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Sons of our Founding Fathers: Men of Renowned Lineage and the American Civil War

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Abstract

Political dynasties have always occupied a strange spot within the democracy of the United States. Though the argument is frequently made that the circumstances of one's birth are irrelevant, and that it is only the ability of a person which propels them through society, it is foolish to ignore the effects that a name can have how a person is judged by society—for better or worse. In the decades following the Revolution, when the descendants and fortunes of the Founding Fathers were still easily identifiable, this was especially true. When you possessed a name like Washington or Adams while their memory was still fresh in the young nation, you stood in the shadow of heroes. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Sons of our Founding Fathers: Men of Renowned Lineage and the American Civil War

March 23, 2016

By Ryan Nadeau '16

Political dynasties have always occupied a strange spot within the democracy of the United States. Though the argument is frequently made that the circumstances of one's birth are irrelevant, and that it is only the ability of a person which propels them through society, it is foolish to ignore the effects that a name can have how a person is judged by society—for better or worse. In the decades following the Revolution, when the descendants and fortunes of the Founding Fathers were still easily identifiable, this was especially true. When you possessed a name like Washington or Adams while their memory was still fresh in the young nation, you stood in the shadow of heroes.

Many descendants of the founders were thus member of what is often viewed as an aristocratic class in mid-19th century society. They lived on the plantations of the South and in the big cities of the North, inheritors of their ancestors' wealth, social status, and political respect. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, they could have easily chosen to watch the conflict play out from the sidelines. After all, they frequently possessed the means to either avoid the draft or find no benefit to service altogether. Patriotism, though, motivated them beyond any economic interest: the desire to save their country from an existential threat. With the blood of revolutionary heroes flowing through their veins, and possessing perhaps a democratic equivalent of *noblesse oblige*, the decedents of the founders went to war. An illustrious name, however, would not necessarily grant them great success on the battlefield, as they soon discovered.

For instance, brothers Colonel Paul J. Revere and Dr. Edward Revere, grandsons of Paul Revere, found themselves laid low by the great equalizer of man: death. Both were well-educated Harvard men and inheritors of their industrious grandfather's wealth. Edward, naturally, earned his degree in medicine, and was the proprietor of a successful private practice upon the outbreak of the war. Paul, meanwhile, was involved in numerous business ventures. At the start of the war, he immediately enrolled in a gentleman's drill club led by a French fencing instructor when it seemed he could be of service to the country. In short order, Paul was appointed Major of the newly formed 20th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, a regiment made up in large part of Harvard elites. Edward joined as well, though as a doctor rather than a soldier.



A depiction of the Battle of Ball's Bluff, where both Revere brothers were taken prisoner. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

Their careers started poorly. Both were taken prisoner by the Confederacy at the disastrous Battle of Ball's Bluff in October 1861, and remained in captivity until returned as part of a prisoner exchange in May 1862. Edward did not have a long career beyond that point, for he was killed during the Battle of Antietam in September. While many doctors worked behind the lines in field hospitals, Edward preferred to work on the front. Unfortunately, this put him in the line of fire. In April 1863, Paul was promoted to the colonelcy of his regiment. He only held it for just over a month before falling at Gettysburg. During the second day of fighting he was struck in the throat by a shell fragment, and lingered for two days before dying.

Not all descendants featured in such dramatic stories. Major General Schuyler Hamilton, the grandson of Alexander Hamilton, neither died dramatically nor played a hugely significant role in the fighting. A West Point graduate and a veteran of the Mexican-American War, during which he served as aide-de-camp to Winfield Scott, Schuyler was only thirty-nine in 1861. He did not, however, possess a military commission, for he had resigned it due to ill health six years earlier. Upon the outbreak of war, he left his newly adopted life of farming and business to enlist as a private in the 7th New York Militia, a regiment made up disproportionately of members of the social elite. Among the 7th, Schuyler rocketed through the military hierarchy owing to his previous experience and social connections. Not only was he Hamilton's grandson, after all, but he was the son-in-law to the future General-in-Chief, Henry Halleck. His crowning moment of achievement during the war came during the Battle for Island Number Ten, in early 1862. Then a brigadier general commanding the first division of the Army of the Mississippi, he suggested cutting a canal that allowed Union forces to surround and capture the island. In successfully capturing the island, the army had gained a foothold on the Mississippi from which they could launch attacks down river. Though his service earned him a final promotion to Major General, illness once again forced him out of the army early in 1863. He would have no further part to play.



Major General Schuyler Hamilton. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

Illness also cut short the rather unique career of Colonel Richard Henry Rush. The grandson of Dr. Benjamin Rush, and son of the cabinet officer and diplomat Richard Rush. A member of Philadelphia's social elite, Richard Henry was a graduate of the legendary West Point class of 1846. Like Hamilton, Rush was a Mexican War veteran without commission upon the outbreak of war. He immediately volunteered for service, however, and was put in command of the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry, or the 70th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers. His regiment quickly became affectionately known as "Rush's Lancers," as they were outfitted for battle on General McClellan's suggestion with nine-foot Austrian-style lances. This was much to the amusement of the army's other cavalry regiments, who viewed the lancers as over-decorated and anachronistic. Though the lancers put on several dazzling military parades and demonstrations, their military record under Rush's command was hardly noteworthy. By late 1863, both Rush

and the lances were gone—Rush retired due to illness, and the lances due to inefficacy. Unlike Hamilton, Rush did not completely leave military life, instead receiving appointments to several positions within the army bureaucracy. Despite later recovering and seeking reinstatement into command, however, he never returned to the field.



A photograph taken of the 6th PA Cavalry by Matthew Brady. Note their lances! Photograph via the National Archives.

To accuse these men of having obtained their rank exclusively due to their illustrious names would do each of them a grave disservice. After all, all four chose to fight for the Union: nobody had to force them. Much like our dynastic politicians of today, however, the suspicion exists that the name has something to do with it—and the names we deal with today aren't even those of the nation's founders. Forces such as illness and a well-aimed shot know no dynasty, however: if their names helped them attain wartime ranks, their heritage did not help them keep their titles. There is something heartening, however, knowing that in a time of destructive disunity between the states, the descendants of the Founding Fathers still carried on their family legacy by fighting to preserve what their grandfathers had built. Perhaps the men who fought under the descendants thought this as well. Dynasties are funny in that way: on the one hand, they seem aristocratic and anachronistic, like the lances wielded by Rush's division, bound to only get in the way. On the other, names can be inspiring, for certain names transcend the individual to whom they were originally attached.

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