

### **Colonel Ellsworth, Cult Hero**

Colonel Elmer Ephriam Ellsworth, 1837-1861, lived a short but event-filled life and, by the time he died, he had earned enormous fame nationwide. It is interesting to know that Ellsworth's life touched the history of Lake Forest for a brief moment.

Born in Malta, N.Y., young Ellsworth's dream was to enter West Point but he was not academically prepared to do so. Nevertheless, his interest in things military persisted. He moved to Chicago and joined a National Guard volunteer unit that was about to disband. Ellsworth worked to bring them back together, recruited new members and fashioned a unit after the French Colonial highly trained troops in Algeria, the Zouaves. They wore an unusual uniform consisting of baggy pants, short jacket, fezzes and gaiters. That, combined with their complicated drills, made them famous throughout the Midwest. It didn't take Ellsworth long to be appointed a major with the Illinois State Guard.

In 1860, Ellsworth came to Lake Forest Academy to drill the gentleman students on marching. He also taught them how to handle rifles. The government provided a Springfield Army musket for each student. The young men, who called themselves the Ellsworth Guides, did not protest the long, rugged marches, hikes and bivouacs throughout the countryside. Ellsworth had them perform double-quick marching parades through town, entertaining and thrilling the residents. Ellsworth drilled similar companies in Elgin, Rockford, and Madison, WI.

In August of 1860, Ellsworth left his command and moved to Springfield to study law in the offices of Abraham Lincoln. Ellsworth became close to Lincoln and traveled with him to Washington. When the Civil War, long brewing, finally broke out, Ellsworth returned to New York to raise a volunteer regiment whom he uniformed in Zouave dress and drilled expertly.

In May of 1861, the day after Virginia officially seceded from the Union, Ellsworth convinced the military to assign him and his Zouave regiment the mission to cross the Potomac and take control of the Virginia side. When they arrived in Alexandria, they easily overran the small number of Confederate troops. Ellsworth ordered his men to capture the railroad station while he himself and a small contingent of four went to capture the telegraph office. On their way, the men came across a small inn that was flying the Confederate flag. Ellsworth charged at the inn, running upstairs to cut down the flag at the window. On his way back down, he was confronted by the inn's owner who was holding a double-barrel shotgun. Despite the efforts of his companions to divert the shooter, Ellsworth was shot dead at such close range that his uniform medal was embedded in his chest. Elmer Ephriam Ellsworth became the first American officer to die in the Civil War.

President Lincoln was grief-stricken by this tragedy and ordered an honor guard to escort Ellsworth's body to Washington where it lay in state at the White House.

Following his death, Ellsworth became a cult hero for the Union and he was to be the subject of many songs, poems, and sermons. People carried memorial cards and named babies, streets and towns after their hero. Ellsworth was buried in his hometown in New York in a grave overlooking the Hudson River. He was 24 years old.