

ANNALS OF IOWA
APRIL, 1870.

GENERAL JAMES A. WILLIAMSON

JAMES ALEXANDER WILLIAMSON, a brigadier general of volunteers from Iowa in the war of the Union against the slave holders' rebellion, is a native of the state of Kentucky. He was born at Columbia, in that commonwealth, February 8, 1829, so that in this month of April, 1870, he is a little over forty-one years of age. There were no incidents of special moment connected with his early life. He grew up as most boys of "poor but respectable parents" grow up, having considerable work to do, and getting such rudiments of education as the schools of the times afforded. These advantages were nothing like they have grown to be now-a-days. The school houses, made of logs in many instances, of the time of James A. Williamson's boyhood were rude indeed and comfortless in comparison of the modern structures, built without regard to expense or, sometimes, art, or anything else but bigness. The curriculum of the schools of the olden time, too, was of the same cramped nature as the buildings in comparison of the prodigious amount of learning which any boy can now have without money and without price.

It may not be improper to add, in respect to the early life of General Williamson, that he went through some "experiences" not usual even with boys of the "far West." When he was but ten years of age, his father removed to Marion county, Indiana, near the capital of that state. The father died the same year, leaving a wife and two children, the subject of this sketch and a sister, with but a small share of the world's goods. When the family moved to Iowa, the boy was only about fifteen years old. He made a "claim" on the public lands, and opened a small farm, doing all the work himself. Not owning a team, nor being able to do so, he worked by the day for neighboring farmers, taking his pay in work done on the little farm by them with their teams. In other words he "swapped work," in the phrase of the times, exchanging his own personal labor for the labor of others and that of

their horses or oxen as the case might be. Thus he raised his crops and supported the family, by exertions which, in this day of farm machinery and implements, seem almost incredible. And so he worked for two years, when he became clerk in a country store,—a business in which he did not long engage. At length he sold his farm, and with the proceeds making his share, gave himself a course of classical and mathematical study at Knox College. Whilst on these details of General Williamson's early life, I may also say that, having completed his collegiate studies, he returned to Lancaster and studied law. His instructors were M. M. Crocker, since the distinguished Major General, whose death has been so earnestly deplored by the people of Iowa, and Judge Casey, who has been a prominent member of the Lee county bar for several years. Mr. Williamson was admitted to practice in Lancaster, but removed to the present capital before his briefs had got to be numerous or profitable. At his new home he was immediately successful.

It was about ten years after settling in Iowa, that is in the year 1855, Mr. Williamson removed to Des Moines, then agitating for the capital and soon afterwards getting it by constitutional provision. With the question of removing the capital from Iowa City to Des Moines, Mr. Williamson had much to do. He was one of those interested in building the structure, now called the capitol, which was part of the consideration, so to speak, for the removal. The state afterwards took this building off the hands of its owners, upon whom the financial crisis of 1857 had borne with great hardship. In the "lobby" at work for this measure during the regular session of the famous General Assembly of 1860, was Dr. Brooks, of Des

Moines, who was, I believe, pecuniarily interested in the success of the bill for the purpose and worked for it with great earnestness. Dr. Brooks, though not much known to the general public of Iowa, was well acquainted with nearly all the prominent men in the state, and was in reality one of the most potential lobbyists who ever engaged in helping measures through the legislature. He died something over two years ago, during a session of the General Assembly, and that body did itself honor in adjourning over in respect to his memory, the members of both houses attending the funeral, almost without exception. But few men have such genial, whole-soured qualities as had the lamented Dr. Brooks, by whose death Iowa lost one of her most public spirited and valuable private citizens. He died in the very house in which Mr. Williamson lived at the time the State House—so called by the most chivalrous courtesy—was taken possession of by the state, as owner of the property.

