

Albert Lea

By Frank Clark



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I saw a Series 1929 Type 1 \$20 National Bank Note on the First National Bank of Albert Lea, Minnesota charter number 3560. I started to wonder how did this town get its name? This thought led to an unexpected story with father and son on opposite sides of the Civil War.

Albert Miller Lea was born on July 23, 1808 in Richland, Tennessee near Knoxville. Albert attended the United States Military Academy. He graduated fifth out of 33 cadets in the Class of 1831. He was assigned to the engineers due to his high class ranking and posted as a topographer to Fort Des Moines in the Wisconsin Territory, but soon to become part of the Iowa Territory. He surveyed southern Minnesota and northern Iowa in 1835. This included the land that later became the eponymous town of Albert Lea in Freeborn County in 1855 when the residents of the area chose to honor Mr. Lea in this manner. Lea kept a detailed journal of the expedition. Lea resigned his commission after his mandatory five-year military commitment was up in 1836. He became the chief engineer of his home state of Tennessee in 1837 despite his youth. His next job was working for the United States government surveying the border between the states of Iowa and Missouri. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad came calling next and Lea was the assistant engineer for that railroad during the years 1839-40. Next, this busy man was able to squeeze in a stint as a brigadier general in the Iowa militia. That was followed by a presidential appointment by Martin Van Buren as chief clerk for

the United States War Department in March, 1841. This government position is now known as the Undersecretary of Defense. This led two short terms as acting Secretary of War. President John Tyler appointed Lea as Secretary of War in September, 1841 for six weeks when John Bell resigned. Also, President Millard Fillmore appointed Lea once again as acting Secretary of War for three months in 1850. After all that moving around, Lea attended East Tennessee University at Knoxville (now the University of Tennessee) and earned his master's degree in engineering in 1844. He would go on and serve as a professor of mathematics at this university. He resigned from this position in order to serve as the city engineer for Knoxville from 1849-54. The year 1855 saw him move to East Texas. When the Civil War broke out, he became an engineer with the Confederate States Army with the rank of major and he later attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. Albert first served in the Eastern Theatre, but was transferred back to Texas, where he arrived on December 15, 1862. He was living in Galveston after the Civil War and he later moved to Corsicana, Texas when he purchased a farm from a relative in 1874. He died of heart failure on January 16, 1891 and was interred in Oakwood Cemetery in Corsicana.

Edward Lea, was born on January 31, 1837 in Baltimore, Maryland to army engineer Albert Miller Lea and Ellen Shoemaker. Unlike his father who had attended West Point, Edward entered the Naval Academy at Annapolis on October 2, 1851. He

graduated on June 9, 1855. He worked his way up to lieutenant by the end of 1860. Edward was serving on the USS Hartford when the Civil War started. The USS Hartford was a sloop-of-war steamer and the flagship of the East India Squadron. She was ordered home and departed the Sunda Strait on August 30, 1861 and arrived in Philadelphia for refitting on December 2, 1861.

Edward was reassigned to the USS Harriet Lane which became part of the Gulf Blockading Squadron. Both Edward and the ship were involved in the capture of New Orleans in April, 1862. He was promoted to lieutenant commander and in July, 1862 the USS Harriet Lane engaged Confederate batteries near Vicksburg.

The next assignment was the blockade of Galveston, which resulted in a Union victory and the capture of that port on October 4, 1862. The Confederates wanted to retake the valuable port and therefore planning began in order to achieve that goal.

Albert Lea was temporarily detached to the command of Colonel C.G. Forshey while battle plans were prepared for the pending battle. He learned that one of the Union ships in the harbor was the Harriet Lane and he believed his son was still serving on it. The Battle of Galveston started during the pre-dawn hours of January 1, 1863. Albert helped in the movement of six cannons across the rail causeway of Galveston Island. He was next placed in the tallest church steeple in Galveston so that he could watch the naval battle unfold. Lea saw the Confederate gunboat, Bayou City, ram the Harriet Lane. Next, the Confederates stormed the Union vessel and captured it. Lea hurried to board the Harriet Lane. When he got there he found that the Union commander Captain Jonathan M. Wainwright was dead and that his son, the executive officer Lieutenant Commander Edward Lea was mortally wounded due to having been shot through the navel. The elder Lea went ashore to arrange care for the younger Lee and then he traveled

back to the Harriet Lane. Death was imminent for the young Union naval officer and the Confederate engineer said, "Edward this is your father." The response from Edward was, "Yes, father, I know you, but I cannot move." The young Lea was then asked if any special disposition should be made of his body. Edward replied, "No, my father is here." January 2, 1863 saw Albert Lea conduct the funeral rites for the two Union naval officers because an ordained minister was not present. The deceased were buried in a common grave. Captain Wainwright was reinterred with honors at the Naval Cemetery in Annapolis, Maryland in 1866. At this time, a wealthy relative of Edward Lea's sought permission to have Edward Lea reburied next to his mother in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore. However, Albert Lea refused the request on the grounds that his son preferred to remain where he had fallen, "in sight of the sea, in sound of the turf." Albert Lea would survive the war. After the Battle of Galveston, he was the chief engineer for General H.P. Bee's command in Brownsville, Texas. Lea would be promoted to lieutenant colonel at the end of 1863. His last Confederate post was as head of the Cotton Bureau in Eagle Pass, Texas. That job entailed trading cotton for gunpowder and arms.

Albert Lea visited the Minnesota site named for him only twice. The first time was when he and the army surveying expedition he was attached to came upon a lake in July, 1835 that today bears his name. The expedition camped nearby on land that later became the town of Albert Lea. The second time occurred in June, 1879 when the town fathers invited the former Confederate to be their guest of honor at their fortieth anniversary celebration.

Collecting National Bank Notes sometimes leads one to areas that are totally unexpected. That is what happened when I gazed upon that Type 1 \$20 on charter number 3560.

Bibliography

Block, W.T. "A Towering East Texas Pioneer: A Biographical Sketch of Colonel Albert Miller Lea" *East Texas Historical Journal*, 32, No. 2 (1993), 23-33.

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