

Otis Howard – General in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Indian Wars

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Oliver Otis Howard was born November 8, 1830 in Leeds, Maine. He entered Bowdoin College in 1846 and that summer, at age 16, met Elizabeth Ann Waite. She was 15. She would be his only sweetheart. They married right after Howard graduated from West Point in 1855. Howard's first tour of duty was fighting Seminoles in Fort Brooke, Florida. While in Florida, he underwent an intense religious awakening, triggered by a combination of exposure to a conversion account in Hedley Vicar's *Diary Notes*, and a robust Methodist tent meeting. Returning to West Point, Howard threw himself into evangelical work. He was seriously considering joining the ministry when the Civil War broke out.

Howard in the Civil War and Reconstruction

Howard began the war as a colonel in command of the Third Regiment of Maine Volunteers. One year later he was major general of the volunteers. He lost an arm fighting the Battle of Fair Oaks, and received the Thanks of Congress for his role in the Battle of Gettysburg. He was transferred to the Army of the Tennessee in 1863, where, after the death of General McPherson in 1864, he was given command. He commanded the right wing of the Army of the Tennessee under Sherman for the attack on Atlanta and the historic March to the Sea. By the war's end, he was brigadier general in the regular Army with the brevet-rank of major general. He was 34.



General Sherman's staff (from left): O.O. Howard, John A. Logan, William B. Hazen, Sherman, Jefferson C. Davis, Henry W. Slocum, Joseph A. Mower, Frank Blair

Immediately upon the war's conclusion,

Howard was appointed Commissioner of the newly created Board of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.

FREEDMAN'S RIGHTS

“The rights of the freedman, which are not yet secured to him, are the direct reverse of the wrongs committed against him. I never could conceive how a man could become a better laborer by being made to carry an over heavy and wearisome burden which in no way facilitates his work. I never could detect the shadow of a reason why the color of the skin should impair the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Oliver Otis Howard, circa 1865

Chosen for this job because of his twin credentials as hero and humanitarian, he faced the daunting task of assisting four million ex-slaves in finding jobs, homes, and health care. Social work had not yet been invented as a profession. The Bureau was a department of the Army, and the employees were officers. No sooner had President Johnson installed Howard in this post, than he began trying to dismantle the Bureau and undermine its mission. Howard understood that he did not have much time in which to work, and he prioritized education – the setting up of schools. By the time the Bureau was completely dismantled in 1872, Howard was president of Howard University. The university was one of several schools Howard had used Bureau monies to establish, sometimes a little too creatively in the minds of his critics. The brainchild of a bible study group to which Howard belonged, Howard

University was founded specifically to train black lawyers, doctors, dentists, and teachers.

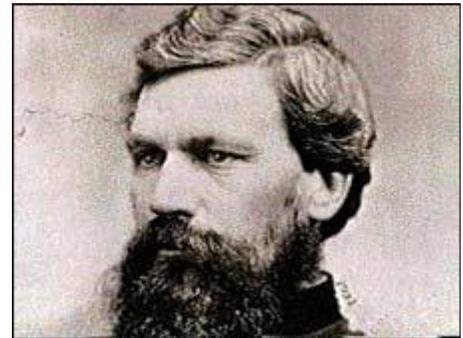
The consensus on the question of whether the Freedmen's Bureau achieved its goals is unanimous. It did not. Many ex-slaves found themselves working under contracts designed by the Bureau to give them economic freedom, but utilized by their new employers, often their old slaveholders, to rob them of the same. There are numerous theories as to who was responsible for these failures. In some analyses, Howard bears more of the guilt than in others. Everyone agrees he was not a good administrator. His decision to spend much of his time traveling around the South, inspecting Bureau offices and explaining Bureau policies, left plenty of room for things to go wrong.

Howard had critics on all sides. His open non-comprehension of racism attracted tenacious enemies who repeatedly brought the bookkeeping practices at the Freeman's Bureau under public examination. It exposed him to public ridicule (A graduate school?! For black people?!), drained his pocket book (he had to pay for his own legal defense), and alienated him from the political mainstream. Sherman advised Howard to request transfer to the field, and in 1874 he was given command of the Department of the Columbia.

