John Moulder Wilson (1837-1919)

From: "Men of Mark in America", 1906

WILSON, JOHN MOULDER, son of a lawyer; page in the United States senate for four years; cadet at the United States Military academy; active officer in the United States army for forty-one years from lieutenant to chief of engineers and brigadiergeneral, and a man of large public service; was born in Washington, District of Columbia, October 8, 1837. His father, Joseph Shields Wilson, was a lawyer, clerk, chief



Figure 1. John M. Wilson as a First Lt. in the Civil War.

clerk and commissioner in the General Land office, an earnest student, a fine linguist, an authority on legal questions affecting the ownership of land and its conveyance, a man of remarkable memory, an orator and lecturer, strong in likes and dislikes. His mother, Eliza Uhler (Moulder) Wilson, was the daughter of John N. and Mary (Uhler) Moulder.

As a boy John Moulder Wilson attended school in his native city and when twelve years old became a page on the floor of the United States Senate and held the position, 1849-53. He then took a preparatory and freshman course at Columbian College, and in 1854 made the trip to California, via the Isthmus of Darien (Panama) and continuing his journey from San

Francisco to Puget Sound located in Olympia, Washington Territory, where he obtained employment.

In the spring of 1855 he was appointed a cadet to the United States military academy; and he was graduated and assigned to the artillery July 1, 1860. He was transferred to ordnance October 9, 1860, and served in Fortress Monroe and at Washington, District of Columbia, 1860-61. He was commissioned second lieutenant and transferred to the 2d artillery, January 28, 1861. Promoted first lieutenant, May 14, 1861; he was engaged in the battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861, and in the defense of Washington, District of Columbia, up to March, 1862, when he was transferred to the Army of the Potomac and took part in the Peninsular campaign, March to August, 1862. He was transferred to the topographical engineers, July 24, 1862, and to the corps of engineers, March 3, 1863. He engaged in the battles of South Mountain and Antietam, September 14 and 16, 1862; was superintending engineer of the defenses of Harper's Ferry, November 1, 1862 to March 20, 1863; was assistant professor of Spanish at the

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United States military academy, March 30 to June 18, 1863, being made captain, corps of engineers, June 1, 1863. He was assistant engineer of the construction of defenses at Baltimore, Maryland, June-July, 1863; superintending engineer of construction of defensive works at Memphis, Tennessee, Vicksburg and Natchez. Mississippi, August 1863-May 1864; assistant inspector-general of the military division of West Mississippi,



Figure 2. John M. Wilson from book published in 1906.

May 1864-September 1865; and was appointed lieutenant-colonel, staff United States volunteers, May 26, 1864. He took part in the siege and capture of Spanish Fort, the storming of Fort Blakely and the occupation of Mobile, April 12, 1865, on the staff of General E. R. S. Canby, and was with that officer at the surrender of General Richard Taylor's army at Citronella, Alabama, May 8, 1865.

He then served in the corps of engineers, and was promoted to major, June 3, 1867, and to lieutenant-colonel, March 17, 1884. He had charge of the public buildings and grounds, Washington, District of Columbia, with the rank of colonel, from June 1, 1885 to September 7, 1889 and from March 31. 1893 to March 1897, and in that capacity he had charge of the construction of

the army medical museum and library, the extensive repairs of Ford's theatre building, the erection of a monument to mark the birthplace of Washington, the erection of President Garfield's statue, the erection of the monument at Washington's headquarters, Newburg, New York, and memorial tablets on the battlefield of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, as well as monuments to General Hancock and General Logan. He was advanced to



Figure 3. Congressional Medal of Honor plaque of John M. Wilson $\,$

colonel, March 31, 1895; to chief of engineers with the rank of brigadier-general, February 1, 1897; was a member of the commission to investigate the conduct of the War Department, 1898-99; of the board of ordnance and fortifications, 1899-1901; and was retired by operation of law, April 30, 1901.

He was brevetted captain, June 27, 1862, for Gaines Mill; major, July 1,1862, for Malvern Hill; colonel United

States volunteers, March 26, 1865, for campaign against Mobile; lieutenant-colonel United States army, April 8, 1865, for capture of Spanish Fort, Alabama, and colonel of United States army for capture of Fort Blakely, Alabama. The Congressional Medal of Honor was conferred upon him for distinguished gallantry in action at Malvern Hill, Virginia, August 6, 1862.

