

The origin of Ellsworth Cemetery's name leads to first Civil War martyr – February 25, 2024

In recent years, the Carroll County Times has covered several important events at historic Ellsworth Cemetery including its annexation into Westminster's city limits as well as the installation of new headstones for members of the military buried there. But what lies behind that cemetery's name? What prompted the seven African American men who founded the cemetery in 1876 to name it after Colonel Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth? The answer is intriguing. James Swanson's book "Bloody Crimes: The Chase for Jefferson Davis and the Death Pageant for Lincoln's Corpse" and other sources offer background on who Elmer Ellsworth was.

Abraham Lincoln and Ellsworth met in the months before Lincoln became president. According to Swanson, Lincoln asked Ellsworth, a clerk in his Illinois law office, to help deal with a deluge of requests from autograph hounds once he became the Republican nominee for president in 1860. In longhand, Ellsworth would carefully copy "It gives me pleasure to comply with your request for my autograph," then turn the letters over to Lincoln for his signature. Apparently, dozens of these letters have come to light.

The 52-year-old Lincoln and 24-year-old Ellsworth became great friends during the period leading up to Lincoln's election. The articulate young man even spent time delivering Republican campaign speeches which attracted crowds across central Illinois. In the meantime, Lincoln was impressed with Ellsworth's strong interest and expertise in military drill. When Lincoln's train left Springfield in February 1861 bound for his March inauguration in Washington, Ellsworth was onboard. Lincoln had plans for how he could integrate his protege into the work which lay ahead.

On April 12, 1861, less than a month after the inauguration, Fort Sumter came under attack and the Civil War began. Lincoln called for 75,000 Union troops and Ellsworth responded by heading to New York City where he raised a regiment of soldiers among its firefighters. On May 7, Lincoln and his son, Tad, watched as Ellsworth and his regiment were sworn into military service in front of the U.S. Capitol. Ellsworth held the rank of colonel.

Across the Potomac lay Virginia. From the White House, Lincoln could see a Confederate flag flying over a hotel in Alexandria. On May 24 Col. Ellsworth and his men were sent across the river to take possession of the city. Ellsworth entered the hotel, pulled down the offending flag, and was descending the hotel stairs when the owner shot him in the chest, killing him instantly. Ellsworth became the first Union officer killed in the Civil War and an immediate martyr.

Visitors to Lincoln's second-floor office in the White House shortly after he'd been notified of his friend's death found him staring out the window. When he turned around he couldn't keep his emotions in check. He is believed to have said, "Poor fellow! It was undoubtedly an act of rashness, but it only shows the heroic spirit that animates our soldiers. . .in this righteous cause of ours. Yet who can restrain their grief to see them fall in such a way as this; not by fortunes of war, but by the hand of an assassin."

The following day, Lincoln arranged a funeral service for Ellsworth in the East Room of the White House, then followed his friend's coffin to the railroad station where a train was waiting to return Ellsworth to his family and fiancée in New York.

Lincoln's private secretary John Hay wrote of Ellsworth, "And [I] will say this of him, that I never yet saw so much of manhood embraced within five and half [feet] from spur to plume. He was a soldier born to command men, and he was an artist also, ready and persuasive stump speaker, a close, relentless student, but everything in him was subordinate to a feverish and passionate love of arms and lust of fame. He had that intense and romantic devotion to the flag which is only seen among young and imaginative men. I have seen him take the colors in his hands and caress them as a mother does her child. He was, perhaps, not a man of our time. He was too purely a soldier to be a perfect Republican. He was full of reveries of conquest."

James Swanson noted, "As word of Ellsworth's death spread across the country, he became a popular hero celebrated in prints, sheet music, badges. . ." Noah Brooks said of the Ellsworth craze: "The death of Ellsworth, needless though it may have been, caused a profound sensation throughout the country, where he was well known. He was among the very first martyrs of the war, as he had been one of the first volunteers. Lincoln was overwhelmed with sorrow. . .and even in the midst of his increasing cares, he found time to sit alone and in grief-stricken meditation by the bier of the dead young soldier of whose career he had cherished such great hopes."

Although 15 years had passed since Ellsworth's death in 1861, perhaps we can assume the seven Carroll County men who founded Ellsworth Cemetery in 1876 wanted to honor a fallen hero in this way.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*

*Image 1: Source: Library of Congress      Caption: This image from the Library of Congress is titled "Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth of the fire Zouaves"*

*Image 2: Source: Library of Congress      Caption: Photograph of Elmer E. Ellsworth*

*Image 3: Source: Library of Congress      Caption: Patriotic poster titled "The First Martyrs" with the date 1861 shows an image of Col. Ellsworth in the center.*