



Gouverneur Kemble Warren, the Man

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Article Summary: Warren served as a topographical engineer in the West under General Harney, and his surveys provided the first scientific information about Nebraska. He is best known for his dramatic victory in the Civil War battle of Little Round Top, Pennsylvania.

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Photographs / Images: G K Warren; Warren's maps and sketches of his western route (3 maps, 2 sketches); statue of Warren at Little Round Top



Major General G. K. Warren

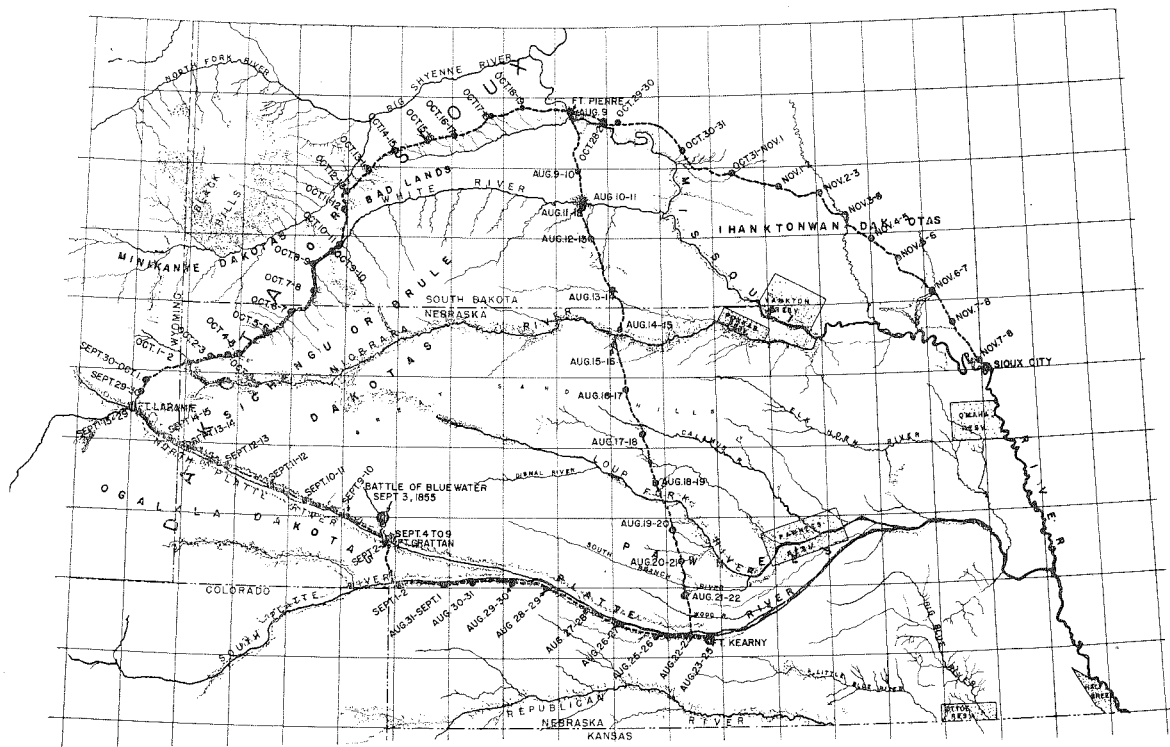
GOUVERNEUR KEMBLE WARREN — THE MAN

By Loraine Ferris

Among the portraits unveiled at the last annual meeting of the State Historical Society, one was the gift of Miss Emily B. Warren of Newport, Rhode Island. It is a lithograph of her father, Major General Warren. Soldier of valor and genius, scientist of distinction, citizen with the heart of a poet and passionate devotion to the ideals of his country, with grave and gentle fortitude in the face of great injustice, this exceptional life deserves wide acquaintance of the public. And with that life, Nebraska has a very special link.

In the Society's library are two volumes of fascinating interest. One is the "Report of Explorations in Nebraska and Dakota in the Years 1855-57" by Lieutenant Warren, then topographical engineer under General Harney. It was a commission involving great difficulty and danger, surrounded as they were by Indians who resisted every inch of advance into the Black Hills which General Harney himself had secured to them by treaty. Lieutenant Warren recognized the justice of their position, and conducted the exploration with rare tact, sympathy and courage, as well as military skill and readiness to meet any emergency.