He received the honorary degree of LL.D. from Columbian university in 1890; was elected to membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers; to the presidency of the Society of Civil Engineers of Cleveland, Ohio; was commander of the Commandery of the District of Columbia, of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States; and has served as president of the Columbia Hospital for Women, as president of the Training School tor Nurses, as a member of the board of directors of the Reform School for Girls, and is President of the Board of Trade, Washington, District of Columbia. He was a member and vice-president of the board of directors of the Corcoran Art Gallery, of the executive committee of the Citizens Relief Association, of the Anthracite Coal strike commission in 1902-03; vice-president of the Thomas Jefferson memorial association; member of the Washington National Monument Society, member of the board of visitors at the United States military academy, 1904; member of the Federal Commission to investigate the disaster to the steamer General Slocum, June-October, 1904; president of the Federal commission in connection with the sale of Choctaw-Chickasaw coal lands 1904-05 and chairman of the citizen's Presidential Inaugural committee, November 1904- March 1905.

He was always a Democrat in politics, but took no part in the party campaigns. He was a member of the Protestant Episcopal church and held the position of vestryman of St. Thomas' parish, District of Columbia, for over ten years, and was registrar of the parish. He was an original incorporator and a director of the National Episcopal Cathedral foundation.



Figure 4. Tombstone of John M. Wilson at the Post Cemetery of the U. S. Military Academy.

As a child "his strongest desire was to please his parents"; as a page in the senate he was early brought into contact with distinguished men in public life, and this contact aroused his ambition; while his life as a soldier cultivated his patriotism and made it his greatest ambition to serve his country to the best of his ability.

He was married November 5, 1861, to Augusta Bertha Waller, who died June 17, 1902. Their only child died in infancy. General Wilson has done a large measure of work toward beautifying the city of Washington. His advice to young men who desire to attain true success and happiness in life is to "love God and your

country; practice honesty, sobriety, industry; do your best in every duty devolving upon you; be invariably punctual both in private and public life; live strictly within your income; have absolute control of your temper under all circumstances; be courteous to all, and generous to the extent of your ability."

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From: "<u>Fiftieth Annual Report of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy</u>", 1919.

JOHN MOULDER WILSON

No. 1858. Class of 1860.

Died February 1, 1919, at Washington, D. C., aged 81 years.

By those who had the good fortune to be personally and intimately associated with General Wilson, he will always be remembered as a man of marked individuality, differing from the average man in many respects. Perhaps his most conspicuous quality

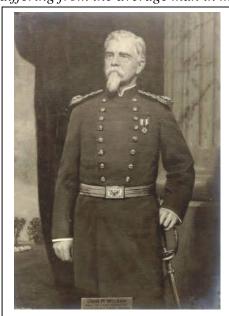


Figure 5. John Moulder Wilson as Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, about 1889

was intense activity, both physical and mental. He walked fast and with a springy step. At his desk he sat upright, with his shoulders back. In the hottest summer weather his frock coat, always spotless, was kept buttoned up. With John M. Wilson as Chief of Engineers, however, we too kept our coats buttoned up, although we would gladly have discarded every unnecessary article of dress in vain efforts to secure a little comfort, and there surely was no lounging at our desks. He never asked us to do anything he did not do himself. On time to the minute in arriving at his desk every morning, he left it only when the long and heavy day's work was done. He was always deeply impressed with the importance of any work he was given to do. For the time it was the one thing that mattered; other people might, of course, be doing good and useful things, but to him his own duty, and his own corps, were pre-eminent, far above all others.

He was Chief of Engineers at a time when many changes of army organization were imminent, and truthfully can it be said that he was the last of our Chiefs to retain all the varied powers and responsibilities which at any time have been vested in that office. At his own request he retired some five months short of his age limit. I have often wondered if this was not done to anticipate what was soon to follow; namely, the loss to the Chief of Engineers of the direct "command" of the Post of Willets Point, a duty most attractive to General Wilson, because in that function the Chief of Engineers was performing duties technically similar in many respects to those of a Department Commander. It was due to his untiring efforts that the law of March 2, 1899, was passed, which made engineer officers serving with engineer troops line and not staff, which closed finally a controversy which began when Colonel Jonathan Williams claimed the command of Castle Williams, Governor's Island, New

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York Harbor, and resigned from the army on July 31, 1812, because he was refused the "command" which he believed was his right as a commissioned officer of Engineers.

