

## Albany Law's Greatest Generation: Civil War Alumni

By Robert Emery,  
Associate Director and  
Head of Reference Library

Albany Law School's World War II veterans constituted a great generation. With all due respect, however, Albany Law's greatest generation was its Civil War alumni, greatest in terms of both legal achievement and government service. Albany Law people remember, of course, Major William McKinley (class of 1867), Ohio Volunteer Infantry; but what about, for instance, Redfield Proctor (1860), Vermont Volunteers, Vermont governor, Secretary of War, and U.S. Senator; or Edwin H. Conger (1866), Illinois Volunteers, congressman, and ambassador successively to Brazil, China, and Mexico; or Russell Conwell (1865), Massachusetts Volunteers, leading Baptist minister, and founder of Temple University? These were some of the best-known of a legion of alumni noted for their post-Civil War success.

When war broke out in April 1861 and President Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the rebellion, recent Albany Law alumni and current students joined the Union Army. To cite two examples, almost at random, both Wheelock Veazey, class of 1860 (Vermont Volunteers, Congressional Medal of Honor winner, and later Chief Justice of Vermont), and Thomas Hubbard (1861) (Maine Volunteers, later



*Redfield Proctor (1860), Vermont governor, Secretary of War, and U.S. Senator*

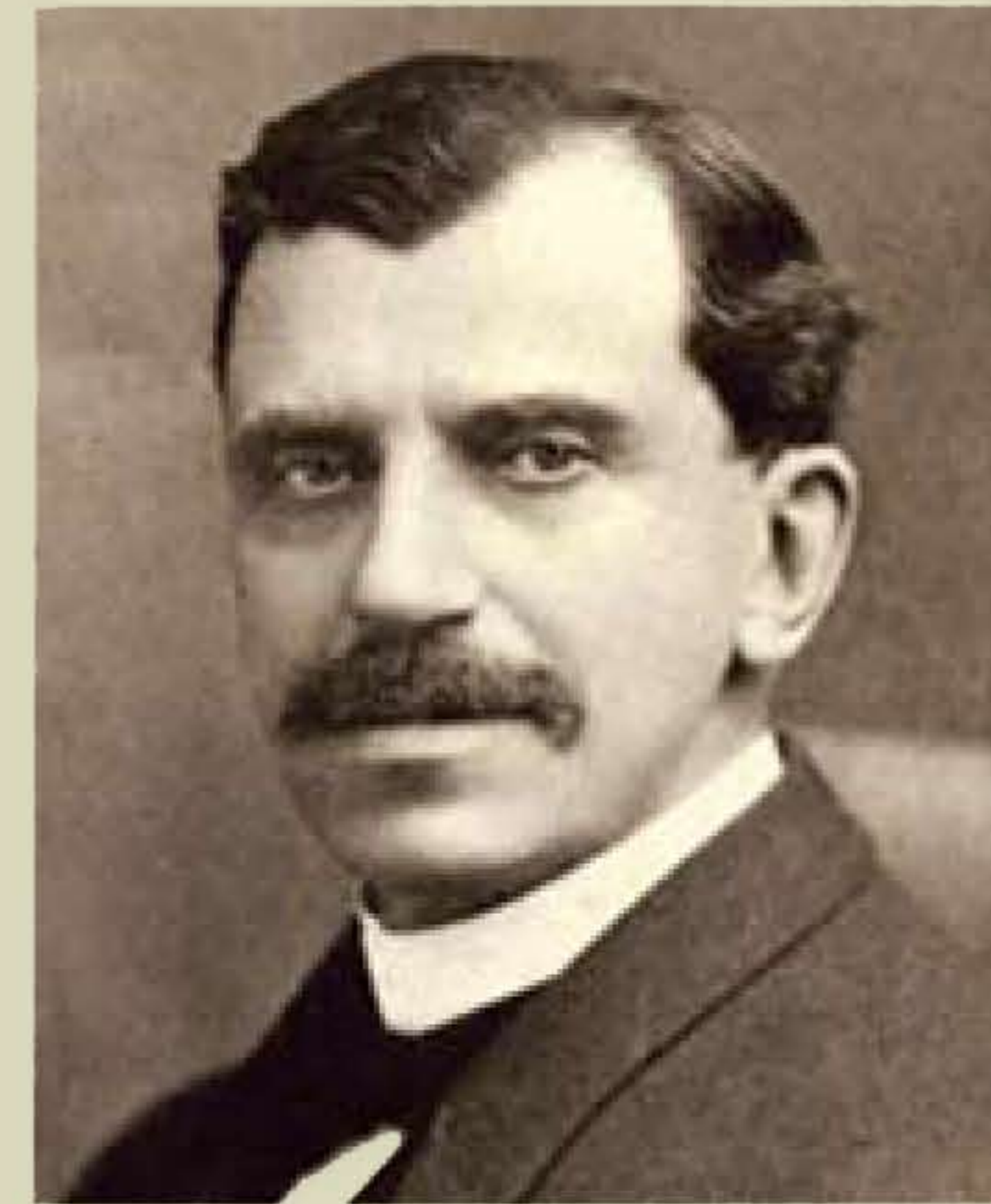
railroad financier and drafter of the ABA Canons of Professional Ethics), joined the Army shortly after Lincoln's call. Some current students enlisted immediately; others, before joining up, first enrolled in a student company drilled by William P. Prentice (class of 1861, New Hampshire Volunteers, and post-war prominent New York City lawyer). The enrollment of the law school dropped from 133 to 86 in one year.

