

PARMENAS TAYLOR TURNLEY

No. 1311. CLASS OF 1846.

Died, April 22, 1911, at Highland Park, Ill., aged 89



PARMENAS TAYLOR TURNLEY was born September 6, 1821, in Dandridge, Tennessee. He came of patriotic lineage. His paternal ancestors came from England to Virginia in 1692 and bore their part in the vicissitudes of that colony. When the War of the Revolution broke out, the Turnleys were on the right side, and the name is found on many regimental rolls of the Continental Army.

George Turnley, his grandfather, served throughout the Revolutionary War, beginning his service when but fourteen. On the maternal side, his grandfather, Parmenas Taylor, was of English parentage, the family having settled in North Carolina at an early date. Parmenas Taylor was twenty-three at the time of the Declaration of Independence. He served in the Continental Army first as Captain and then as Major under Colonel William White of Berks County, North Carolina, whose daughter Taylor subsequently married. John Cunnyngnam Turnley, the father of Parmenas Taylor Turnley, was with Jackson at New Orleans, at eighteen years of age.

It was but natural, therefore, that John C. Turnley, the father, should dedicate his son to a military life, the door to which was the West Point Military Academy. But this mental dedication was about all that was done till the young man was nineteen years of age. The father owned a large farm on the French Broad River, to which he had added a saw-mill and grist-mill; the son had become very expert in these two industries; in fact, he was general manager of all, and chief laborer by turns in each, while book learning was a negligible asset.

The father had in 1840 filed an application for the appointment of his son to fill the first vacancy that might occur in his district; the application had been honored and now, June 1st, 1841, the appointment was at hand. Here were difficulties to daunt a wiser man. The time was short; he was ordered to present himself at West Point by July 1st to take the examination. The distance was great -- 800 miles, mostly by stage coach; specie money was scarce at that time over the entire state, and especially so with the elder Turnley, but the father said the son must go if he walked, and Turnley began his military career by obedience.

Thus it was that Parmenas Taylor Turnley, in homespun clothes, and with thirty-six dollars in his pocket, set out from his home in Tennessee to learn soldiering at West Point Military Academy. By walking and riding alternately he reached West Point in time to take his examination in July, and had five dollars left to turn over, according to regulation, to the treasurer at the Academy.

So far he had but little time to consider any requisite for admission other than the ability to get there. The result of his physical examination was highly satisfactory; but when he found himself lined up in the section room with other candidates, most of whom were graduates of academies or grammar schools, he began to realize his disadvantage. His practical good sense however did not desert him.

He had traveled too far and had overcome too many difficulties to be found deficient and sent home now. He knew that his father, if sufficient time were given for arranging it, could furnish money to keep him for a year in a preparatory school, and could also secure an appointment from the state at large if the one he held should be forfeited, for the elder Turnley had always more influence in the state than ready money in the pocket. With these possibilities in view, he sought out the post chaplain, Professor M. P. Parks, and laid the facts before that gentleman who was himself a West Point graduate. The situation was not an encouraging one; eight hundred miles from home without a friend or acquaintance, without money, knowing he could not pass the required

examination, and not willing to be found deficient! This good man interested himself in the farmer boy; how, or through whom Turnley never knew, but his appointment was held over for a year, and instead of going into the section room to be found deficient, he went to Mr. Kinsley's preparatory school where, in a year, he attained such proficiency in books that he was able to enter the Academy in September, 1842.

Among the men who graduated in that class were Thos. J. Jackson (Stonewall), Whistler, the artist, George B. McClellan, Henry A. Ehninger and Francis T. Bryan. The two latter being now the only survivors of the class which originally numbered fifty-nine men.

Upon graduation in 1846 Turnley was made Second Lieutenant in the Second Infantry and ordered with his Regiment to report to General Taylor, then at Monterey, Mexico. General Taylor sent the Regiment on to General Scott who was about to embark for Vera Cruz. Turnley's account, told in his "Narrative from Diary," shows how General Scott, with limited facilities and under the guns of Vera Cruz, landed 11,000 troops without the loss of a man. It is an interesting story to the civilian who would know the intricacies of campaigning, and the careful attention to details that constitute the genius of success in war no less than in industrial life. The bravest man may die in vain if in preparation of details, someone has blundered. Turnley thought Scott's genius for minute detail has never been duly appreciated.

Turnley with his regiment participated in the siege of Vera Cruz, March 12 to 27, 1847. Of that siege he writes:

"I was on picket guard on the line or investment twenty days and nights in the sand hills, a bitter norther blowing, and I had not so much as an overcoat."

The First Infantry, to which Turnley then belonged, was left to occupy Vera Cruz after its surrender, March 29, 1847, and Turnley, weak from fatigue and exposure, developed a serious case of mumps and measles. As between the siege and the measles, Turnley expressed himself strongly in favor of the former.