General Wilson took no rest and was the last Chief of Engineers who insisted on initialing the "rough" drafts prepared by his bureau officers for every action taken by his office, which involved rapidly reading through an enormous mass of papers every day.

His second and very pronounced characteristic was extreme punctiliousness in performing every social or official duty. As Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds, he had acquired profound knowledge of social precedence and etiquette among diplomats, cabinet officers, etc., and compliance with every requirement was a second nature to him. He carefully studied the official registers, learned the names and titles of all foreign diplomats, officers and attaches, and in introducing them to the President, he never failed to give the correct title and the exact pronunciation of European, or even African or Asiatic names. A personal call, even from a junior officer, was returned within the week, and this continued long after he retired, and with men fifty years younger than himself. Personal letters were answered immediately. Autograph letters were given an autograph reply, in spite of the mass of official correspondence. Whenever fault was to be found with a field officer, the reprimand was composed and signed by General Wilson, and was generally in his own clear handwriting. Under the War Department regulations of his time, Chiefs of Bureaus were authorized to correspond with each other direct, but such letters were required to be signed by the Chiefs in person and not by their assistants. In other offices breaches of this requirement were not uncommon and were generally overlooked, but every wrongly signed communication to the Chief of Engineers was promptly returned by General Wilson in person, to the Chief of the Bureau from which it came, with a most courteously expressed request that the "young" officer who had accidentally overstepped his authority be "kindly" reminded that such an occurrence must not again take place.

A third characteristic was his warmth of heart and absolute sincerity. Under a stern exterior, and an inflexible determination to make every one of his officers do his full duty to his country and to his corps, he spent hours learning their personal characteristics, their family relations, and the kinds of people with whom they associated. In assigning duties and stations he always tried to give the deserving, as he saw them, duties and locations that would make them contented and happy, and for those who needed discipline, he had certain assignments that were generally regarded as was Botany Bay in its palmy days. In any assignments, his personal relations to an officer did not enter, it was not his friends who were favored, nor his personal enemies who were disciplined. He tried to be absolutely fair, and to measure out the sweet and the bitter to those whose official conduct and performance of duty called for the one or the other.

In his family life General Wilson found a heaven on earth. A more devoted couple than the General and his wife never lived, and the day he went on the retired list the General told me, "I have graduated, and now I can really enjoy my home." Mrs. Wilson's death in 1902, only thirteen months after his retirement, was one of those tragedies in real life that we all have felt to be almost inexplicable. Married during the Civil War, Mrs. Wilson (nee Augusta Waller) remained as near her husband as possible, and was

often exposed to danger and discomfort. At times their quarters were actually within range of the Confederate guns. A daughter, Frances Waller Wilson, was born, but died at New Orleans when about six months old, and no other children followed. Finding this was to be, they adopted a niece of Mrs. Wilson, brought her up as a daughter, and after her marriage to John C. W. Brooks of the Artillery, their children always called General Wilson "grandfather."

Miss Leila Webb Waller, his sister-in-law, who lived with the Wilsons from the time she was twelve years old, and the two granddaughters, were the joys and comforts of the later years of his life. It seems possible that Miss Waller's sudden death on January 13, 1919, was the immediate cause of the General's own demise.

In the following paragraphs only a few of the salient features of General Wilson's career are given. Where so many important things have been accomplished it is difficult to select, but an attempt has been made to record those which he himself would have emphasized, and in doing this I have been aided greatly by an outline he left on the personnel files of the office of the Chief of Engineers, partly reprinted from Cullum, and partly interlined and extended in his own characteristic handwriting.

John M. Wilson was born in the District of Columbia on October 8, 1837, and secured an appointment to West Point for the class entering in 1855. Endowed with untiring energy, a quick mind, and the power of rapidly coming to definite decisions, John M. Wilson would have made his mark in any walk of life, but from the beginning he threw himself, soul and body, into a military career. How devotedly he loved his alma mater is shown by the following extract from an address he made at West Point on June 12, 1911, when he was unanimously elected to the presidency of the Association of Graduates of the Military Academy for the ensuing year.