His first achievement in the army service was an outstanding contribution to Nebraska pioneers in the task confronting them. True, the expeditions of Lewis and Clark and of Fremont each added much to the early knowledge of this state, but it was Warren whose scientific surveys gave a definite basis of fact in place of the highly imaginative and misleading theories that prevailed. He made a map of this country which the Con-



Route of Lieutenant Warren, 1855

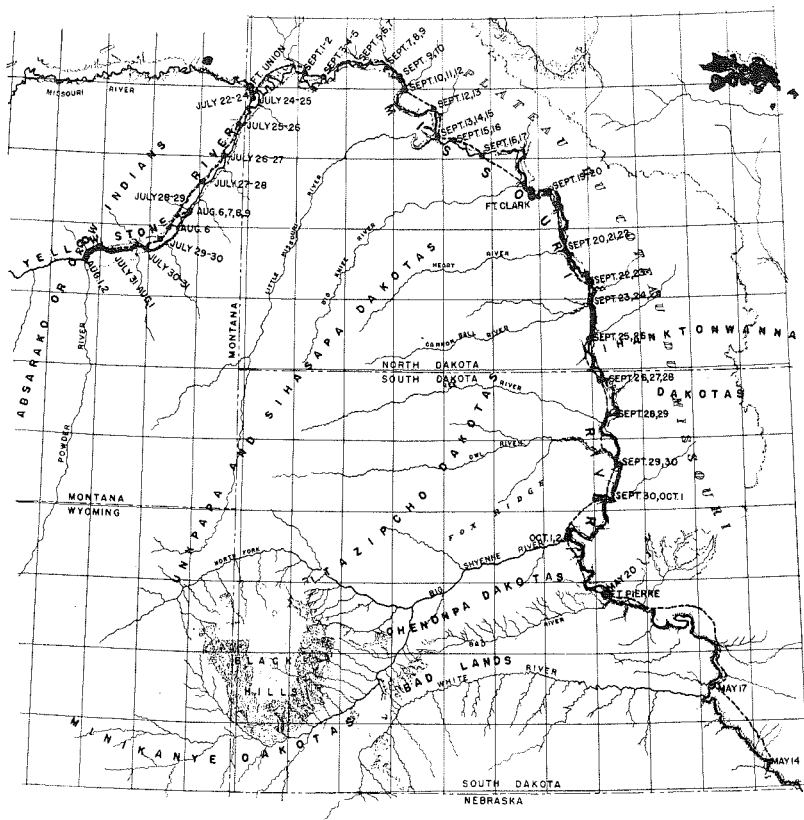
gress ordered engraved. He was the first to supply an exact, definite catalog of Nebraska's trees and plants and animals, her weather, her bugs and birds and rocks and soils—everything that goes to make this state an individual among her sister states. And his work along these lines was accepted as authority by the highest scientific bodies in the land.

"His mental habits were those of the investigator, never satisfied until he had studied the matter in hand in all its bearings, but in action he was impetuous, indomitable and gallant in the extreme." Such was the characterization by Major General Henry L. Abbot, in a memoir read before the National Academy of Science in April, 1884.

The second volume is "The Life and Letters of an American Soldier," by Emerson Gifford Taylor (reviewed in XIX-1), with this lovable portrait as its frontispiece. The eyes of deep spiritual perception and infinite sadness, the noble brow and tender lips, possess a haunting quality that sets this soul in a class apart and repays careful study. No evidence here of the man of instant decision and intense action who checked the Confederate onslaught at Little Round Top, turning the tide in the Battle of Gettysburg.

Yet the firm will was apparent from the day he was mustered into service as Lieutenant Colonel, Fifth New York Regiment Volunteer Militia—"Duryee's Zouaves," as they were commonly known. "The streets of the city were combed for recruits," Mr. Taylor wrote of this regiment. "In the ranks were to be found French and British veterans of the Crimean War, Italians, Prussians, Irishmen—representatives of all the European fighting races who, even in bygone days, gravitated naturally to the polyglot, turbulent, vigorously growing town. . . And the regiment's spirit was as high as its uniform was gorgeous."

Only a man of rare qualities could bring this motley group into line with the discipline of West Point, and



Route of Lieutenant Warren, 1856

the thoroughness with which Warren attacked and conquered his problem reveals a firm decision based on far-seeing judgment, and great resourcefulness and understanding in handling his men.

