



2ND MINNESOTA BATTERY OF LIGHT ARTILLERY

William A. Hotchkiss

“The Governor’s absence from the state embarrasses my plans and may frustrate them entirely.”

William Augustus Hotchkiss wrote those words in a letter to Major Goddard, the chief of staff in the Army of the Cumberland, on March 10, 1863. William wrote them in reference to his plans to recruit enough men to fill his Second Battery of Light Artillery to full strength once again, but it may have described how William felt about a good many things in his military career.

He had been born in White Hall, New York, on February 2, 1823, and began an apprenticeship in the printing business at a young age. He continued in the printing business until 1846 when he volunteered to serve in the Army during the Mexican War. He was sent to Vera Cruz and was promoted to noncommissioned officer status under the command of General Winfield Scott near Mexico City. When the war was over, William returned to New York and took up the printing trade at Albany, New York. He spent a year in the State Legislature as the assistant sergeant-at-arms.

During these years, William met Amanda Smith and they were married on May 27, 1851. The couple would eventually have seven children.



Maj. W. A. HOTCHKISS.

In 1854, William decided to move west and arrived in Minnesota in May where he began publishing the *Northwestern Democrat* in the fledgling city of Minneapolis. That community of less than 75 people stood on the west bank of the Mississippi River, making William’s newspaper the first in the Minnesota Territory to be published west of the Mississippi. He continued his newspaper publishing for four years, then sold the paper and bought a farm in Monticello, Wright County. By this time, William was involved in the buying and selling of several lots. A quit claim deed showed William and Amanda as living in Minneapolis and having sold a lot in the town of Monticello for \$150. In 1859, a mortgage note in the amount of \$200 described the property the couple owned. “One span of horses--one gray horse about 9 years old formerly owned by G. Brookins & Williams, the other a bay mare, white face about five years old, also a double wagon--light with iron ex--all the of crops now growing on the place now occupied by me in Monticello....consisting of about 8 acres of wheat, from ten to twelve acres of oats, about nine acres of corn, about an acre of potatoes and one half acre of beans, all owned by me” for a promissory note in the amount of \$158.25.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, William decided to enlist and this time to seek a commission as an officer. He enlisted at Fort Snelling on October 18, 1861, with the idea of recruiting a battery of light artillery. William later wrote about his efforts at raising the first Minnesota light artillery unit.

“In the summer of 1861, soon after President Lincoln called for 300,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion, I went to St. Paul and, through Gov. Ramsey, telegraphed to the Secy of War a tender of a Bty of Light artillery from Minnesota. It was promptly accepted by telegraph and I commenced recruiting, mustering in as a private with my first detachment. After enlisting 47 men entitling me to a first lieutenants commission I allowed myself to be overreached and cheated of that battery.”

Command of the First Minnesota Battery went to Emil Munch, the unit mustering into U.S. service on November 21, 1861.

William was not a member of that unit. He succeeded “in getting recognized as the 2 Bty by the Secy of War and was commissioned Captain Jan’y 14, 1862.” He finally had his commission and his command; however, his recollection of the date was a month off. The official date of his commission as captain came on February 14, 1862.

William recruited, trained, and drilled his men until the Battery was accepted into U.S. service on March 21, 1862, and was sent south in May. He stayed with his Battery through their first battles, but by the spring of 1863, William was breveted a major and given command of an artillery brigade. Letters from William indicate he was back in Minnesota in March of 1863 looking to recruit men to refill his Battery. It was during this recruiting mission that he wrote of his frustration in his efforts on account of the governor's absence from the state.

Other matters also came to attention that probably frustrated William. A cover letter dated July 22, 1863, described the procedure preferred for convening a court martial to answer the “charges and specifications against Capt. William Augustus Hotchkiss.”

Five separate charges were made against William. The first three charges dealt with making false provision requests, stating William drew provisions for more men than he had on the muster roles. The fourth charge stated he had “appropriated to his own use the provisions belonging to the Enlisted Men of his Battery.” The final charge was appropriating Hospital and Sanitary Commission items sent for his men to his own use.

William pleaded not guilty to all of the charges and specifications. The convening authority, Colonel W. P. Carlin, found William not guilty of all the charges “in consequence of the loss and death of one of its members and the absence of others Occasioned by Wounds and Sickness. With that of the Judge Advocate and the loss of the records of the court thereby preventing the continuation of the business that had been before it is hereby dissolved.”

The charges and their less than exonerating outcome probably tarnished William's reputation with his men. He continued to have conflicts with his junior officers and letters from the men indicated a dislike for their commanding officer.

Muster rolls show William serving at the brigade level until December of 1863. At Chattanooga, Tennessee, he was ordered to take command of the artillery defenses and he had charge of 110 guns around that city. William and his Battery were then left as one of the rear units, protecting and guarding while the bulk of the Army of the Cumberland marched on Atlanta, Georgia, and then to the sea with Sherman.

When the Battery was ordered to Philadelphia, Tennessee, William was the commanding officer of the Battery once again and conflicts with his officers heightened. Several lieutenants resigned and William noted that often it was due to an "inability to cooperate" with him. This may have stemmed from William's penchant for volunteering his Battery for various details in the infantry, pioneer corps, cattle herding duty, and other tasks considered unpleasant by his men. In any case, it did not endear William to his men judging by the comments they made in letters and journals.

At the end of the war, William came back to Minnesota with the Battery and sent them off with a rousing speech at their discharge from the army. His final words to his men were:

"Soldiers! You are about to return to the peaceful pursuit as citizens in which capacity I believe you will prove to be as true men as you have been soldiers. In the future remember what you did commissioned with the duty perpetuating an individual record unsurpassed by the heroes of any age, and that, what you have done in arms for the defense of law and order and good government is hereafter to be done by example and through the ballot-box. -- A chance for patriotic effort which ought to engage your most serious thought and noblest intentions(?)

Comrades! Cherish the memory of each other with a true soldier's love. Embrace the memory of those of our companions who have fallen by casualties in battle and disease in your most sacred affections.

As Soldiers, your commanding officer bids you an affectionate farewell hoping that in the future, happiness and prosperity may be the fruits of your labors."

William went back to his family and in October of 1866, he bought the *Fillmore County Republican* newspaper and moved to Preston. This was in partnership with his brother, Fred. William became the editor and publisher of that paper. Fred decided he was not a printer and would "do better in another trade" according to an article in February of 1867. William bought out his brother's share and in 1880, changed the paper's name to *The National Republican*. As its editor, he was noted as one of the "original progressives" and advocated the People's party in Minnesota.

The military once again frustrated William when he applied for a soldiers' pension in 1885. Confusion in the dates of his enlistment and rank provided him with a private's rate, based on his initial enlistment rank. A flurry of letters over the next nearly ten years eventually led to the correction of William's claim that he indeed had served as a captain.

In 1899, Amanda died. Their son, F. W. as he was called, took over the daily running of the newspaper in May of 1900. He promised the people of Preston a great deal on their subscription and expressed a desire to get to know them.



William remained in Preston and took up a life of ease. After a while, he went west to Kent, Washington, where he lived with his daughter.

William died on April 19, 1914, at the age of 92 years. He was laid to rest in the Kent Cemetery under a simple stone reading "Father," with his name and dates.

Researched and compiled by the reenactors of the 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery. Visit our website at <http://www.2mnbattery.org> for more information about our soldiers and our organization.

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