Mr. Williamson practiced law with success at Des Moines, taking less part, perhaps, in politics, than is customary with a majority of the members of that profession. He belonged to the democratic party, and was a consistent, though not an illiberal, supporter of its doctrines and candidates. He continued in good fellowship with the party till the breaking out of the war of the rebellion, when, entering the army, he eschewed for the time being the subject of politics, but in the course of a year or two, or it may have been more, became, as General M. M. Crocker also did, what is now called a radical republican. It is not within the province of this sketch to commend or condemn either the past or present political doctrines of its subject. It is sufficient to say here that Williamson was a prominent and influential democrat, and that his experience in the army made him a republican, of which party he is now a prominent and influential member. It is neither doubted that he was a conscientious democrat, nor that he is a conscientious republican, nor yet that, in being at one time the one and at a subsequent period the other, he is chargeable with any the least inconsistency as an earnest friend of our great republic. Whether democrat or republican, he who passed through the fearful struggle of the late war,—a most remarkable conflict, both of ideas and of arms,—without notable change of opinion, may be very good timber considered as a saw-log, but not so, when considered as an intellectual and moral being.

Not long after the wickedness of disunion and secession had broken out in the overt treasonable act of firing on Fort Sumter, Mr. Williamson volunteered as a soldier of the Union. The Fourth Iowa volunteer infantry, Colonel G. M. Dodge, afterwards the distinguished major-general, was at this time being recruited, and Mr. Williamson became the adjutant of the regiment. The rendezvous was at Council Bluffs, where the regiment was drilled during part of the summer of 1861, and whence it moved to Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis, Missouri, for further drill, arms, and equipments in the month of August. Having stopped here a short time, the regiment proceeded by rail to Rolla, where it remained for a considerable period, first in camp and then in winter quarters, the barracks, such as they were, being built by the men themselves.

That history of a conflict of arms which deals but in marches and counter marches, advances, retreats, skirmishes, and battles, may satisfy those who think only of the pride, and pomp, and circumstance of glorious war, but it leaves much of value and of deep and painful interest untold. "The army went into winter quarters" means a great deal to those who know what an army is. There are weeks, there may be months, of

"Mingled shades of joy and woe,
Hope, and fear, and peace, and strife,
In the thread of every life."

If sickness visits the troops, as it is so apt to do in quarters, it is almost impossible to dispel

the gloom which settles upon the men. The virtues of patience and fortitude here have their triumphs, and they are no less worthy of admiration, though they receive much less than the qualities which earn fame and glory on the battlefield. Of the checkered scenes of army life in quarters, Adjutant Williamson saw as much as men may often see while the regiment remained at Rolla. He studied his new duties with great assiduity, and became a substantially good officer, but without acquiring that technical proficiency in the words of command and the details of the profession which mere martinets so much admire, sometimes herein making a mistake like that of insisting upon Horace

Greeley being a bad writer solely because he cannot write a legible hand. It is not meant that Adjutant Williamson was deficient in a substantial knowledge of the details of his new profession, but only that he cared not to spend too much time on those matters which did not go to "the merits," as a lawyer would say. He got the essentials of his temporary profession better by paying more attention to them than to the non-essentials. It thus happened that though he was a good adjutant, he was, in some particulars, an awkward officer for several months after he entered the service.

It was not long till he had excellent opportunity to put all his soldierly qualities to the test. For early in the year 1862, General Samuel R. Curtis, commanding the Army of the Southwest, began that march which ended on the mountains of northwestern Arkansas in the pitched battle of Pea Ridge, one of the longest and most desperately contested engagements of the war, and directed in the most skillful manner by General Curtis. Colonel Dodge commanded a brigade during this campaign, and was conspicuous for bravery and efficiency at the battle. Adjutant Williamson was the acting adjutant general of the brigade, and received the warmest commendations of his commanding officer.

Not long after the battle Colonel Dodge was promoted to the rank of brigadier-general, and the lieutenant-colonel of the regiment resigning about the same time, Adjutant Williamson was promoted to that rank. He was still further promoted. however, in a very few weeks, receiving the commission of colonel. From this time forth until near the close of the war, he served with his regiment, commanding first it, then a brigade, and then a division, of which the Fourth Iowa volunteers formed a part. It was one of the most distinguished of the distinguished regiments which the state of Iowa sent to the field, and if he who was its commanding officer in its most trying and most glorious hours, and who so long retained no other rank than that of its colonel, was unjustly deprived of well-earned promotion, it is agreeable to reflect that to have been the efficient commander of the Fourth Iowa infantry was far better than to have been many brigadier-generals, or major-generals for that matter, which every one can call to mind without consulting the "Rebellion Record." The life of General Williamson is interwoven with the record of his famous regiment. Its history makes an important part of his life; his talents and services largely contributed to the efficiency and the renown of the command, and none the less, one may safely conclude, because he was nothing at all of a demagogue soldier.