"It was certain that his rowdy, exuberant soldiers gave their officer vexation enough at first. It was supposed he never slept. His slight, wiry frame seemed incapable of fatigue. It was very difficult for this seasoned Regular, with his rigid convictions as to what a good soldier's conduct must be, to feel anything but rage towards those of his zouaves who broke bounds like so many schoolboys on a lark. But even in this early period, Warren won their respect; and later, on a dozen fields, he was to deserve and receive their enthusiastic affection . . . Quoting the report of a superior:

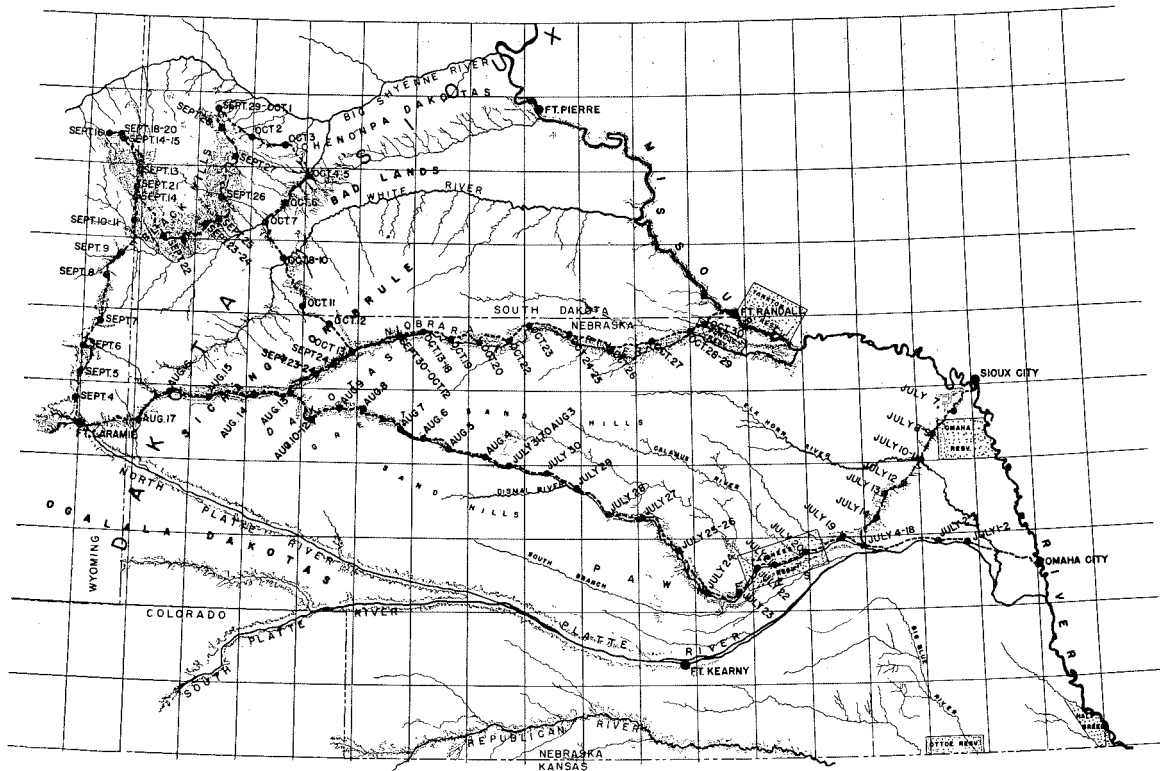
"He handles the regiment in a scientific manner. In field maneuvers, the men are taught movements and tactics they never dreamed of before, and never performed by the militia at home. He is very rigid with the officers, and requires them to know their duties thoroughly and make no mistakes."

"Nor was it long before the relations of this energetic executive and his men were put to a genuine test. Less than a month after their enlistment, Duryee's red-legged but otherwise quite green young zouaves were sent against the enemy."*

Another insight into the nature of this greatly wronged man is revealed in the "dark and bleak" winter after Fredricksburg when, writing to the lovely lady who in the following June became his bride, "he could pause in the thick of the mud and chill of the winter camp to send back a page all lyrical and tender. . . His faith he kept intact. . . His mystical belief and conviction that, because their cause was just, the Union arms must triumph, remained always to guide him even in the darkness."

