

# Lew Wallace

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## Lew Wallace

April 10, 1827 – February 15, 1905



Lew Wallace

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**Place of  
birth**

Brookville, Indiana

<b>Place of death</b>	Crawfordsville, Indiana
<b>Allegiance</b>	United States
<b>Years of service</b>	1846 – 1847; 1861 – 1865
<b>Rank</b>	Major General
<b>Commands</b>	11th Indiana Infantry
	3rd Division, Army of the Tennessee
	VIII Corps and the Middle Department
<b>Battles/wars</b>	American Civil War
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fort Donelson</li> <li>■ Shiloh</li> <li>■ Corinth</li> <li>■ Monocacy</li> </ul>
<b>Other work</b>	Author of <i>Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ</i> , territorial governor of New Mexico, U.S. minister to Turkey

**Lewis "Lew" Wallace** (April 10, 1827 – February 15, 1905) was a lawyer, governor, Union general in the American Civil War, American statesman, and author, best remembered for his historical novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

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## Early life and career

Wallace was born in Brookville, Indiana, to David and Esther French Test Wallace. His father served as lieutenant governor and Indiana Governor; his stepmother, Zerelda Gray Sanders Wallace, was a prominent temperance and suffragist. Wallace served in the Mexican War as a first lieutenant with the 1st Indiana Infantry regiment. He was admitted to the bar in 1849. On May 6, 1852, Wallace married Susan Arnold Elston by whom he had one son, Henry Lane Wallace (born February 17, 1853). In 1856, he was elected to the State Senate after moving his residence to Crawfordsville.

## **Civil War**

At the start of the Civil War, Wallace was appointed state adjutant general and helped raise troops in Indiana. On April 25, 1861, he was appointed Colonel of the 11th Indiana Infantry. After brief service in western Virginia, he was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers on September 3. In February 1862, he was a division commander fighting under Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at the Battle of Fort Donelson. During the fierce Confederate assault on February 15, Wallace coolly acted on his own initiative to send a brigade to reinforce the beleaguered division of Brig. Gen. John A. McClernand, despite orders from Grant to avoid a general engagement. This action was key in stabilizing the Union defensive line. Wallace was promoted to major general to rank from March 21.

### **Shiloh**

Wallace's most controversial command came at the Battle of Shiloh, where he continued as a division commander under Grant. Wallace's division had been left as reserves at a place called Stoney

Lonesome to the rear of the Union line. At about 6 a.m., when Grant's army was surprised and virtually routed by the sudden appearance of the Confederate States Army under Albert Sidney Johnston, Grant sent orders for Wallace to move his unit up to support the division of William Tecumseh Sherman.

Here, the controversy begins. Wallace claimed that Grant's orders were unsigned, hastily written, and overly vague. There were two paths by which Wallace could move his unit to the front, and Grant (according to Wallace) did not specify which one he should take. Wallace chose to take the upper path, which was much less used and in considerably better condition, and which would lead him to the right side of Sherman's last known position. Grant later claimed that he had specified that Wallace take the lower path, though circumstantial evidence seems to suggest that Grant had forgotten that more than one path even existed.

Whatever the case, Wallace arrived at the end of his march only to find that Sherman had been forced back, and was no longer where Wallace thought he was. Moreover, he had been pushed back so far that Wallace now found himself in the

rear of the advancing Southern troops. Nevertheless, a messenger from Grant arrived with word that Grant was wondering where Wallace was and why he had not arrived at Pittsburg Landing, where the Union was making its stand. Wallace was confused. He felt sure he could viably launch an attack from where he was and hit the Rebels in the rear. Nevertheless, he decided to turn his troops around and march back to Stoney Lonesome. For some reason, rather than realigning his troops so that the rear guard would be in the front, Wallace chose to countermarch his column; he argued that his artillery would have been greatly out of position to support the infantry when it would arrive on the field.

Wallace marched back to Stoney Lonesome, and arrived at 11 a.m. It had now taken him five hours of marching to return to where he started, with somewhat less rested troops. He then proceeded to march over the lower road to Pittsburg Landing, but the road had been left in terrible conditions by recent rainstorms and previous Union marches, so the going was extremely slow. Wallace finally arrived at Grant's position at about 7 p.m., at a time when the fighting was practically over. Grant was not pleased. Nevertheless, the Union came back to win the battle the following day.

At first, there was little fallout from this. Wallace was the youngest general of his rank in the army and was something of a "golden boy." Soon, however, civilians in the North began to hear the news of the horrible casualties at Shiloh, and the Army needed explanations. Both Grant and his superior, Maj. Gen. Henry Wager Halleck, placed the blame squarely on Wallace, saying that his incompetence in moving up the reserves had nearly cost them the battle. Sherman, for his part, remained mute on the issue. Wallace was removed from his command in June and reassigned to the much less glamorous duty commanding the defenses of Cincinnati in the Department of the Ohio.