While in garrison at Vera Cruz, Turnley was detailed to proceed to Cincinnati to conduct 800 recruits there assembled to the seat of war. He reached Vera Cruz with the 800 recruits by the first of October, 1847. Yellow fever had been in Vera Cruz all summer but had subsided by October. Turnley, however, was seized immediately on his arrival, though not one of his 800 recruits suffered.

In January, 1848, he was ordered to move with his 800 recruits as part escort to a supply train destined for the City of Mexico. The recruits were to be distributed at the various posts on the way according to their several assignments; the last recruits being delivered at the City of Mexico, January 23, 1848, after which he joined his regiment and company then in the City of Mexico. After a short rest his regiment was ordered to Cuernavaca, about ninety miles from the City of Mexico, to protect the Haciendas from the uprising of the Peons. In this and similar expeditions he was occupied till the United States Army was finally withdrawn from Mexico.

The practical efficiency acquired by the farmer boy on the French Broad River, pre-eminently fitted him for the subsequent work of opening roads and building military posts on the Texas frontier, a fitness which his superior officers were quick to see and utilize. He was on such duty with headquarters at Austin, Texas, 1848 to 1849; he was detailed as Quartermaster and Commissary to build a fort on the Rio Grande at a point so entirely unfit that work was suspended on Turnley's advice; couriers were sent to the commanding officer at Austin, who carried a request to allow a point to be selected further up the river, resulting in establishment of Fort Duncan (Eagle Pass) in 1850.

In April, 1850, he was detailed as Quartermaster to accompany a supply train for El Paso, Captain Sprague, commander; the distance was 630 miles. All went well for the first four days –

"When," quoting from his own account, "we were confronted with a situation appalling to the other officers who had not seen as much of the Texas border as I had. A pioneer party who had been sent ahead with Mexican guides, returned to tell us that not a drop of water was to be had from the Pecos River, where we were camped,

for a hundred miles. A beautiful prairie lay before us with abundant grass, but no water. Kegs of water could be suspended under the wagons for the four hundred men, but it was impossible to transport water for our 3,000 animals. The officers looked blue and had a right to; they naturally looked to the Quartermaster and Commissary. I was almost the youngest officer of the company, but the oldest in pioneer service. In answer to Major John T. Sprague's question, 'What shall we do?' I said, 'Well, the grass grows; and the Indians will not consider the water question when they lie in ambush for us. By the way, let us have a little talk with some of those Red Fellows, some of them are nearly always in the train. Sure enough an Indian had joined the train the day before. A Mexican half-breed, who spoke Comanche and English indifferently well, acted as interpreter.

I asked him how the Indians crossed the waterless prairie with their horses. He answered that heavy dew fell every night and if the animals grazed on the wet grass every morning they would not need water for many days. So 'Lo, the poor Indian'¹ had solved a problem which we with West Point mathematics and military tactics had failed to see through. We cut up our train into sections; starting each section eight miles before the one next following; driving till midnight, allowing the animals to graze till sunrise, and thus crossed safely over."

Turnley was then detailed to open a road from Fort Duncan to Laredo, 125 miles, and build a hospital and store houses on the American side. This post was called Fort McIntosh. When he had accomplished this work he was ordered to accompany Colonel Bainbridge as Quartermaster and Commissary to establish a military post 200 miles southwest of San Antonio, which was named Fort Terrett.

We have gone more into detail in recounting this Mexican and Texas service, because many look upon the Mexican War and subsequent reclamation of western Texas as a mere summer outing, and it is well known that the heroism of our soldiers and fidelity to duty under great hardships in this war have never been duly recognized. Now that the last remnants of that brave army are falling into the ranks of the silent majority, it is fit to take a hasty retrospect of the strenuous labors which they performed so faithfully. After six years on the Texas border Turnley was detailed to recruiting service with headquarters at Chicago in the fall of 1852.

In the spring of 1855 he was sent up the Missouri River as Chief Quartermaster to an expedition that was to establish winter quarters for General Harney, then holding the Sioux Indians in check. Fort Pierre and Fort Randall were thus built on the upper Missouri. In 1857 he was sent as Chief Quartermaster in an expedition commanded by Albert Sydney Johnston against the Mormons and Indians in Utah.

In 1860 he returned to the states on sick leave. Fourteen years of continuous service in inclement latitudes had so broken his health that he remained a partial invalid for many years after. However, he returned to duty, and was engaged in repairing railroads between Harrisburg, Pa., and Baltimore, 1861; Chief Quartermaster at Perryville, Md., 1861; Chief Quartermaster at Annapolis, May, 1861; Chief Quartermaster at St. Louis, July to December, 1861; Chief Quartermaster at Cairo, December, 1861 to July, 1862; at Memphis, Tenn., July to September, 1862; on sick leave of absence with permission to go beyond the seas, September 27, 1862, to retirement from active service September 17, 1863, "For disability resulting from long and faithful services, and disease contracted in the line of duty."