His daughter Emily graciously illustrates that "lyrical and tender" quality, quoting from a letter written at Yorktown: "I send you a rose from this place. It, like my love for you, blooms amid the strife that surrounds it."

*This, like all other major quotations herein, is taken from "The Life and Letters of an American Soldier," by Emerson Gifford Taylor.



Route of Lieutenant Warren, 1857

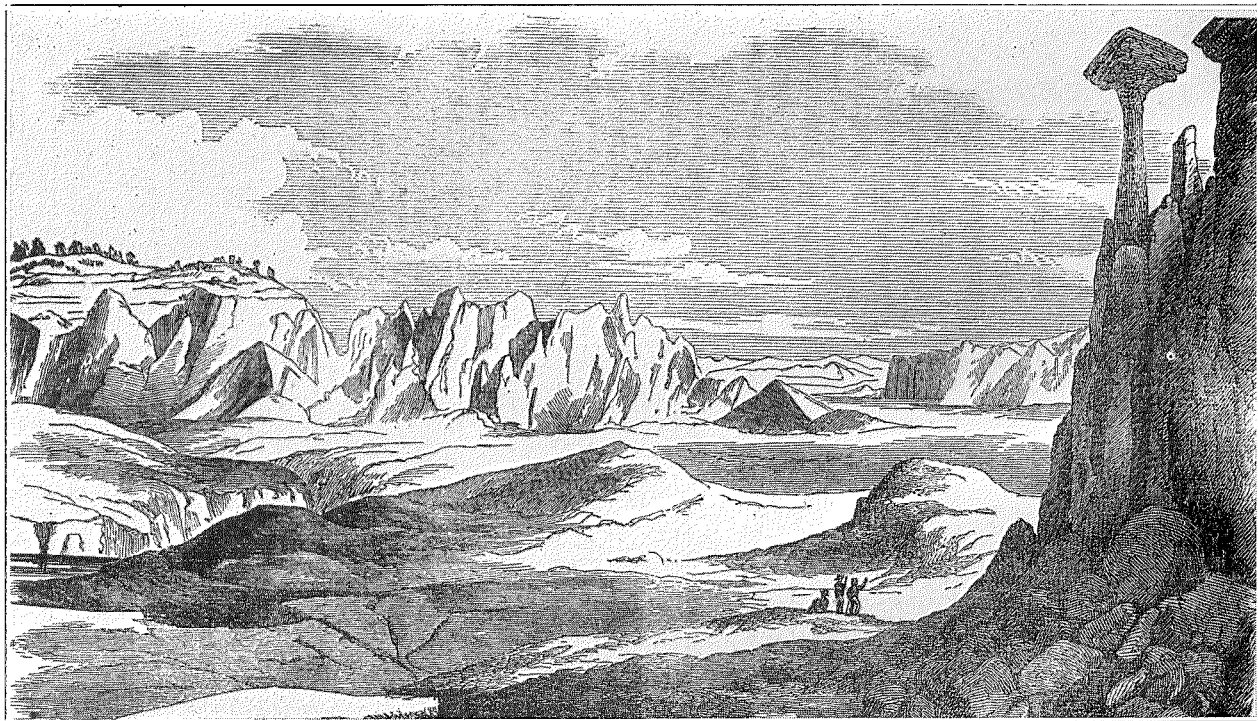
The dramatic story of Little Round Top has been told often and ably. Warren had asked permission to go and examine the situation. "He had known neither rest nor food for many hours, but, sick with vague apprehension, he spurred his jaded horse up the incline—to find that the garrison of the most vital, the most exposed point of the whole Union battle-field was a handful of signallers! His worst fears had been realized. . . If the enemy got an inkling that their way was clear to Little Round Top, it would only be a question of minutes before a solid mass of Southern infantry rushed forward to seize it. . . What to do—a solitary staff officer, with just a couple of boys and a group of signalmen to help him? At that moment the destiny of the whole battle of Gettysburg was laid in Warren's hands.

"Action! It was the keynote of his whole character. . . To act, and act promptly, had become second nature. The instant he comprehended the situation—and this took only a flash of time—Warren acted."