After the battle of Pea Ridge, Colonel Williamson did not for some months participate in any engagement, but his duties were constant and onerous. His command continued to form a part of the little army under General Curtis, which, it will be recollected, marched a good deal through the gloomy wilderness and swamps of Arkansas, suffering many hardships, and at last made the famous march to Helena, overcoming difficulties well-nigh insurmountable, and enduring privations in comparison of which those of which romance tells, even in the gloomiest pages of imaginative human destitution, are like royal magnificence to the rags of paupers. The fact is well known that he who was then commanding the armies of the United States,—General

Halleck,—supposed that General Curtis and his army were lost, and that no one was more surprised than he upon intelligence of the arrival of the command at Helena. In this expedition through an exceedingly gloomy country the Fourth Iowa had borne its part of the hard work, and marched on short rations with a fortitude and even cheerfulness that spoke well for its discipline.

In the unsuccessful attack upon Vicksburgh by Chickasaw Bayou,—known as the battle of Chickasaw Bayou,—Colonel Williamson and his command bore the most conspicuous part. It will be proper, therefore, to speak of this engagement with some detail.

On the 20th of December, 1862, Major General Sherman embarked at Memphis with a considerable army, to co-operate with General Grant, marching by land, in an attack upon Vicksburgh. At Helena he was reinforced by General Steele, to whose command Colonel Williamson's regiment was now attached. The whole army then continued the voyage on as many as an hundred transports to Milliken's Bend, something more than twenty miles above Vicksburgh. Entirely ignorant of the events which had compelled the retreat of Grant before he had come near Vicksburgh, General Sherman proceeded with his part of the plan of attack, the whole army being confident of success. About noon on the 26th the fleet reached its destination, and the troops debarked. The locality was extremely uninviting. Vicksburgh is on the bank of the Mississippi, some two miles below a sharp bend. Immediately opposite, is a peninsula, formed by the sharp bend of the river, and it is opposite the point of this peninsula that the waters of Chickasaw Bayou empty into the river. The bayou is only about seven miles in length. It flows from the Yazoo, first in a southerly direction, and then more toward the west, following the course of a range of bluffs north of the city. Between the bayou and the Yazoo, it is little better than a swamp, intersected by turgid streams and corduroy roads.

In this dreary locality the army bivouacked the night after debarkation. In front, was a stronghold, well defended by the best troops of the rebellion. Without here stopping to speak of the operations of the following days in which the army moved into position for attack, marching and fighting not a little, it may be said that on the morning of the unsuccessful assault General Morgan, with a division, occupied the central position, General M. L. Smith's division the right center, while General A. J. Smith was moving up on the right, and General Steele on the left. During the night before, our troops had heard trains of cars moving into Vicksburgh. They were bringing reinforcements to the rebels. Their position, almost impregnable by nature, was further fortified by art. On the plateau between the bayou and the bluffs there were lines of rifle-pits, protected by abatis, whilst the hills were crowded with batteries of light guns and heavy artillery, whose fire could sweep every part of the plateau. Early in the morning the rebels opened fire, chiefly directed against the Union center, held by Morgan. It was kept up during all the forenoon, during which time the infantry on different parts of the lines was from time to time engaged. General Sherman had issued no order announcing an hour for the assault, but about noon General Frank P. Blair threw his brigade across the bayou above where it bends to the right, and moved, overcoming many obstacles, against the first line of rifle-pits. Colonel DeCourcy, commanding a brigade, also moved at the same time, and both commands, passing through a murderous fire, carried the first line of defenses with a dash, and in a short time the second also. But these gallant troops were still under the fire of the artillery on the bluffs. The brigade of General Thayer,—in which was the Fourth Iowa, —of Steele's division, had been ordered to support Blair. Thayer crossed the bayou lower down than Blair had done, marching by the flank, but with only one regiment,—Colonel Williamson's. The next regiment in line was directed to take a different direction by General Steele, and those coming after followed this. Thayer sent for support, but