Howard Out West

The Howards arrived in Portland in 1874. By this time they were a family of nine: Howard, his wife "Lizzie," Gus, Grace, James, Chauncey, John, Bessie and Harry. The oldest son, Gus, had just graduated from Yale. Grace was still at Vassar. Their home was located at SW 10th and Morrison.

Howard found Portland to be filled with "much wickedness." He responded to this moral disarray by throwing himself into volunteer work. He transferred to Portland his Washington DC memberships in the Congregational Church and the YMCA. Howard adored the YMCA, which embodied all his values: temperance, education, evangelism, and ecumenicalism. At that time, the YMCA was organized along military lines, so for Howard, already known as the "Christian general," it was an ideal match. Primarily concerned with protecting young men from the dangers of city life in its early years, during the Civil War, the YMCA focused on providing medical care. Walt Whitman was a YMCA member when he nursed wounded soldiers. The Portland YMCA was led by a small group of elite Christian businessmen, including a founder William Ladd, and met in rooms above his bank on SW Third.



Young General O. O. Howard

The Howard's official Fort Vancouver residence, built for their family of nine and servants, was ready after the Nez Perce campaign in 1878. Howard and his wife entertained often, but always without alcohol. President Grant and his wife, heading home from Japan at the end of a two-year-long grand tour of the world, stopped to visit the Howards at Fort Vancouver. In his memoir Howard points out that the large reception he and his wife held in Grant's honor was very enjoyable and no alcoholic beverages were served.

It was at Fort Vancouver that Howard met Lt. Charles Erskine Scott Wood, a recent West Point graduate. Howard liked Wood, and made him his aide de camp. In Howard, Wood saw a man who held progressive beliefs and at the same time moved within the power structure of our society. Later Wood would himself do much the same thing, combining unorthodox political beliefs and self-expression – writing and painting – with a lucrative business law practice. One difference: Wood ably merged the two sides of himself with far greater social ease than Howard.

Howard once attended a dinner party where the topic of conversation was the scandalous marriage of a young rich officer to an Indian girl he had met while serving in the West. Howard's response was that he believed all Indian "wives" taken by soldiers in the West, were, in the eyes of God, legitimate wives, and when soldiers abandoned them to return East and marry white women, they all were committing bigamy. This was a conversation stopper. No one said such things.

Howard didn't think about when or where his non-racism would be socially welcome. He just expressed something that seemed natural to him, and was bewildered when it caused an uproar. People hated him for exposing their own hypocrisy. He invited black children to join the Sunday School in his Washington DC church. The resulting panic divided the congregation. In Portland, he ignored social norms and made friends with a Chinese family, the Lings. Mr. Ling was so grateful to Howard for crossing the cultural divide, he named all his children after Howard's children.

Howard began to write a weekly column for the *Portland Bee*. Encouraged by his success at the paper, he began a longer project, a children's book based on his own childhood. *Donald's School Days* and *Henry In The War*, both written in Portland, launched Howard's writing career. He would remain active as a writer the rest of his life. Howard liked to hold reading groups at his house in Fort Vancouver. Wood and Howard probably bonded over love of books, hatred of injustice, and disinterest in military pomp.

Howard – Indian Fighter

Howard's Fort Vancouver command began under President Grant's Peace Policy. Howard was familiar with the Peace Policy. In 1872, he had taken time out from his job as a bureaucrat to travel, with one aide and three civilian guides (two of them Apache), to the remote camp of the renegade Chiricahua Apaches fighting under Cochise. Acting as Peace Commissioner, he entered the camp unarmed, and accompanied by one aide. He negotiated with Cochise for eleven days,. They reached mutually-agreed-upon terms, and the peace was lasting.

So Howard knew there was more than one way to address Indian conflicts. When complaints from white settlers reached Fort Vancouver that the Dreamer Nez Perce were stubbornly refusing to relinquish the Wallowa Valley, he commissioned a study of the situation by his adjutant, Major Henry Clay Wood. Wood was a lawyer. His careful study of the 1855 and 1863 treaties revealed the Nez Perce claim of ownership to be legitimate. Howard's own opinion, recorded in an 1876 report, was, "I think it is a great mistake to take from Joseph and his band of Nez Perces Indians that valley...and possibly Congress can be induced to let these really peaceable Indians have this poor valley for their own." His plea was not heard. That the Nez Perce had a right to stay in the valley was not the issue. The issue was how soon they would leave.