"In his letters to his anguished bride . . . was no mention of what he personally accomplished on that fearful field. . . But when Mead's detractors were thrusting at Gettysburg's victor in the dark, from behind, Warren wrote:

"If the truth ever prevails, the people will acknowledge a debt of gratitude to General Meade for Gettysburg, that will make him loved as long as we are a nation. He was quick, bold, cheerful and hopeful, and so inspired others. I believe he had a real strength from his fine trust in Divine Providence, and his upright character gave confidence to all others who so trusted."

"Today, topping the rough summit which his resourcefulness and courage saved from capture, stands Warren's statue. The spirited and heroic bronze embodies a truth too often forgotten by the doctrinaires. . . Invariably and always, battle implies the unexpected—and only the soldier who grasps the sudden chances of battle ever wins one. It is the man of quick vision and



Scenery in the Bad Lands of Nebraska. From Drawing by Lieutenant Warren

iron determination, the man of imagination and action, who can twist today's bleak fortunes into the morrow's triumph. . . Alone, Warren saved the Army of the Potomac from defeat at Gettysburg."

Again, at Five Forks, in the face of conditions almost impossible, Warren and his indomitable corps won another incredible victory.

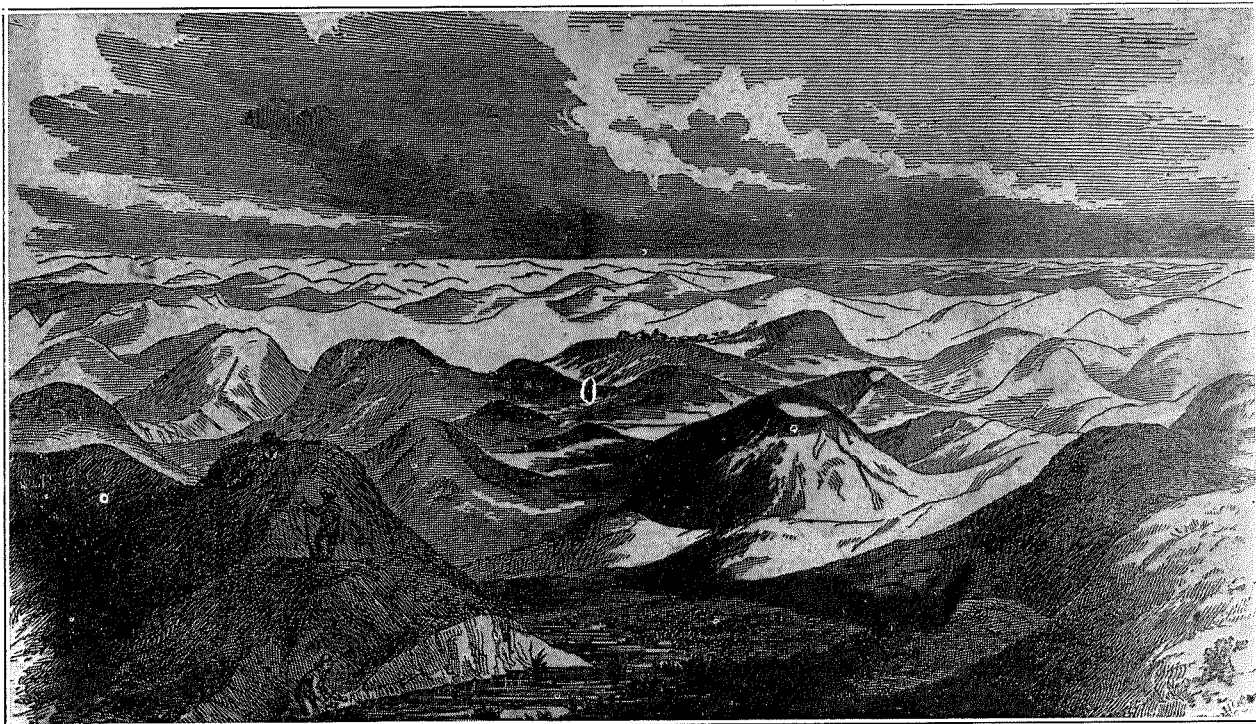
"As the battle continued, it was obvious that Warren and his infantry, not the precious cavalry, were going to win the fight. That, to Sheridan, was perfectly intolerable. Here rode Custer and Merritt; here, at the head, rode Sheridan himself—dashing and superb and reckless and accomplishing precious little. Could it be suffered that any mere infantryman should carry off all the honors of the day? The thought itself was enough to enrage the jealous cavalryman, and for long hours he nursed it. And when the battle was over, when Sheridan realized that, unless something were done to prevent it instantly, the award of victory would assuredly go to Warren, the cavalryman deliberately drew the knife which his good friend Grant had placed ready to his hand. It is a story which would seem utterly incredible, were it not perfectly true."

