

Edwardsville Native Charles Lippincott, A Well-Known State Official, Fought In Duel In 1855 That Left His Foe Dead

by Tom Emery
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EDWARDSVILLE - Duels were a common, though gruesome, part of 19th-century life, and often featured leading figures of history. Among them was Charles Lippincott, an Edwardsville native who held state offices in both Illinois and California – where he fought a duel in 1855 that left his opponent dead.

Lippincott was also a high-ranking officer in the 33rd Illinois Infantry, the famous “Teachers’ Regiment” that originated at Illinois State University in Normal. The duel, though, overshadows many of his life’s achievements.

Born on Jan. 25, 1825, Lippincott’s father was a leading Presbyterian minister and businessman who also owned an Edwardsville newspaper. One of Charles’ sisters, Abia, married Winthrop Gilman, the Alton-area investor and business partner of Benjamin Godfrey.

Young Charles attended Illinois College in Jacksonville without graduating, and later earned a degree from St. Louis Medical College in 1849.

He opened a practice in Chandlerville, in Cass County west of Springfield. On Christmas Day 1851, he married eighteen-year-old Emily Webster Chandler, who received her education at the Jacksonville Female Academy, and was herself the daughter of a doctor.

Like many others of the time, Lippincott felt the pull of the West, and in 1852 relocated to California, settling in Yuba County, north of Sacramento. There, he became a vocal opponent of slavery and was elected to a single term in the California Senate as a Democrat in 1853.

A source from California described him as “a low, heavy-set man, with light hair” and “piercing black eyes” who was “deliberate and resolute in his speech.”

While there, Lippincott contributed to the *Old Oaken Bucket*, a short-lived newspaper that promoted temperance. In the summer of 1855, he used his platform to mock Robert Tevis, who had embarrassed himself at a local temperance rally with a long-winded speech. That drew the ire of a hostile crowd, which was more interested in hearing from Sarah Pellet, a popular area temperance lecturer.

Accounts vary on what happened next. One source reported that Tevis was enraged at the derisive column and demanded that the paper publish a rebuttal, labeling the author as “a liar and a slanderer.”

Lippincott then challenged Tevis to a duel, and the affair became a confrontation between the Democrats and the Know-Nothings, a party that opposed immigrants and Catholics. Tevis himself was a Know-Nothing, dubbed because of members’ tendency to answer “I know nothing” when asked of their beliefs.

Double-barreled shotguns were the weapons of choice, and the duel was set in the high Sierra hills near Downieville at dawn on July 14. Lippincott was an expert shot, and Tevis suffered a mortal wound to the chest.

Various accounts say that Lippincott suffered a minor wound when Tevis's shot "passed directly over Lippincott's left shoulder, grazing his face and cutting away a lock of his hair." Other sources imply "a piece was shot out of the shoulder of Lippincott's coat."

Though the duel was a celebrated news story, Lippincott may have been also been the loser. One source reports that "the better class of citizens considered Tevis another victim of the bloodthirsty code" and "extended their hands rather cringingly" at Lippincott afterward.

The duel also was said to have affected Lippincott's devout father, "whose heart, it was said, was broken by the part taken by the son in the Downieville tragedy."

Lippincott remained in the Golden State until 1857. He then came back to Chandlerville and resumed his practice.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, he recruited a company of men that became Company K of the 33rd Illinois Infantry, one of the most unusual regiments of the conflict.

Largely organized on the present-day campus of Illinois State University in Normal, the 33rd featured a disproportionate number of college students and faculty, leading to its nickname, the "Teachers' Regiment." The first colonel of the 33rd was Charles Hovey, the inaugural president of the university.

The level of education of the men was reflected in their unusually high literacy rate, and their immodest belief that privates discharged from the regiment for mental shortcomings were good candidates to become officers in other regiments. Not surprisingly, the men of the Teachers' Regiment left many written accounts of their experiences.

Lippincott was elected captain of Company K of the 33rd and eventually worked his way up to colonel. He was wounded in the foot during the frontal assault on Vicksburg on May 22, 1863, and was brevetted brigadier general in 1865.

In 1866, Lippincott, who had switched to the Republicans, was a candidate for Congress in a heavily Democratic district, a hopeless challenge. However, in 1867 was elected Secretary of the Illinois Senate and, that same year, was named Doorkeeper of the U.S. House.

Republicans, riding the crest of victory in the war, were well-positioned for the 1868 elections, and Lippincott was among them. That year, he won election as Illinois State Auditor, a position that was rolled into the current position of comptroller under the state constitution of 1970.

Lippincott was re-elected as Auditor in 1872. An active party member, he was named permanent president of the Republican State Convention in 1878. In November 1886, Lippincott was appointed as the first superintendent of the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Home in Quincy.

He later suffered injuries from a runaway team as he was driving through the grounds of the home. Lippincott died on Sept. 11, 1887, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield.

Shortly after his death, Lippincott's wife was named Matron of the Soldiers and Sailors Home, a position she held until her own death on May 21, 1895. Beloved by the residents of the home for her kindness, she was buried with her husband at Oak Ridge.

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