method, with which, in some measure, shall be effected the preservation of the grand results of the war, the fruits of their

# Greatest Organization of Its Kind in the World

By Major General Daniel E. Sickles.

**T**HE Grand Army of the Republic is today the greatest organization of its kind in the world. With a membership of over 400,000, it represents the best blood of a generation that fought and suffered to make this country the unit it is today. The annual convocations held by this body are much more than a meeting of old comrades for the purpose of dwelling on the long past camp and battle experiences; they are an illustration to the younger generation of the fortitude and indomitable resolution that pervaded the north at the outbreak of the rebellion. The spectacle of old men, men broken by the hardships of war, the lame, the halt, all marching in parade, when a carriage would seem to be of little enough assistance, is a feature of these convocations familiar to all. It is not the mere desire of appearing on parade that causes these battered veterans to take part in the march, but it is to show their love and respect for the flag. They have endured the privations of camp life, they have seen their comrades, even their brothers, shot down at their side, they have been wounded themselves. All this, and more, have they done in the past for the old flag, and they have learned to love it to the extent they have suffered. Their fighting days are over, but their patriotism lasts to the end. It is for the honor and glory of flag and country that they turn out.

After a parade the daily papers record numerous deaths of veterans caused by the exhaustion and exposure of the march. Long editorials are written deploring the condition that impels these men to over-exert themselves. The Grand Army of the Republic needs no sympathy. Many of its members have died from the effects of the parades in the past, and more will do so in the future. It is to be expected. Many a man has taken part in what he knew to be his last march, and many more have endured a greater effort than that required in the past to stand under fire. It is right for them to do so, and it is the conviction of every man in the organization that each should take his part at all hazards. If their end is hastened thereby it is unfortunate, but it is the death of a soldier who has fallen while following his flag. Nothing



MAJOR GENERAL DANIEL SICKLES.

could be grander. At whatever cost, the Grand Army of the Republic will continue in the future to perform what it considers a sacred duty, just so long as there is a single platoon left alive to report for service.

As late as 1875 I have seen the veterans of the war of 1812 hold their flag-raising at the Battery and at Fort George. Old men of 85 or 90 conducted these services and the younger generation of today is destined to see the Grand Army of the Republic, reduced to a mere handful, valiantly following the flag with the same resolution as it is today.

It has frequently been suggested that cities whose guests the veterans are should supply means of conveyance. This would be cheerfully done but for the almost unanimous protest of the veterans themselves. At the unveiling of Grant's tomb I commanded the Grand Army of the Republic division of the parade and endeavored to provide means to lighten the extremely long march. I was opposed on all sides, but finally thought that by hiring a dozen steamboats and carrying them part of the way by water, with a short march at the end, that I had a plan they would consent to follow. But not they. One veteran voiced the opinion of the entire committee by tersely saying: "General, we always followed Grant on the land and we are not going to take to the water on this occasion of all others." And with frequent intervals of rest they made their long and arduous march.

There should be a strong representation of veterans at the Chicago convocation in August. We are always enthusiastically received in every city in the country, except New York. We are the guests of the city at which our meetings are held and with this one exception there is no stint to our welcome. The people of New York are not less patriotic, but they are so preoccupied in their rush for the dollar that they have forgotten what these men have done for them. In Philadelphia and Chicago our visit is a signal for a general holiday. Business is suspended and people come in by thousands from the surrounding country. In New York we are lost. Our convocations would not excite as much comment as a decline of half a dozen points in the stock market.

The action of the New York militia authorities in relegating the veterans to the rear was a great wrong. They should always be the central figure in whatever function they take part and the state troops should act as an escort. The veterans have earned their position at the right of line, and they should always be placed there. It is no discredit for the state militiaman to give the post of honor to the veteran. While the younger man has probably not fought for his country, there is not the slightest doubt but that he stands ready to repeat the heroic acts of '63 if this country but demands it of him. Resting secure in the popular faith in his willingness and ability, let him act as an ornament to the men who have done that which he has not been called upon to do.

There is no marked falling off in the membership of our association. We are continually recruiting from veterans who are non-members. This fact of itself shows the vitality of the organization. The evident comradeship and bond of unity existing between members of the order appeals strongly to the veteran who sees his circle of old friends rapidly growing smaller, and he eventually turns to the Grand Army to seek the companionship he so much desires. The camp fires of his post bring him into intimate association with the veterans of his own town, and the annual convocations broaden his acquaintance and renew friendships of years ago. Men who fought in the same regiment and have heard nothing of each other for years are continually meeting each other. Some of these meetings are almost pathetic, particularly between the older members, but the convocation is always a cause for general rejoicing. If the only end attained was the satisfaction derived by the veterans, its purpose would be a sufficient reason for its existence. Aside from this, however, is the strong patriotism that imbues the entire order. It is the keynote, the very essence of its existence, and it is as strong as in the dark days of the rebellion.

The time must come when we will slowly fade away. There will no longer be available recruits to fill up the steadily thinning ranks, but just as long as there is a corporal's guard left the Grand Army of the Republic will be found at its post.