without waiting for it to come up, moved against the works in his front with the Fourth Iowa alone. This gallant regiment carried the first line of works, and, marching on, drove the enemy from his second line. Unable to press on up the bluffs against the terrible fire of many batteries concentrated on this part of the lines, those brave men remained for a considerable time, waiting for support, scores of them falling almost every moment in wounds or death, and then, obeying the command to retire, retreated steadily under the same fire by which their ranks had been decimated during the assault. Troops along the rest of the lines only crossed the bayou in small detachments, or not at all. So the assault by Blair, DeCourcy, and Thayer, the last with a single regiment, the whole force numbering only about three thousand men, was all that was made. Of these three thousand, about eight hundred were killed and wounded.

As for Colonel Williamson's regiment, it behaved with surpassing heroism. The regiment went into the fight with four hundred eighty men and officers, of whom one hundred twelve were killed and wounded, among the latter being Colonel Williamson himself, who was hit several times during the battle, and had his uniform well perforated with balls, but continued in command throughout. General Grant, nearly a year after the battle, when he had fully reflected upon all the facts connected therewith, commanded by general order that the Fourth Iowa infantry place "First at Chickasaw Bayou" on its colors,—a distinguished honor, given, it is believed, but to a single other regiment (the Thirteenth Regulars) during the whole war of the rebellion.

Immediately after this unsuccessful attack on Vicksburgh, Colonel Williamson's regiment proceeded on the expedition against Arkansas Post, in which it took honorable part under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Burton, Colonel Williamson being wounded, and ill. After the success which attended General McClelland's movement against the enemy in Arkansas,—a movement which, it is believed, was the conception of General Sherman,—the Fourth Iowa returned to that vast encampment opposite Vicksburgh, where, under the dark shade of the cypress and the threatening frowns of the batteries of the stronghold, officers and men spent the darkest days of their service. It is probable that Colonel Williamson was not more severely tried in the hottest of the storm of Chickasaw Bayou than he was every day, almost every hour, during the two months which the regiment remained in this encampment. There was a great deal of sickness and suffering. The locality was utterly uninviting. Everything conspired to give the army "the horrors." In comparison of this, battle, where there is the "fine frenzy" of fight, is a pleasure.

Colonel Williamson's part in the great campaign of Vicksburgh under General Grant, and which attained glorious success on the anniversary of our national independence, was quite conspicuous throughout. General Steele, for the purpose of deceiving the enemy, was sent into Mississippi, some hundred miles, by the river, above Vicksburg, about the 1st of April. In this column was Colonel Williamson, with his regiment. Having done what was required of him, Steele rejoined the army after the engagements of Port Gibson and Raymond, but in time to take part in the capture of Jackson, entering that city from the south about the time the rebels evacuated, having been handsomely whipped, chiefly by troops under the command of General Crocker. After the work of destruction at Jackson, Colonel Williamson marched with his command to Haines's Bluff, above Vicksburg, where some sharp fighting took place. From this time till the capitulation, including the memorable assault of May 22d and the long siege, the regiment was near the extreme right of the investing army. During the whole of the siege,—forty-seven weary, wearing days under the hot sun and hotter fire from the enemy,—Colonel Williamson and his regiment were engaged in the hard duties of the investment. From the time

he took position in the investing lines till the surrender of the stronghold, he lost about eighty of his officers and men in killed and wounded.

After the victory, Colonel Williamson shared in the second campaign of Jackson, and in the pursuit of Johnson went as far as Brandon, something more than a day's march west of the capital. From this time until after the close of summer, there was rest. The command of Colonel Williamson was now a brigade, which rested from the hard marches, battles, and sieges of the spring and summer, in an encampment not far from the railroad bridge over the Big Black river, a few miles in rear of Vicksburgh. These few weeks of comparative ease and pleasure were followed by a long march and active operations, continuing, with but short intervals of repose, until the end of the war.

