

This Day in History... February 14, 1824

Birth of Winfield Scott Hancock

Winfield Scott Hancock was born on February 14, 1824, in Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania, and would grow into one of the Union Army's most respected battlefield commanders. Known later as "Hancock the Superb," he built his reputation not through legend, but through steady leadership in some of the Civil War's hardest fights.

Named after famed War of 1812 general Winfield Scott, Hancock attended Norristown Academy and local public schools before receiving a nomination to the US Military Academy at West Point. He graduated in 1844, finishing 18th in a class of 25, and was commissioned into the 6th US Infantry.

Early in his career, Hancock served in Indian Territory and worked as a recruiting officer. His first combat came during the Mexican-American War, where he served under General Winfield Scott. He fought at battles including Contreras and Churubusco and was wounded at Churubusco in 1847. The injury kept him from participating in later operations toward Mexico City, something he reportedly regretted.

After the war, Hancock spent years in routine army assignments across the country, including Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas, Florida during the Third Seminole War, and California. He married Almira Russell in 1850, and the couple had two children. These years helped shape him into a professional officer known for discipline and calm judgment.

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, Hancock was stationed in California but returned east and was appointed a brigadier general in the Army of the Potomac. During the 1862 Peninsula Campaign, he led a successful counterattack at the Battle of Williamsburg. General George McClellan praised his performance, leading to the nickname "Hancock the Superb."

Over the next year, Hancock fought in several major battles, including Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. He was wounded more than once but gained a reputation for staying calm under fire and maintaining control of his troops in difficult situations.

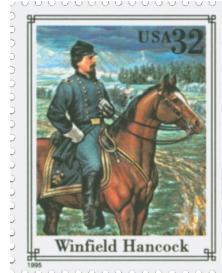
In May 1863, Hancock took command of II Corps of the Army of the Potomac, a position he held for most of the rest of the war. His most important service came two months later at the Battle of Gettysburg. On the first day, after Union General John Reynolds was killed, Hancock helped organize defenses on high ground at Cemetery Hill. His decisions helped shape the Union defensive position for the rest of the battle.

On July 3, 1863, Hancock's corps held the Union center and absorbed the main impact of Pickett's Charge. During the attack, Hancock rode along the line directing the defense and was severely wounded when a bullet struck his saddle and injured his thigh. Despite the injury, his leadership helped repel the Confederate assault.

After months of recovery, Hancock returned to command during Ulysses S. Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign, fighting in the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and the Siege of Petersburg. However, lingering effects from his Gettysburg wound contributed to his decision to step down from field command later in 1864.

Following the war, Hancock continued serving as a major general. During Reconstruction, his policies in Louisiana and Texas emphasized civilian authority. This stance made him popular with Democrats, who nominated him for president in 1880. He narrowly lost to Republican James A. Garfield before returning to military service.

Winfield Scott Hancock died on February 9, 1886, at Governors Island, New York, after more than four decades in uniform. Today, he is remembered as a capable, steady commander whose leadership helped hold the Union line at critical moments of the Civil War.



Hancock had an identical twin brother named Hilary Baker Hancock.



Hancock served under his namesake, General Winfield Scott, during the Mexican-American War.



At Gettysburg, Winfield Scott Hancock helped secure the Union defensive position and led troops at Cemetery Ridge during Pickett's Charge, where he was severely wounded while directing the battle.

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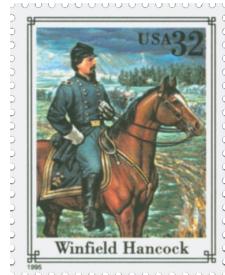
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