"There are times in the life of a man when language fails to express his deep appreciation of honors conferred upon him, and, as I stand before you today, a graduate of fifty-one years ago, I feel that the honor of election to the Presidency of this superb galaxy of magnificent soldiers, is the greatest of my life, and from the bottom of my heart I thank you for it. It has been my good fortune to be a private in the cadet ranks, a Corporal out of ranks, a First Sergeant and First Captain of the Battalion of Cadets, an Instructor at the Academy, its Superintendent, a member and President of the Board of Visitors, and today comes the last possible honor I can receive from dear old West Point until I am laid away in our ever beautiful cemetery."

[He was actually buried there with full military honors in March, 1919.]

Young Wilson entered West Point July 1, 1855, in one of the few classes at the Academy which took a five-year course, and graduated July 1, 1860, and was the only member of his class with no demerit marks for the entire first class year. This achievement he never forgot, and sometimes mentioned it to those who were his closest friends. He was commissioned Brevet Second Lieutenant of Artillery, July 1, 1860, transferred to the Ordnance on October 9th of that year, transferred again to the line, joining the First Artillery on January 14, 1861; became a full Second Lieutenant of the Second Artillery two weeks later, and First Lieutenant on May 14, 1861. In the artillery he had active service in the Manassas campaign, and in the Peninsular campaign, being personally present at the first battle of Bull Run, at the siege of Yorktown, at the battle of Williamsburgh, at the actions of Slatersville, Gaine's Mill, Mechanicsville, at Malvern Hill, at the second battle of Malvern Hill, August 5th (where for a time and as an officer of Topographical Engineers he actually commanded a battery of field artillery) and at a skirmish at Harrison's Landing. How well he performed his artillery duties is attested by Brevets of Captain June 27, 1862, for gallant and meritorious services at the battle of Gaine's Mill, Virginia, and of Major July 1, 1862, for gallant and meritorious services at the first battle of Malvern Hill, Virginia. On July 24, 1862, he transferred to the Topographical Engineers, which by Act of March 3, 1863, was consolidated with the Corps of Engineers. As an officer of Topographical Engineers, he took part in the Maryland campaign of the Army of the Potomac in September and October, 1862, participating in the battles of South Mountain, and Antietam (where he was also detailed the day after the battle to go over the field and locate the positions occupied by the



Figure 6. John Moulder Wilson with Artillery Cavalry Officers in the Peninsular Campaign in 1862. Wilson is just right of center in back row. (Photo from the Library of Congress, James F. Gibson photo.)

different divisions), and in the skirmish at Charlestown, Virginia, October 17, 1862. From November 1, 1862, to March 20, 1863, he was superintending engineer, laying out and constructing defenses of Harper's Ferry. On March 30, 1863, after the consolidation of the two corps, he was ordered to West Point and made Assistant Professor of Spanish, but, having reached the grade of Captain on June 1, 1863, he succeeded in getting back. to active work near the front on June 19th of that year, constructing defenses for Baltimore. From Baltimore he was sent about six weeks later to serve as superintending engineer of the defenses at Memphis, Vicksburg and Natchez, which kept him busy until May 26, 1864, when, with a commission of Lieutenant-Colonel, Staff, U. S. Volunteers, he was made Assistant Inspector General of the Military Division of West Mississippi, at the headquarters of Major-General Canby. He served in that capacity until September 15, 1865, participating in the Mobile campaign March 4 to May 4, 1865, in the siege and capture of Spanish Fort, March 28, 1865, to April 8, 1865, and in the storming of Blakely, April 9, 1865. He was present in the occupation of Mobile, April 12, 1865, and at the surrender of General Dick Taylor's army at Citronelle, Alabama, May 4, 1865. His good work in the above capacities is attested by brevets as follows:

"Colonel, U. S. Volunteers, March 26, 1865, for faithful and meritorious services during the campaign against the city of Mobile and its defenses; Lieutenant-Colonel, U. S. Army, April 8, 1865, for gallant and meritorious services at the capture of Spanish Fort, Mobile Harbor; and Colonel, April 8, 1865, for gallant and meritorious services at the captures of Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely, Alabama."

