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## “I am always thinking first of you:” The Chamberlains in Love and War

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# “I am always thinking first of you:” The Chamberlains in Love and War

## **Abstract**

Soldier. Professor. Hero. Braggart. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain has been called many things by many people. Regardless of whether one loves or despises him, Chamberlain and his role in the American Civil War never fail to evoke intense emotion. While books, movies, and the occasional painting have all immortalized Chamberlain the soldier, rare is the occasion to observe Chamberlain the husband. In honor of Valentine’s Day, I bring you the story of the Chamberlains; a story of romance and rebuttal, of peace and conflict, of injury both physical and emotional and, in the end, a deep, abiding love. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, 20th Maine

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | History | Military History | United States History | Women's History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### “I am always thinking first of you:” The Chamberlains in Love and War

February 14, 2015

*by Bryan Caswell '15*

Soldier. Professor. Hero. Braggart. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain has been called many things by many people. Regardless of whether one loves or despises him, Chamberlain and his role in the American Civil War never fail to evoke intense emotion. While books, movies, and the occasional painting have all immortalized Chamberlain the soldier, rare is the occasion to observe Chamberlain the husband. In honor of Valentine's Day, I bring you the story of the Chamberlains; a story of romance and rebuttal, of peace and conflict, of injury both physical and emotional and, in the end, a deep, abiding love.



Fanny Chamberlain.  
Wikimedia Commons.

Joshua Chamberlain was twenty-seven years old when he married Francis Caroline Adams. Three years his senior, 'Fanny' was the foster daughter of the pastor of First Parish Church in Brunswick, Maine, where all students of Bowdoin College were required to attend service. The two most likely met soon after Chamberlain arrived at Bowdoin in 1848, though their courtship would not begin in earnest until 1852. By this time Fanny had accepted a teaching position at a private girls' school in Georgia, and so the bulk of their early intimacy was conducted through written correspondence. A reserved young woman, Fanny seems to have been rather hesitant in the expression of her affections, regularly testing Chamberlain with, among other things, musings on the value of a platonic relationship. As a hot-blooded young college student, Chamberlain responded by expressing his affections for Fanny in what can only be described as Victorian erotica, detailing his own sexual

fantasies and what he looked forward to upon their reunion. Fanny's homecoming in 1855 brought with it their marriage, an arrangement pursued by Fanny with dogged determination.

The outbreak of the Civil War brought with it irrevocable upheaval. Chamberlain joined the 20th Maine in 1862, leaving behind him two young children and a not-wholly-supportive wife. Fanny's exact opinions on her husband's new role as an officer are unclear. Some of his biographers have claimed that she did not agree with his decision, while others claim that she was as supportive as a wife was expected to be of her husband going off to war. The correspondence which had begun their relationship now resumed, with Chamberlain describing camp life and battle in equal parts fascination, admiration, and revulsion. Chamberlain made clear that his love for Fanny was never far from his thoughts, addressing her as "my precious wife" and writing on 24 April 1863 that "I am always thinking first of you." While 2 July 1863 would bring Chamberlain everlasting fame, June 1864 would bestow upon the Chamberlains terrible misfortune. Leading his brigade in an early assault against Confederate works outside Petersburg, Virginia, Chamberlain was shot through both hips in a wound all thought would prove mortal. Though Chamberlain would survive, the surgery that saved his life most likely rendered him both incontinent and impotent for the rest of his life.



"General Joshua L. Chamberlain."  
Wikimedia Commons.

As so many others did, Chamberlain returned home from the war a changed man. Gone was the fire of his courtship of Fanny; it had been replaced with a cool distance and a longing for the heroic deeds left behind with the stroke of the pen on his mustering out papers in 1865. As Chamberlain later explained to Fanny, "You know I have had great and deep experiences – and some of my life has gone into the history of the days that are past." Determined to relive the success he had achieved in the army, Chamberlain threw himself into all manner of tasks, becoming president of Bowdoin College and, from 1866 to 1870, governor of Maine. Bereft of her husband's attention, Fanny began to behave erratically, traveling away from her

husband and children for extended periods. Then, scandal. In November of 1868, Chamberlain got wind that Fanny had been telling friends of the family that Chamberlain regularly beat her and that she intended to sue for divorce. While domestic abuse was not uncommon among Civil War soldiers attempting to rejoin society, the only evidence of Fanny's mistreatment in this case is the single letter sent to her by her husband, admonishing her for spreading unsubstantiated rumors and darkly threatening that if she did not "stop this at once, it will end in hell."

Regardless of the realities of the situation, a period of separation began between the Chamberlains. Occupied with his gubernatorial duties and then his role as president of Bowdoin, Chamberlain engrossed himself in his work while Fanny traveled and visited family members. Then, around 1880, the love that had so flourished at the opening of their marriage seems to have reasserted itself. Joshua and Fanny began to reconcile, slowly at first, but within five years had rekindled their old flame and despite the complications of his wounds,

Chamberlain even began to display a bit of his youthful ardor again. As they both entered old age and their health began to fail, the Chamberlains increasingly looked to each other for support. Never possessed of the same youthful vigor as her husband, Fanny's well-being worsened with increasing rapidity until, in October of 1905, she died. Chamberlain was devastated by her loss, and perhaps the most poignant expression of their love can be seen in a letter he wrote to Fanny on or very near to the day of her death, on which was written "It will be best to destroy this." Pen shaking and eyes clouded with tears, Chamberlain wrote what may have been his final farewell to his beloved wife:

*Fannie – may God bless you – do not think that I can ever forget in my darkest hours the gleam of white light you have shed upon my soul. May God bless you as He blessed me when I was suffered to know you. . . . Good bye Fannie – I will be patient till you are gone & the pall shall fall on me, alone with buried memories.*

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