The First to Fall

By Jerry R. Fry

General Nathaniel Lyon was the first Union general killed in battle during the Civil War, where he is often credited with "Saving Missouri for the Union." **General Robert S. Garnett** is remembered as the first Confederate general killed in battle. While both share the distinction of being the first general officers to fall in combat on their respective sides of the conflict, there are many other coincidental parallels in their lives and deaths.

Parallel Beginnings

Both men were the offspring of historically significant military families. An early biographer of Lyon wrote the following:

> Gen. Lyon sprang from a worthy, brave, and patriotic ancestry. Ephraim Lyon, his grandfather, was elected first lieutenant of the Ashford, Connecticut, militia company that served in the War of Independence and later became a successful farmer and lawyer.

On the grounds of the Connecticut state capital in Hartford is a statue of Lyon's great uncle on his mother's side, Colonel Thomas Knolton. He served in the French and Indian War and in the American Revolution until he was killed in the Battle of Harlem Heights, New York. In his General Orders the next day, General George Washington paid tribute to "the gallant and brave Colonel Knowlton, who would have been an honor to any country."

Garnett was the offspring of a famous French officer. General Pierre Aubry de Gouges (1766 - 1802) was an officer in the royal guard at the court of Louis XVI, military adjutant general, and then chef de brigade in Guiana.

Military Experience

Both Garnett and Lyon were graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point and members of the Class of 1841. Lyon's class standing was 11th out of 52 cadets. This put him in a position to select a non-combat arms branch in which to serve, as most other high-ranking graduates did. However, Lyon surprised everyone by choosing the infantry branch and assignment to the 2nd Infantry Regiment. This choice guaranteed he would be going to Florida to join that unit, which was then participating in the 2nd Seminole War. Garnett graduated 27th, selected the artillery branch, and was assigned to upper New York near the Canadian border.

After graduation, Lyon served as an infantry rifle company commander in the 2nd Infantry Regiment, a wartime rarity for a new second lieutenant. That assignment was possible because of an officer shortage caused by the large number of officers who resigned their commissions to avoid service in Florida. Garnett eventually served in Florida seven years later as a staff officer in the 7th Infantry Regiment.

Both fought in the Mexican War. Garnett served as aide-de-camp to Major General Zachary Taylor. Lyon remained in direct field service as an infantry rifle company commander and participated in all of the major battles on the road to Mexico City. He was wounded during the final assault on Mexico City.

After the Mexican War, both served in California during the years of America's expanding western frontier. Both were involved in protecting settlers from Indians in California and the Oregon Territory. Lyon was later assigned to Kansas, where he also helped protect settlers and friendly Indians against the more aggressive Plains Indians. Finally, he helped maintain law and order during the pre-Civil War "Bleeding Kansas" border war between Kansas and Missouri.

Confederate General Robert S. Garnett

Robert S. Garnett (1819-1861)
Civil War Glass Negatives - Library of Congress

When Virginia joined the Confederacy, Garnett resigned his U.S. Army commission and accepted command in northwestern Virginia. An officer with an impressive resume, he was assigned to command a division in the rugged terrain of western Virginia, an area of divided loyalties. A region that eventually seceded from Virginia and became West Virginia.

Outmaneuvered by Union forces under Major General George B. McClellan during the Rich Mountain campaign, Garnett ordered a withdrawal through the Laurel Mountains of what is now West Virginia. Retreating with a force of roughly 5,000 men, he was pursued by an enemy force numbering as high as 20,000 under McClellan.

On July 13, 1861, while personally directing his rear guard at Corrick's Ford, Garnett was shot and killed. His body was recovered by Union troops, treated respectfully, and returned under a flag of truce. He was first buried in Maryland before later being re-interred at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

According to the Southern Civil War diarist Mary Boykin Chestnut, Garnett had fulfilled his own prophecy by dying. She wrote that Garnett was:

> ...proud, reserved and morose, as cold as an icicle to all... frozen and stern and isolated.... The night before he left Richman [Virginia], he said in his quiet way: 'They have not given me an adequate force. I can do nothing. They have sent me to my death.' It was acknowledged that he threw away his life.