He was afterward sent to straighten out some entanglements in the Quartermaster's Department in the District of the Plains, headquarters at Denver, Colo., March to December, 1865. Resigned December 31, 1865.

This completes the military history of a man who was ever at his post, and never found shirking his responsibilities.

On his retirement from active duty he, with his wife, went to Europe with the intention of remaining till rest and change of scene had restored his shattered health. He was called home, however, early in 1863, to succor his aged father and five sisters with their families, whom the ravages of war had reduced to great destitution. They were all of the South and shared in its distresses. His father, John C. Turnley, seventy years old, and practically blind, the same who twenty-one years before had so loyally offered his son to the United States

service, was now in a United States prison in Knoxville, Tenn., his native state. Such are the contradictions of life!

Turnley hastened home from Europe and spent the remainder of the war period, and many years succeeding, in works of mercy and help for the innocent victims of our fratricidal war. He established a home for his distressed kinsmen in Madison, Indiana, to which he gathered twenty-two homeless people, most of them children, supported them during the remaining years of the war, clothed them, put the children in schools where they were fitted for future usefulness.

Turnley was married in 1853 to Miss Mary Ryerson Rutter, daughter of Dr. David Rutter and Esther Turner Rutter of Chicago, Illinois. His wife preceded him to the final rest by less than two years. For the last thirty years of his life he lived in Highland Park, Illinois. He took a lively interest in scientific and national subjects, has written many essays and delivered many addresses on the topics of the day; being a fluent speaker he was always in demand when a racy speech was wanted. He was a Democrat in politics, and a public spirited and progressive citizen.

He belonged to the Association of West Point Graduates, and held in fond remembrance the comrades of that institution with many of whom he corresponded during life. Alas, but few of these old comrades are now left. He was also a member of the Aztec Club, Mexican War Club, Order of Foreign Wars, Sons of the American Revolution and of the Loyal Legion. To the day of his death he kept in touch with the events of the time. His illness was short, only a few weeks, and then he closed his eyes with the full realization that he had been blessed with a long life, and the time had come for him to rest from his labors.

The highest praise that can be accorded mortal man is that he always did his duty; this meed of praise is due to P. T. Turnley. Brave to do his part in the face of any obstacle or danger, pitiful toward all who suffered, helpful to all who needed his help. He was averse to all pomp and show, and carried out in his simple life the gospel of human brotherhood.

C. L. T.

Colonel Turnley wrote a number of very interesting pamphlets concerning his career. One is about his clocks, of which he had many. In another of the pamphlets he states that he received an appointment to West Point in the spring of 1841, and not having the means to make the long journey from East Tennessee to West Point, he determined to walk. Allowing a day for about every twenty miles of the distance, he packed his few belongings into a bundle and started. Every night he was taken in by kind-hearted farmers along his line of travel. After a while he reached the vicinity of Harper's Ferry and was put up for the night by a farmer who owned a saw mill. He heard the farmer tell his troubles, which were that he had made a contract to deliver a lot of lumber within the next ten days, but could not fill his contract because the only man on the place who could run the saw mill was sick. Turnley promptly offered his services, saying he had worked in a mill and knew how to run a saw. A bargain was made and work began next morning at sunrise. Two powerful slaves were detailed to assist and in less than a week enough lumber had been cut to fill the contract. More than enough money was earned to pay all expenses to West Point. Unfortunately Turnley failed to pass the entrance examination. He was penniless and asked Mr. Kinsley, who at that time was conducting a school on what is now the southern part of the government reservation, for a job. Mr. Kinsley employed him for general work and at the same time instructed him as he did other candidates. Turnley secured another appointment and entered with the 1842 Class of Plebes. He was too poor to go on the ever delightful Cadet furlough so remained at the Academy while his more fortunate classmates were enjoying themselves at their homes.

After leaving the Army Turnley decided to settle in Chicago. He was successful in business, but the great Chicago fire in 1871 again left him penniless, but it was not long before he again was the possessor of ample means, which he lived long to enjoy at his pleasant home in Highland Park, Illinois. His residence was a short

distance from Fort Sheridan and overlooked Lake Michigan. Here he lived many years. The home was a veritable curiosity shop.

The writer received letters about every three months from Colonel Turnley. The old gentleman was anxious to attend the re-union this year in order to witness the graduation of the grandson of his roommate (for two years) -- the late General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson -- but the infirmities of age prevented the fulfillment of his wishes. In the last letter received he said his memory was failing, for he no longer remembered at dinner time what he had for breakfast.

[United States Military Academy Reunion June 12, 1911](#)

¹“Lo! the poor Indian...” is a quote from Epistle I of [The Essay on Man](#) by Alexander Pope (Verse III).