

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

First Union officer to die in Civil War has Ripon ties

Memorial Day is celebrated in America on the last Monday of May. This national holiday originated in the years following the Civil War and honors those people who died while serving in the many branches of the U.S. military. It is a much more solemn day than Veterans Day, which is celebrated Nov. 11 each year and honors people who have served in the military.

One marker honoring a fallen soldier is found in section B of Ripon's Hillside Cemetery located on Congress Street near Elm Street. The marker was placed there to honor Col. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth (1837-1861), the first Union officer to lose his life in the American Civil War.

Ellsworth's marker in Ripon is technically called a "cenotaph" which is an empty tomb or monument erected in honor of a person or group whose remains are buried elsewhere.

The Ripon Historical Society recently was contacted by the Illinois State Capitol inquiring about this cenotaph, and why it is in Ripon. A Ripon Historical Society genealogist researched the cenotaph and found that it was requisitioned by Ripon Dr. Edgar C. Barnes (1865-1954), who lived on Woodside Avenue and later Jackson Street, in 1948 (long after Ellsworth was killed).

The cenotaph was approved by the U.S. Government for shipment to William "Billy" Prill (1896-1985), listed as superintendent at Hillside Cemetery, who guaranteed the marker be delivered to him for personal installation at the cemetery.

Ellsworth grew up in New York and in 1854 moved to Rockford, Ill. to work for a patent agency. In 1857, he became the drillmaster of the local militia company the "Rockford Greys" and in his spare time studied military science. He then helped train militia units in Madison and Milwaukee. He married and his family debated whether he would be able to afford a family. They advised him to become a lawyer and in 1859, he moved to Chicago to study law.

In addition to the above cenotaph connecting Ellsworth to Ripon, the 1860 U.S. Federal Census shows Elmer Ellsworth listed as a "law student" staying in the Hazen family house located



COL. ELMER ELLSWORTH (1837-1861), a personal friend of President Abraham Lincoln, was the first officer to lose his life in the American Civil War. He has a marker near his relatives in Ripon's Hillside Cemetery.

in Ripon Ward 1, dwelling #1165. Chester Hazen (1824-1900) of Ripon served as a judge, justice of the peace, mayor of Ripon and assemblyman.

State of Illinois researchers agree that Ellsworth may have been in Ripon to be mentored by Hazen. The Ripon Historical Society also notes there were other Ellsworths who had married Riponites living here at that same time period. In addition, Ellsworth was the first cousin once removed of the father of Clarence H. Ellsworth (1859-1919), who owned the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* newspaper from 1876 until 1917.

The Illinois Center for Lincoln Studies in Springfield, Ill. noted Ellsworth as traveling and making "Republican Speeches" (the Republican Party being Founded in Ripon in 1854). Ellsworth then went to work with Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) at his law practice.

Ellsworth worked tirelessly and was chosen to assist in Lincoln's 1860 campaign to become the first-ever Republican U.S. president. When Lincoln won the election, Ellsworth traveled

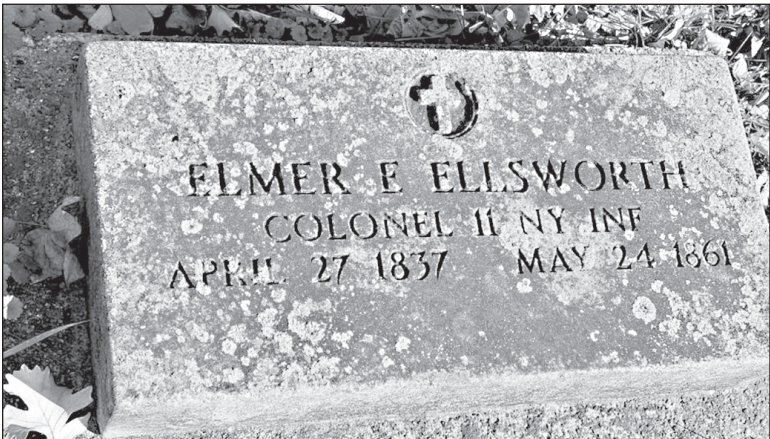
with him to Washington, D.C. in 1861 prior to his presidential inauguration.

When the Civil War started that same year, Ellsworth helped recruit soldiers for the Union army. He wanted to serve and was appointed colonel of the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which was stationed in Washington, D.C. by Lincoln. Ellsworth was sometimes referred to as the "Little Colonel" because of his diminutive height, which was accentuated when in the presence of Lincoln, who was 6-foot, 4-inches tall.

While in Washington, D.C., Lincoln and Ellsworth observed a Confederate flag flying from a roof across the Potomac River in Alexandria, Va.

On May 24, 1861, Ellsworth's troops defeated the Confederate forces in Alexandria. Ellsworth decided to take down this rebel flag, which he felt had been mocking the Union headquarters across the river. He was shot through the heart by the building's owner as he was descending the stairs with the flag and died at age 24.

When Lincoln heard of Ellsworth's death, he ordered an



ABOVE, WHILE he is not buried in Hillside Cemetery in Ripon, nor did he live in Ripon, this cenotaph marker for Elmer Ellsworth (1837-1861) is found there. The memorial was placed there by Ripon relatives to honor Ellsworth, the first Union officer killed in the Civil War. Right, his physical grave site is in the Hudson View Cemetery in Mechanicville, Saratoga County, N.Y.

submitted photos honor guard to bring the body to the White House. Lincoln and his wife chose to meet Ellsworth's body at the navy shipyard and the president burst into tears saying "My boy! My boy!"

Ellsworth was transported to lay in state in the East Room of the White House before being taken to City Hall in New York City. Lincoln felt some personal guilt for deploying Ellsworth into the Civil War, which had just broken out. Thousands of Union supporters came to pay their respects to Ellsworth, the first man who had died for the Union cause. Actor Adam Croesdell portrayed Ellsworth in the 2013 movie "Saving Lincoln."

Ellsworth is physically buried in the Hudson View Cemetery in Mechanicville, Saratoga County N.Y. His grave is marked with a large monument and plaque installed in 1874. The grave and monument were accepted by and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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