Confederate Brigadier General Edward Porter Alexander wrote the following of Garnett:

> ...the impression I formed of him as a soldier is not lower than that of any other officer I have ever known. In everyone else, I have seen some mere human traits, but in Garnett, every trait was purely military. Had he lived, I am sure he would have been one of our great generals.

Union General Nathaniel Lyon

On the same day Garnett was killed, nine hundred miles to the west in Missouri, Lyon arrived in Springfield, ten miles from where he would become the first Union general killed during the war at the Battle of Wilson's Creek on August 10, 1861.

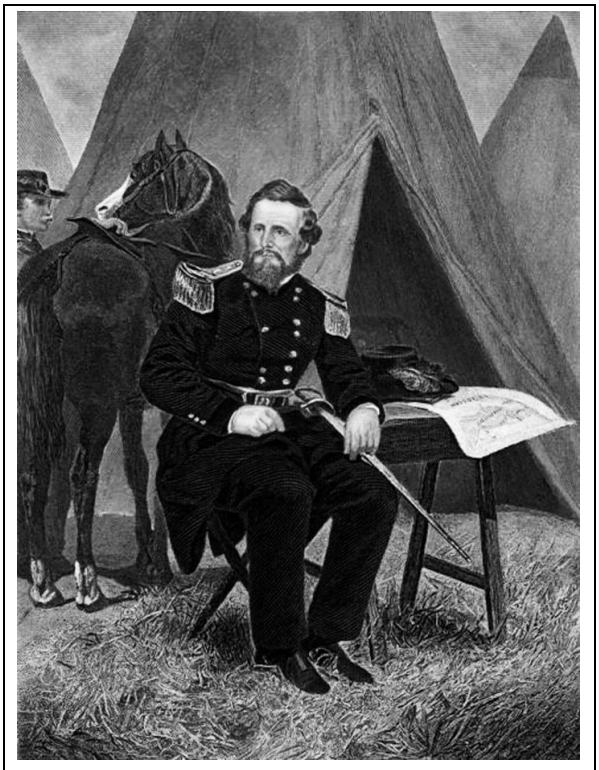
Lyon had a style entirely different from Garnett. Intense, energetic, and fiercely loyal to the Union, Lyon was known more for action than ceremony. In 1861, Missouri's allegiance hung in the balance. Lyon moved aggressively to secure the state for the Union, a decision with immense strategic consequences.

Like Garnett in the Laurel Mountains of Virginia, Lyon found himself on the edge of the Missouri Ozarks facing reports of an enemy force as large as 20,000 men, four times the size of his own 5,000-man command. He understood immediately that retreat was his only real option. A cavalry-heavy foe would overtake him quickly, forcing battle on ground he had not chosen and where his infantry would be at a severe disadvantage. Realizing that a clean withdrawal in the face of such overwhelming mounted strength was impossible, Lyon made the only decision he believed could save his army: he attacked, hoping to hit the

enemy hard enough to cripple their pursuit and buy his men the time they needed to escape.

While Lyon would not have been aware of Napoleon's Maxims, Napoleon would have supported his decision.

> **Napoleon's Maxim VI:** However skillful the maneuver in a retreat, it will always weaken an army's morale, because the chances of success are transferred to the enemy. Besides, retreat always costs more men and materiel than the bloodiest engagements; with this difference, that in a battle the enemy's losses are nearly equal to your own, whereas in a retreat the loss is on your side only.



Nathaniel Lyon (1818-1861)
The State Historical Society of Missouri, Photograph Collection (020022)

Though called the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Lyon's attack was more like a spoiling raid intended to inflict maximum damage on the enemy with a surprise first-light assault on their encampment, before pulling back to their starting point, and commencing their retreat. Surprisingly, except for a few cases of bad luck, what was only intended to be a raid almost turned into a victory.

Even though Lyon was killed while leading his troops from the front (an absolute necessity when commanding untrained volunteers who required the encouragement of visible leaders), his troops were eventually able to withdraw from the enemy encampment after the attack, return to their previous encampments around Springfield, and then depart the next morning. They then traveled 120

miles through the Ozark Mountains to their supply base at Rolla, unhurried and unmolested.