## **Later service**

In July 1864, Wallace produced mixed results in the Battle of Monocacy Junction, part of the Valley Campaigns of 1864. His army (the Middle Department) was defeated by Confederate General Jubal A. Early, but was able to delay Early's advance toward Washington, D.C., to the point that the city defenses had time to organize and repel Early.

General Grant's memoirs assessed Wallace's delaying tactics at Monocacy:

If Early had been but one day earlier, he might have entered the capital before the arrival of the reinforcements I had sent. ... General Wallace contributed on this occasion by the defeat of the troops under him, a greater benefit to the cause than often falls to the lot of a commander of an equal force to render by means of a victory.

Personally, Wallace was devastated by the loss of his reputation as a result of Shiloh. He worked desperately all his life to change public opinion about his role in the battle, going so far as to literally beg Grant to "set things right" in Grant's memoirs. Grant, however, like many of the others Wallace importuned, refused to change his opinion.

## **Postwar career**

Wallace participated in the military commission trial of the Lincoln assassination conspirators as well as the court-martial of Henry Wirz, commandant of the Andersonville prison camp. He



resigned from the army in November 1865. Late in the war, he directed secret efforts by the government to help the Mexicans remove the French occupation forces who had seized control of Mexico in 1864. He continued in those efforts more publicly after the war and was offered a major general's commission in the Mexican army after his resignation from the U.S. Army. Multiple promises by the Mexican revolutionaries were never delivered, which forced Wallace into deep financial debt.

Wallace held a number of important political posts during the 1870s and 1880s. He served as governor of New Mexico Territory from 1878 to 1881, and as U.S. Minister to the Ottoman Empire from 1881 to 1885. As governor, he offered amnesty to many men involved in the Lincoln County War; in the process he met with Billy the Kid (William Bonney). On 17 March 1879, the pair arranged that Kid would act as an informant and testify against others involved in the Lincoln County War, and, in return, Kid would be "scot free with a pardon in [his] pocket for all [his] misdeeds." But the Kid returned to his outlaw ways and Governor Wallace withdrew his offer. While serving as governor, Wallace completed the novel that made him famous: *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). It

grew to be the best-selling American novel of the 19th century. The book has never been out of print and has been filmed four times.

Recently, historian Victor Davis Hanson has argued that the novel was based heavily on Wallace's own life, particularly his experiences at Shiloh and the damage it did to his reputation. There are some striking similarities: the book's main character, Judah Ben-Hur accidentally causes injury to a high-ranking commander, for which he and his family suffer no end of tribulations and calumny. *Ben-Hur* was the first work of fiction to be blessed by a pope.

Wallace died, likely from cancer, in Crawfordsville, Indiana, and is buried there in Oak Hill Cemetery. A marble statue of him dressed in a military uniform by sculptor Andrew O'Connor was placed in the National Statuary Hall Collection by the state of Indiana in 1910 and is currently located in the west side of the National Statuary Hall.

## Works

- *The Fair God; or, The Last of the 'Tzins: A*

*Tale of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company), 1873.

- *Commodus: An Historical Play* ([Crawfordsville, IN?]: privately published by the author), 1876. (revised and reissued again in the same year)
- *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1880.
- *The Boyhood of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1888.
- *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison* (bound with *Life of Hon. Levi P. Morton*, by George Alfred Townsend), (Cleveland: N. G. Hamilton & Co., Publishers), 1888.
- *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, Publishers), 1888.
- *Life and Public Services of Hon. Benjamin Harrison, President of the U.S. With a Concise Biographical Sketch of Hon. Whitelaw Reid, Ex-Minister to France [by Murat Halstad]* (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Co.), 1892.
- *The Prince of India; or, Why Constantinople Fell* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers), 1893. 2 volumes
- *The Wooing of Malkatoon [and] Commodus* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers), 1898.
- *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New

York: Harper & Brothers Publishers), 1906.  
2 volumes

## References

- *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the United States Capitol*, Prepared by the Architect of the Capitol under the Joint Committee on the Library, United States Government Printing House, Washington, 1965.
- Eicher, John H., and Eicher, David J., *Civil War High Commands*, Stanford University Press, 2001, ISBN 0-8047-3641-3.
- Grant, Ulysses S., *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885–86, ISBN 0-914427-67-9.
- Hanson, Victor Davis, *Ripples of Battle: How Wars of the Past Still Determine How We Fight, How We Live, and How We Think*, Doubleday, 2003, ISBN 0-385-50400-4.
- Warner, Ezra J., *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders*, Louisiana State University Press, 1964, ISBN 0-8071-0822-7.

## External links

- [Lew Wallace Archive](#), overview with detailed bibliography of his works
- [General Lew Wallace Study & Museum](#), Crawfordsville
- [Wallace in Indiana Civil War history](#)
- [Works by Lew Wallace at Project Gutenberg](#)
- [The Political Graveyard](#)
- [Chronology at General Lew Wallace Museum](#)
- [Find-A-Grave profile for Lew Wallace](#)

Preceded by <b>Samuel Beach Axtell</b>	<b>Governor of New Mexico</b> 1878-1881	Succeeded by <b>Lionel Allen Sheldon</b>
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