In the ten years from 1855 to 1865, Wilson had had the right to wear the insignia of every grade at West Point except those of Lieutenant, and in the army from Brevet Second Lieutenant to Colonel. He had been brevetted to every grade up to Colonel, except those of Second and First Lieutenant, which actual rank he had attained less than one month after the war had begun. At the close of the war in 1865 he had reached in the regular service only the grade of Captain, Corps of Engineers.

Now, half a century later, the army is again passing through an era of temporary Generals and Colonels, who have done brave and effective service at the front, but who will soon return to their peace time regular rank, and like Wilson, will slowly have to climb a second time the ladder of promotion. His Majority was reached seven years after graduation, June 3, 1867; his Lieutenant-Colonelcy seventeen years later, March 17, 1884; his Colonelcy eleven years later, March 31, 1895; and his Brigadier-Generalcy February 1, 1897, after thirty-seven years' service, when he reached the head of his corps.

His peace time service was varied and important, involving construction and design of many kinds of fortifications, of large concrete and masonry structures, of many noted monuments, of the government printing offices in the city of Washington, of the water supply of that city, with its filtration plant, etc., of lighthouses on the stormy coasts of Oregon and Washington, of unprecedented dams to retain mining debris in California rivers, of difficult river and harbor improvements, from streams like the Hudson and the Columbia carrying enormous commerce in ocean-going vessels, down to little streams where the possibility of floating timber to saw-mills means cheaper buildings and

cheaper homes for our people. He did important construction work on the harbors lying on Lakes Erie and Ontario. To these multifarious and varied construction duties he brought a mind fertile in resources, a capacity for sustained mental effort far beyond the average, and a power to command men and draw from them loyal and contented service. That his construction work has been successful is not a miracle, it is the logical result of care and painstaking attention to details, as well as to large questions of design.

Two assignments gave him perhaps his happiest years of duty. One was the superintendency of public buildings and grounds which brought him into close personal contact with all the great men concentrated in Washington during Mr. Cleveland's two administrations. The other was the superintendency of the United States Military Academy at West Point, which enabled him to put into effect ideas he had long cherished, such as inducing the cadets voluntarily to cooperate with the authorities, and thus to insure perfect discipline. With his peculiar powers he succeeded, and the years during which he was Superintendent were marked by an absolute absence of any important infractions of discipline by the corps of cadets as a whole. Genuine affection for him as a man still exists in the hearts of the men who passed through the Academy during the years 1889 to 1893, among whom I have never failed to find instantaneous response to a mention of the name of John M. Wilson, and, if the roll of all survivors of those classes be called, I know that not a man will be found who does not keenly feel the loss of this old and tried friend.

General Wilson was a member of an endless number of boards and commissions, both while on the active list, and after his retirement on April 30, 1901. Some of these duties called upon him, not only for professional skill, but also for application of his wonderful tact. For example, he was a member of the Roosevelt Anthracite Coal Commission, which amicably settled the fuel strikes in 1902, and also of the commission in connection with the War Department controversies during and after the Spanish War.

General Wilson was the recipient of many honors, military and civil, including the Medal of Honor for distinguished gallantry at Malvern Hill, August 5, 1862, and the degree of LL.D., Columbia University. One of his treasures was a letter from General W. T. Sherman, written on the eve of his retirement from active service, and from which the following extract is taken:

'"I believe that no general officer has ever held the Engineers in higher esteem than I have, especially when their usual knowledge is supplemented, as in your case, with the practical experience with men in the camp, in the field, and in barracks. It requires great knowledge to take rude blocks of marble and make of them a groined arch, but still greater to take a mass of rude men and work them Into a skilled army, and when the Engineer can do both well, then he is a master. I believe you to be one of these, and that you appreciate my efforts to bring the corps into more perfect harmony with the whole army, and that you do not understand me as thereby selfishly attempting to enlarge my own authority. The fact that you have seen service in the Artillery and -with an army in the field, makes you a better Engineer and qualifies you for the command of men."