Howard sent Major Wood to parley with the Nez Perce in 1876. A year later Howard traveled to Fort Lapwai to conduct a second parley himself. Both Howard's account and the Nez Perce oral history of the second parley tell remarkably similar stories. Howard loses his temper, and in the words of Yellow Wolf "showed the rifle." Later, when war broke out, Howard lost no time escalating his forces. He wanted a quick finish to the hostilities, and at the Battle of Clearwater his men outnumbered the Nez Perce warriors by about 6 to 1. Instead, the Nez Perce escaped through Lolo Pass, and began their epic 1,500-mile flight. Howard pursued, but never directly engaged them in battle again. The newspapers covered the story closely, detailing one near miss after another. Howard once again was the target of public ridicule. Four months after the war began, Chief Joseph surrendered to Colonel Nelson A. Miles in Bear Paw, Montana.

Howard's last Indian War took place the following year. He quickly and easily subdued the Bannock Indians, some of whom had worked for him as scouts in the Nez Perce War.



Photo courtesy First Congregational Church

O. O. Howard.

Howard Back East

Howard took C.E.S. Wood along as his assistant in 1880, when he left Fort Vancouver to become Superintendent of West Point. He served there for two years, time which Wood used to go to Columbia Law School, just down the Hudson River. In New York, Wood met and became friends with Mark Twain. Wood had access to the West Point printing press and he used it to publish privately Twain's *1600: or a conversation as it was by the fireside of Queen Elizabeth*, a work considered too obscene for the usual publishing outlets. It may have been at this time that the relationship between Howard and Wood chilled. In Howard's memoirs, Wood is expunged from the record, except in relation to the Nez Perce War.

Howard wrote non-fiction, primarily about his own experience with Indian fighting, and with Indians. Four of his eight books – his autobiography, his biography of Zachary Taylor, his biography of Queen Isabel of Spain, and his account of the Nez Perce War – were written for adults. The rest were written for children. Bruce J. Dinges writes in his introduction to the 1989 reprint of *Famous Indians I Have Known*, "It is obvious at once that Howard was a talented writer and entertaining storyteller, with a wry sense of humor. Writing from personal experience, he created engaging portraits – almost unheard of in his day – of Indians as flesh and blood human beings with a diverse range of personalities. Because of the cultural blinders he wore, Howard sometimes misjudged Indian motivations, but he left for the rest of us vivid descriptions of their physical appearance, demeanor, thoughts, and conversation." Here again we see indirect evidence of Howard's atypical non-racism. By contrast, what Howard's friend Sherman had to say about Indians was, "The more we kill today, the fewer we have to kill tomorrow."

Howard also had a successful speaking career. He began on the lecture circuit around 1870 when he was low on cash. He spoke to audiences about the Civil War; about specific battles, including Gettysburg; about the need for love to heal the country. An "inspirational" speaker, he was popular enough to keep doing it all his life. Howard never wrote about spiritual matters, including his own spiritual experiences, nor about his vision of a just society, but he often spoke about them to audiences.

ON EDUCATION

"The burden of my efforts...may be condensed into the words: Educate the children. That was the relief needed. Is it not always the relief which in time becomes a permanency?"

Oliver Otis Howard

Howard was a paradox. He was a New Light evangelical Christian, a world traveler, and a teetotaler. He liked dancing, would not tolerate swearing, and made his troops attend Bible classes. He liked teaching Sunday School. When he was young, he wore a silk top hat. He married his wife on Valentine's Day. He tried all his life to be less ambitious. He gave away money as fast as he earned it. He wanted to be a team player. At the same time, he was a social reformer: he believed in temperance, racial equality, and education for women. He believed in creative bookkeeping. He could not understand the point of racism. He was the subject of one

congressional investigation, one military court of inquiry, and several civil suits – exonerated of charges in each instance. He stayed in the army for the steady paycheck. He retired as a major general. His last command, the Department of the East, covered more than half the country.

After his retirement in 1894, Howard remained active as writer, lecturer, and fundraiser for the various groups and causes he supported. He had a speaking engagement just before he died, in 1909 at age 79.