Near the middle of September, Colonel Williamson was ordered with his brigade to Memphis. Thence he moved by rail to Corinth, Mississippi, arriving there about the first of October, when General Sherman was preparing to march to the relief of Chattanooga. The division to which Colonel Williamson's brigade was attached was one commanded by General Osterhaus, an officer of approved courage and skill, to whom General Sherman assigned the duty of observing the enemy, and occupying his attention whilst he should proceed with the movement to Chattanooga. General Osterhaus performed this duty in the neighborhood of Cherokee, in northwestern Alabama, where he engaged the enemy in skirmish, affair, and battle for a number of days. On the 21st of October occurred the affair which has been called the battle of Cherokee. General Osterhaus had purposed moving against the enemy early in the morning, but a dense fog prevented the march for several hours. When the troops were put in motion the mist was still sufficient to prevent friends distinguishing each other at a few yards distance. General Osterhaus had not proceeded far, when the advance, which was Colonel Williamson's brigade, consisting of the Fourth, Ninth, Twenty-fifth, Twenty-sixth, Thirtieth, and Thirty-first Iowa regiments (and known as "the Iowa Brigade of the Fifteenth Corps"), suddenly came upon the enemy, and a sharp combat ensued. There was a lively battle of musketry for about an hour, when the rebels retired, having suffered severe losses. The Unionists lost less than one hundred. Among them, however, was Colonel Torrence, Thirtieth Iowa, a brave and capable officer, who fell dead, pierced by many bullets,—the second colonel of that regiment slain by the enemy, Abbott having fallen in the memorable assault of Vicksburgh, at the head of his command. Having driven the enemy to Tuscumbia, Osterhaus counter marched to Eastport, where he crossed the Tennessee and marched thence to Chattanooga. In all these operations Colonel Williamson's command took active, honorable, part,—the most conspicuous part, indeed, of any brigade in the division.

After the long and laborious march through Tennessee, the division of Osterhaus was ordered to report to General Hooker. The maneuvers which resulted in the remarkable series of combats and conflicts on Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, and which together made up what history calls the battle of Chattanooga, had already commenced. Colonel Williamson had made a long march to battle, but he went into the conflict with his gallant brigade far better, doubtless, than if he had come fresh from the bloodless review, with every man well brushed up and every paper collar clean. In the battle of Lookout Mountain, November 24th, and that of Missionary Ridge, the next day, Colonel Williamson's brigade was engaged, but its losses on either day, or perhaps both, were not so great as at the battle of Ringgold, on the 27th, where this command brought victory to the Union forces engaged, at a critical time, when a panic had seized upon many of the troops and thrown them into disordered flight. The steadiness and gallantry of Williamson's Iowa brigade saved the day.

During the following winter, the Fourth Iowa re-enlisted, and had a furlough of four weeks at home. The command was received at the state capital, the General Assembly being then in session, with great heartiness and hospitality. By the 1st of May, it had rejoined the army for the campaign of Atlanta. Colonel Williamson's brigade now consisted of the Fourth, Ninth, Twenty-fifth, Thirtieth, and Thirty-first regiments of Iowa infantry, and it bore honorable part in all that remarkable campaign which resulted in the fall of Atlanta. It was brilliantly conspicuous at the battle of Dallas, May 28th, and at the great engagement of Atlanta, July 22d. At the battle of Dallas, General McPherson closing up to the left in execution of one of General Sherman's orders, was suddenly assailed with the greatest impetuosity by the enemy. The Unionists met the attack with the greatest coolness, having thrown up slight works for their protection, and the ground in front of our lines was strewn with the rebel dead and wounded. But there was a "gap" in the Union lines which the rebels discovered. They poured in in a stream, threatening destruction. It was at this crisis of the battle that Williamson's Iowa brigade rushed to the rescue, and, by a dashing charge, drove the rebels pell-mell from the field, with terrible slaughter. The services of Colonel Williamson's brigade at the great battle of Atlanta were similar. It was about noon of the day of this battle, which had been raging fiercely for several hours, when Stewart's rebel corps, massed in heavy bodies, sallied from Atlanta, and dashingy assailed the Union Fifteenth corps. The attack was at first successful. The rebels broke through the Union lines, and just at this time heavy firing being heard in their rear, the Unionists were thrown into a momentary panic. The firing in rear was explained as an attack upon our trains at Decatur, bravely repulsed by a part of General Dodge's Sixteenth corps; and General Logan, now in command of the Army of the Tennessee, in place of McPherson, slain, rode amongst his troops, shouting "McPherson and revenge!" and stayed the panic. Wood's division, in which was Colonel Williamson's Iowa brigade, was ordered to restore the line and re-take the lost position. This was done in fine style by Colonel Williamson's command, which, by a heroic charge, drove the enemy from the field, re-taking DeGrass's famous battery of twenty-pounder Parrotts, and regaining the ground that had been lost. It was one of the most brilliant achievements in this day of many brilliant achievements. In the remainder of the campaign, in the pursuit of Hood after the fall of Atlanta into the Union hands, in the famous march to the sea, Colonel Williamson and his command continued to perform their duty in camp, march, or battle. At Savannah, Colonel Williamson had command of the division. Here he received a leave of absence, and proceeded by ocean steamer from Hilton Head to New York, and thence home, where, all too late, he received the commission of a brigadier-general of volunteers.