He was a member of the Washington Academy of Sciences; a Commander of the Loyal Legion, District of Columbia, 1899-1900; a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and Past President of the Society of Civil Engineers of Cleveland, Ohio; a member of the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission, appointed by the President of the United States, October, 1902, until March, 1903; a member and President of the Board of Visitors, U. S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, June, 1904; a member of the Federal Commission to investigate the disaster to Steamer General Slocum, June-October, 1904; president Federal Commission in connection with sale of Choctaw-Chickasaw Coal Lands, 1904-1905; chairman Citizens' Presidential Inaugural Committee, December, 1904, to March, 1905; president Columbia Hospital for Women, D. C., 1902-1907; president Washington, D. C., Board of Trade, 1905-1907; a member and secretary Board of Trustees, Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation of District of Columbia; a member of the Washington Monument Association, Washington, D. C.; a member of the Board of Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; a member and vice president for the District of Columbia, of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association; a member of the Board of Managers of the National Geographic Society.

With many men retirement means cessation of activity, slow fading away of interests in life, a twilight state of inertness, a simple waiting for the end which comes to all. With General Wilson this was not true. His civil history as told in Cullum up to 1910 records performances of active duties, calling for a quick mind and bodily activity. Even as late as 1915, there was but little change apparent to his daily associates, but those who, like myself, met him only at longer intervals did note a little less spring in his walk, a little less vigor perhaps in his way of discussing matters that interested him; and before the end came, all realized that we must soon expect to bid our dear old friend farewell.

Looking back over intimate associations of many years, all his friends can truly say that John M. Wilson never did a mean or underhand thing in all the years we knew him. While often severe, he was so just that the subjects of his displeasure never could bear malice, and often became his warmest friends after the sting of his rebuke was over.

FREDERIC V. ABBOT.

From: "History of the State of Washington", Edward S. Meany, 1909.

The State of Washington is entitled to two United States senators and three members of the House of Representatives. Since March 4, 1907, each of these receives an annual salary of \$7500. The clerk of the committee of which a senator is chairman acts as the senator's private secretary. The salary of the secretary varies according to the importance of the committee. In the House, each member is paid \$1500 to be disbursed as he chooses for secretarial help. Counting mileage, clerk hire, and other items, it is probable that \$50,000 a year is chargeable to the State of Washington for this branch of the government service.

Each senator and each representative in Congress is entitled under the law to appoint a cadet to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Each cadet is paid \$600 a year and "one ration per day, or commutation therefore at thirty cents per day. The total is \$709.50, to commence with his admission to the Academy." The full complement of five cadets would draw from the National treasury at least \$3547.50 a year for the pay and expense of these young citizens of the State. The cost of their education while at the academy is not here included.

The first cadet in the Military Academy from the Pacific coast was appointed from Washington Territory. He was recently retired while holding one of the most important positions in the United States army, that of chief of engineers. Not long since this officer — Brigadier General John M. Wilson — was caught in a reminiscent mood and talked of his appointment as a cadet. He told of his trip to California from his native Washington City and continued: "After I had been in California awhile I went up to Washington Territory, and obtained employment at Olympia, the capital. I got well acquainted with Governor Isaac I. Stevens, who had graduated from West Point in 1839. While I was in Olympia, Mr. Columbia Lancaster, delegate in Congress from Washington Territory [1854], notified the public that he was authorized to appoint a cadet to the Military Academy. I had known him in Washington and had strong hopes from what he told me there that if I became a resident of his Territory, made friends with the people and got some good backing, he would appoint me. I was always ambitious to be a soldier, and that was the motive that led me to go out to the Pacific coast with Senator Gwin [of California]. Governor Stevens and a number of prominent citizens recommended me, and Columbia Lancaster appointed me to the Military Academy as the first cadet from the Pacific coast."



ⁱ Gates, Merrill Edwards, "Men of Mark in America", Ideals of American Life told in Biographies of Eminent Living Americans, Vol. II, Men of Mark Publishing Company, Washington, D. C., 1906

[&]quot;Fiftieth Annual Report of the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy.", Seeman and Peters, Inc., Saginaw Michigan, 1919.

Meany, Edmond S., "History of the State of Washington", The MacMilland Co., New York, 1909.