Howard's biographer, John A. Carpenter, observed, "The anomaly of Howard's position as advocate of racial equality and as a high-ranking officer in the United States Army had proved so impossible of comprehension that more than one person, and often this meant a fellow officer, simply never understood him at all." This lack of understanding, combined with the national shame still triggered by close examination of the Reconstruction and the Indian Wars – Howard's two post-Civil War arenas of action – may explain Howard's curious absence from history books. Howard, who worried that he was too motivated by glory, might be relieved to know that today he has been almost entirely forgotten. ♦

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General O. O. Howard

OLIVER OTIS HOWARD

A Timeline – 1830 -1909

1830 Oliver Otis Howard is born in Leeds, Maine. He grows up hearing his grandfather tell stories of early Maine settlers battling Indians.

1831 A Nez Perce delegation of four appears in St. Louis, requesting “the book” to take back to their tribe.

1839 Missionary Henry Spaulding baptizes Old Joseph. Eliza Spaulding learns Nez Perce from Lawyer.

1840 Young Joseph is born. He is baptized, and attends the Spaulding’s mission school.

1850 Oregon Donation Land Claim entitles every male settler to 320 acres of land – free.

1855 Isaac Stevens signs treaty with Northwest tribes. Under the terms of this treaty, the entire Wallowa Valley remains Nez Perce territory.

1855 Howard marries Elizabeth Ann Waite on Valentine’s Day.

1857 Stationed in Fort Brooke in Florida fighting Seminoles, West Point graduate Howard undergoes an intense Christian conversion.

1861 Howard is a math instructor at West Point. He is planning to leave military service to become a minister when the Civil War breaks out. He is made colonel of the Maine volunteers.

1863 Outraged by repeated treaty violations, Old Joseph erects boundary markers around the west entrance to his valley. He destroys his bible, and repudiates his conversion.

1864 Howard commands the Army of the Tennessee in Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign and the historic March to the Sea. Sherman becomes a lifelong friend.

1865 War over. Major General Howard is made head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, where his intention is to “give the freedmen protection, land and schools as far and as fast as he can.”

1869 In defiance of social attitudes of the time, Howard establishes Howard University to provide professional training to African American teachers, lawyers, doctors and dentists. The college is open to male and female students of any color.

1871 Old Joseph dies, leaving Young Joseph in charge of the Wallowa band.

1872 Howard is sent to Arizona as Peace Commissioner in the Indian Wars. Unarmed, and accompanied by one aide, he enters the remote Chiricahua Apache camp of Cochise. He remains eleven days, negotiating a lasting peace.

1874 The second of two investigations into corruption at the Freedmen's Bureau. Howard is cleared of any wrongdoing. His reputation, however, is in ruins. He requests transfer to the field. He is given command of the Department of Columbia.

1876 Classes continue to graduate from Howard University, as enrollment rises and new departments are added. Custer takes his last stand.



Young Chief Joseph

1877 Howard is called on to calm hostilities in the Wallowa Valley between settlers and the Nez Perce. War results. Throughout the following four month long campaign, Howard's inability to defeat his enemy in battle makes him a national laughing stock.

1877 Joseph surrenders to Colonel Nelson Miles at Bear Paw, on the understanding that he and his people would be allowed to return to their homelands. Joseph offers his surrender rifle to Howard, who shakes his head, indicating it should go to Miles.

1880 Howard is made Superintendent of West Point.

1883 The War Department allows the first Nez Perce refugees from the War of 1877 to return to Idaho. Chief Joseph, however, is never allowed to return.

1904 Young Joseph dies on the Colville Reservation.

1907 Yellow Wolf and L.V. McWhorter cross cultures to become friends. McWhorter begins taking down Yellow Wolf's oral history of the war.

1908 Thurgood Marshall is born. He will grow up to be the civil rights lawyer who brought about the end of segregation in Brown vs. Board of Education. He was the first African American named to the Supreme Court. Howard University was his law school.

1909 Oliver Otis Howard dies in Burlington, Vermont.



ON RECONSTRUCTION

“Legislative, judicial and executive powers were combined in my commission, reaching all the interests of four millions people, scattered over a vast territory, living in the midst of another people claiming to be superior, and known to be not altogether friendly...”

Oliver Otis Howard

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