

# College Student From Bond County Was Among Illinois Civil War Casualties

by Tom Emery  
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(BUZZ MAGAZINE) - Civil War soldiers from Illinois, as elsewhere, came from all walks of life, including a few college students. One was Joseph Howell, a Bond County native who died in the opening months of the war.

Howell was killed in action at the Battle of Fort Donelson on Feb. 15, 1862, which was his first major action. Like most war casualties, Howell was cut down in the prime of life, at 22 years old.

His death brought an untimely end to a promising future. Born on Sept. 1, 1838, Howell managed to pursue higher education in a time of low literacy. In 1860, he was one of ten members of the original graduating class at Illinois State Normal, which was renamed Illinois State University in 1964.

“Normal” referred to a school to train teachers, so Howell’s career path was obvious. By his final year, he was serving as an assistant in the university’s model school, which was founded just weeks after the first classes in 1857. Simply put, Merriam-Webster defines a model school as “a graded school usually in connection with a normal school or teachers’ training college and used as a model in organization and methods of teaching.”

Clearly, Illinois State Normal was on the cutting edge of those methods, and Howell stood well in the new university. Just weeks after graduation in 1860, Howell became the first principal of the model school, a post he held until the spring of 1861. By now, he would have occupied “Old Main,” the first permanent building at the university, which was partially complete for his graduation ceremony, on June 29, 1860.

In 1907, school president and historian David Felmley wrote that “Howell, a brilliant graduate of the first class, was placed over the Grammar Department, now added to the model school.” In a 2015 article, university senior archivist April Anderson-Zorn described Howell as “a quiet student but was well-liked and earned many accolades during his studies. He was a favorite among his peers and the students he taught.”

Illinois State Normal would have a remarkable influence on nineteenth-century education, but that would not be its only claim to history. With the outbreak of the Civil War, men across the state raced to enlist, and Howell was no exception. He was one of five university and model school pupils from Normal who responded to the first call for volunteers in April 1861.

He enlisted in the 8th Illinois Volunteers, considered the second to answer that call, but he was unlike many others from Normal. In the coming weeks, the university president, Charles Hovey, raised a company of men dubbed the “Normal Rifles,” which consisted of many of the university’s students and faculty.

The effort evolved into an entire regiment, the 33rd Illinois, which included 46 Normal students. Though its ranks were filled with troops from around the state, the 33rd still carried the name “Teachers Regiment,” and became a part of Illinois Civil War lore.

The men in this “Teacher’s Regiment” were young on average, but many carried a higher level of education than their comrades. As a result, they bragged that any privates discharged for mental shortcomings were good candidates for officers in other regiments.

Howell became an officer in his own regiment, rising to the first lieutenant of Company K. His first colonel in the 8th Illinois was Richard Oglesby of Decatur, who would later become the first man to be elected to three non-consecutive terms as Illinois governor, in 1864, 1872, and 1884.

Muster rolls list Howell at 5-feet-11-inches tall with auburn hair, hazel eyes, and a dark complexion. A total of 117 Normal men served the Union in the war.

Most Illinois men, as in other states, waited for months to receive orders, and the 8th was like the rest. Howell did not see action until the siege of Fort Donelson, in northern Tennessee on the Cumberland River, in February 1862, when he was killed by a shot to the head.

Howell became the first of the university's ten deaths in the war and left a lasting scar. Felmley wrote in 1907—over forty-five years later—that “Normal’s heart was almost broken with grief, shared by the whole community, a grief which remains fresh to this very day.”

At the university’s 25th anniversary celebration in 1882, over \$100 was raised to erect a memorial to Howell, which was later placed in the Model School room, where he had taught. In 1886, the Philadelphian Society, one of the university’s literary groups, enlarged a photograph of Howell for placement in its hall.

As part of a History Channel commentary in 1993, Virginia Tech professor James Robertson noted a key side effect of the massive casualties in the Civil War – the intellectual drain, as the prospects for works of art, music, and literature died with some of the men. Howell, who seemed destined for great achievements in education, may have been among them. He is buried in Bloomington’s Evergreen Cemetery.

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