These young men often received rapid promotions. Prentice, for example, joined the volunteers as a captain and within a year became a lieutenant-colonel and chief of staff to the general commanding the Army of the Cumberland. William F. Vilas (1860) enlisted in the Wisconsin Volunteers as a private and ended the war as lieutenant-colonel of his regiment (he subsequently served in the U.S. Senate and as Postmaster



*William F. Vilas (1860), U.S. Senator, Postmaster General, Secretary of the Interior*

General and Secretary of the Interior). Albert L. Lee (1854) (Kansas Volunteer Cavalry and member of the Kansas Supreme Court) and Hamilton N. Eldridge (1857) (Massachusetts volunteers and later prominent Chicago lawyer) ended the war as brigadier-generals, Harris L. Plaisted (1856) (Maine Volunteers and later Maine governor) as a major-general. Albany Law volunteers saw varied service. Major Henry R. Rathbone (1859), New York volunteers, for instance, personally witnessed Lincoln's assassination. Daniel K. Healey left law school to enlist in the New Hampshire volunteers and was subsequently commissioned as an officer in the Colored Infantry, serving at the bitter siege of Petersburg in 1864-65 (despite disabling wounds, he returned to Albany Law to graduate in 1868). Brigadier-General John McConihe (1854)



*Russell Conwell (1865), founder of Temple University*

was killed at Cold Harbor in 1864, Brigadier-General Willoughby Babcock (1856) at Winchester the same year. McKinley fought at Antietam, Vilas served under Grant at Vicksburg, Veazey commanded a regiment at Gettysburg.

Veterans who enrolled in the law school after the war rivaled the success of earlier alumni. Take, for example, just the Class of 1867, the first completely post-war class: it numbered 144 and included veterans ranging in rank from private to brigadier-general. Future President McKinley was the most famous member. The class included, however, many others who later achieved prominence. There was Lieutenant-Colonel Edward E. Sill, New York Volunteers, who twice escaped from Confederate prison camps and, despite debilitating head wounds, later successfully practiced law in Rochester and New Haven.



*Edwin H. Conger (1866), Congressman, and ambassador successively to Brazil, China, and Mexico*

William B. Perrin, Rhode Island Volunteers, was a long-time member of the Iowa legislature; Gorham Powers, Maine Volunteers, a Minnesota legislator and district judge. Other post-war classes also produced alumni veterans of prominence: at random: William P. Lord (1866), Delaware Volunteers, later Governor of Oregon; Stillman F. Kneeland (1868), Vermont Volunteers, later leading New York City commercial law specialist; Josiah H. Benton (1866), also Vermont Volunteers, Boston railroad lawyer and nationally-known bibliophile.

Albany Law School had developed a national reputation even before the Civil War. The Civil War veterans who attended it, before and after the war, made it one of the most influential law schools in post-war Gilded Age America.