As his troops were withdrawing, Lyon's remains, which had been wrapped in a blanket, were accidentally left behind. When they were later discovered by the enemy, they were treated respectfully and returned to Springfield under a flag of truce.

Thomas W. Knox, a reporter with the Union forces, wrote the following about Lyon's remains.

> It has been stated and contradicted several times that General Lyon's body was left at Springfield. As late as midnight on the 10th [evening of the battle], only three hours before the column started for Rolla, I saw the body at headquarters and was told that it had been decided to take it with the command. Later that night, it was decided to bury it in Springfield, and it was accordingly interred on Col. Phelps's farm. The interment had not yet taken place when the rebels reached the town, but their officers showed every courtesy to Mrs. Phelps and others who attended the burial.
>
> Several of the General's friends [and family members] have arrived here [in St. Louis] and are to proceed to Springfield with a military escort, under a flag of truce, to disinter the body and take it East for permanent burial [in his family cemetery plot in Eastford, Connecticut].

It is not known if Mary Boykin or Confederate General Alexander commented on Lyon's death, as they did Garnett, but William Tecumseh Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant did comment. Sherman said he not only knew Lyon in Saint Louis before the war, but he also knew him at West Point; they saw each other in both Florida and California. In a speech to a joint session of the Missouri legislature after the war, Sherman had the following to say about Lyon.

> There were many features in Lyon's character that very few understood. He was not only a courageous man but a very gentle man. A kindly man, at a time when his mind was absorbed with great topics, he was blind, of course, to the commonplace events of daily life; but when not thus absorbed, there was none more gentle or kind to his fellow officers, or more beloved by his men. Thus, the shock of war that made plain the destiny of the country brought out the strong features in his character, and you in Missouri saw him amid the tempest and whirlwind of war, when he was pulled hither and thither, and when he only kept in view one single mark, a mark which he thought led to the safety and honor of his country. I wish he could have lived, for he possessed many of those qualities which were needed in the first two or three years of the war, and his death imposed on the nation a penalty numbered by thousands on thousands of lives and millions on millions of dollars.

President Grant, reminiscing about the early days of the war, was overheard by a reporter to say, “That if Lyon had lived, he would have risen to the top of the military hierarchy.”

Congress later issued the following resolution concerning Lyon.

> The Congress deems it just and proper to enter upon its records a recognition of the eminent and patriotic services of the late Brigadier General Lyon. The country to whose service he devoted his life will guard and preserve his fame as a part of its own glory.

Lyon’s death not only made him the first Union general killed in battle but also made him one of the North’s earliest war heroes.

Shared Fate, Different Memory

The parallels between Garnett and Lyon are extraordinary:

• Both were West Point classmates, Class of 1841.
• Both served in Florida, Mexico, and California.
• Both commanded outnumbered forces of roughly 5,000 against enemies reported to be as high as 20,000 strong.
• Both were engaged in operations connected to retreats when killed.
• Both died in or around mountainous terrain—Garnett in the Laurel Mountains of West Virginia; Lyon the Ozark Mountains of Missouri.
• Both bodies were recovered and honorably returned by the enemy.
• Both were buried, then later re-interred and buried elsewhere.
• Both died in 1861, within months of the war's opening, and were the first general officers killed in battle on their respective sides.

Yet history remembered them differently. Lyon retained a stronger regional legacy, especially in Missouri, where his role in preserving the state for the Union remains recognized. Nationally, however, even Lyon has largely slipped from popular memory. Garnett is still more obscure, remembered chiefly by specialists and students of the war's opening campaigns.

Two Careers, One Final Parallel

War often confers fame unevenly. Lyon earned a heroic reputation for his boldness, which shaped Missouri's fate. Garnett died before he could recover from early setbacks and reveal his full potential.

Still, their intertwined stories remain one of the Civil War's most remarkable coincidences: two classmates, two career officers, and the first general officer to lose his life in battle on either side.

In death, Robert S. Garnett and Nathaniel Lyon became linked forever, but both have been lost to the popular history of the Civil War.