Thus it was that, at the moment of his greatest triumph, the intrepid and brilliant young officer was summarily relieved from duty. "It was stinging! To Warren, the best corps commander in the Army of the Potomac, veteran of its every campaign, leader of its every advance, Grant would assign some duty in the quiet and shameful rear."

General Warren accepted his fate calmly, tho the beloved Meade himself had criticized the very qualities that made his victory possible. To his wife he wrote:

"The Western generals have shown a spirit that is extremely sectional . . . and has made me often anxious and wakeful. This last act has put me entirely out of the roll of aspirants, and now that it is to be endured, I feel better already. Adversity proves men and their friends. I could easily bear all my chagrin, if it were not for my darling . . . But it is the will of Heaven . . .

"My countrymen cannot allow me to be treated so, when they shall know the whole truth. I am young yet. I have fifteen good years to work in, and Divine Justice to trust in, if human fails. I feel my energies more refreshed by the injustice I have endured



Scenery in the Sand Hills (les Buttes de Sable) of Nebraska
From Drawing by Lieutenant Warren

than any triumph could have done. I hope my dear, angel wife will be stronghearted and bear everything patiently for the time.' ”

But not all of the people were fooled, as witness one typical phrase from a personal letter:

“ ‘I have yet to see the first person who does not believe that the most outrageous injustice has been done you. With many, it has aroused such feelings of indignation as almost to take away the great joy of the victory. We feel that . . . you have been wounded in the house of your friends.’ ”

“From a cloud of witnesses present at Five Forks there poured a rain of unsolicited letters all in accord. . . Even Meade tried to help. . . Like the generals, all the best military historians of the day, eye-witnesses to the endless work of the Army of the Potomac on the Virginia fields, united spontaneously in Warren’s defense and praise, . . even tho they could (and often did) differ on every other fact of the army’s campaign.”

The ever loyal Fifth Corps, returning after Lee’s surrender, passed thru Petersburg under Griffin’s command, and there the men learned that Warren was in the city.

“Word flashed up and down the jubilant columns, and arrangements were made for the old Fifth to pass in review once more before the general who had led it thru its fiercest battles to final triumph. The route thru the city was altered. Warren, his wife at his side, stood on the steps, . . . and as the veteran regiments and batteries marched up the street, their shot-riddled colors flying, every officer and soldier, from General Griffin down, cheered to the echo the calm and proud general who stood to take the final marching salute of the men who loved and trusted him. It was one of the great dramatic scenes of the war.”

At first General Warren had confidence that justice would be done him without solicitation, but later saw the necessity of filing formal application for a court of inquiry. The request was three times renewed. “Justice! The very word was to ring in Warren’s ears as a symbol of mockery and delusion. . . .



Statue of General Warren on Little Round Top
Gettysburg

“Not until 1879, more than fourteen years after Grant and Sheridan struck him down at Five Forks, was Warren enabled to confront his detractors before a military court with the demand that they make their accusations good. . . It is all-important that a soldier’s record shall be perfect in the cold, dry files of the War Department. For the popular verdict he cares nothing—it is the formal official report of his military conduct that is sacrosanct. . . . And for sixteen years, because of infamous politics, this final seal of approval was withheld from the outstanding soldier of the Army of the Potomac—sensitive as a woman, enduring as a hero, hoping against hope. . . .

“Six months later (1882) the findings of the court of inquiry . . . denied the validity of every one of Sheridan’s imputations. At every moment of the crucial battle-field, the court justified and approved Warren’s every action. On that late November day, his personal honor, his military skill, his reputation and his name received their thrilling and permanent vindication.”

But the gallant soldier with the weary heart was dead. “Those who kept vigil with him, waiting for the distant, silvery trumpet to sound Taps, . . . heard the message sent from his final field of combat.

“‘The flag!’ murmured Warren, just before he closed his eyes. ‘The flag!’”

And this is the man whose arresting portrait has found place of honor on the walls of the State Historical Society.