General Williamson had now been in service nearly four years; all the time in active service; always doing what was given him to do, with ability and skill, and, on several particular occasions, so conducting himself and his command as to

make both justly illustrious in American history. By what so ever accident or oversight it happened, it is a plain truth that the long delay in General Williamson's promotion was shameful to the military authorities of the United States. If hereby the colonel of that regiment which, in the words of the major-general commanding the army, had "won immortal honors" at Pea Ridge, and before the close of 1862 had won "First" for its escutcheon by unparalleled heroism in one of the fiercest battles of the war, and had afterwards been scarcely less conspicuous on occasions of imminent danger and of vital moment,—if hereby General Williamson had been made splenetic and complaining, the fault would not have been his. If his amiability became somewhat ruffled, it is to his credit that his dispositions were not permanently soured.

The last military performance of General Williamson to which reference is necessary to be made in this sketch, was an address to his old regiment, when it was about to be mustered out of service,—a document in which he referred with modesty to himself, and with gratified pride to the record of his old command. This was written from Headquarters, District of St. Louis, and bore date July 6, 1865. The Republican State Convention of Iowa which convened at Des Moines, February 22, 1864, for the purpose of choosing delegates to the national convention of that political organization, had elected General Williamson chairman of the delegation. At the time of the sitting of the convention, however, he was engaged in the campaign of Atlanta, and, though offered leave of absence, declined to part with his command. At the next convention of his party in the State for a similar purpose, he was again elected for the position, and actually was chairman of the Iowa delegation at the Chicago Convention, which put in nomination General Grant and Mr. Colfax for the chief offices of the nation. There was animated contest in that body upon the nomination of a candidate for the vice presidency. Iowa had divided its vote for two or three ballots, but, before the vote of the convention on the ballot last taken had been announced, General Williamson argued, and announced that "the State of Iowa cast its sixteen votes for Schuyler Colfax, of Indiana," thus taking the lead in the movement which gave the nomination to that distinguished gentleman; for other states followed the example of Iowa, and Mr. Colfax was soon nominated in a furore of excitement.

Since his disconnection with the army, General Williamson has been engaged in the real estate business at Des Moines, with the exception of a few months passed in Texas, and a shorter period on the line of the Union Pacific railroad, for which he selected the sites for certain depots and towns, but at a salary which compelled him to resign the position.

General Williamson, though reserved with strangers, and cold in manners to those with whom he is not well acquainted, is exceedingly genial with his friends. He is whole-souled and generous. He does not always make himself as agreeable

as he can but can be extremely pleasing when he wants to, or feels it to be his duty. He is just and honorable in his professional and business transactions. A radical republican, he is liberal in his estimates of those whose political views are opposed to his own. As a soldier, his record is that of a gallant officer from the beginning to the end of the war. There were many who received more of rank and emolument than he; there were few if any, who conferred more honor upon the state or the Union cause than General James A. Williamson.