

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

By **Jared Peatman**, Lincoln Leadership Institute

Lawrence Joshua Chamberlain — he would later invert the order of his first and middle name — was born on September 8, 1828, in Brewer, Maine, to Sarah Dupree and Joshua Chamberlain. His first name was a tribute to James Lawrence, an American naval hero of the War of 1812 most famous for his last words: “Don’t give up the ship!” In time Lawrence would be joined by four siblings. His family made their living through farming and logging, staples of the nineteenth century Maine economy. Both parents wanted their son to be a leader, but while his father favored the military route, his mother preferred the clergy. As a young adult Chamberlain worked on the family farm and taught in the local school.

But Chamberlain wanted more, and spent much of 1846 teaching himself Greek and perfecting his Latin — two of what would eventually become seven languages that he mastered — in order to gain entrance to Bowdoin College, the state’s first institution of higher learning. Chamberlain was admitted in February 1847 as a late entrant to the freshman class, a testament to his abilities as a self-educator. He intended to enter the clergy, and switched the order of his first and middle name to privilege the biblical name over the military one. Ironically for one who would later become one of his state’s most prolific orators, Chamberlain struggled with a stutter in these early years, but mastered the problem by reading ahead to anticipate and react to troublesome words. Those tactics would serve him well fifteen years later during his military career.

Chamberlain attended the Congregationalist First Parish Church of Brunswick, and in 1851 became the director of the choir. The previous year he had met the Reverend’s daughter, Caroline Frances Adams, or Fanny, and soon they were courting. A number of their dates were spent at the residence of faculty member Calvin Stowe and his wife, Harriet Beecher Stowe, where they were treated to pre-publication readings of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In 1852 Chamberlain graduated from Bowdoin and proposed marriage to Fanny. She accepted, but they would be separated for the next three years while Chamberlain attended the Bangor Theological Seminary and she worked as a music instructor in Milledgeville, Georgia, to repay debts owed to her adoptive father. In one of his letters to Fanny during the separation Chamberlain pledged, “I must and will do something and be something.”¹

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852); Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Adams, January 18, 1854, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

After completing his theological studies in 1855 Chamberlain took a job as a tutor at Bowdoin. On December 7 he and Fanny were married. By the next fall Chamberlain was a full professor, and on October 16, 1856, they welcomed daughter Grace (Daisy) to the family. Chamberlain was unsettled at Bowdoin: he was more progressive than many of his elder peers, favoring both the offering of science and liberal arts courses in addition to the traditional classical offerings and also presenting a kinder, more egalitarian treatment of his students than the stricter measures then preferred by most educators.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Chamberlain did not immediately volunteer for military service, though he did observe carefully the drill instruction given the Bowdoin Militia. Perhaps the illness and eventual death of his brother Horace in 1861 had influenced his decision to sit out the first year of the war. By the summer of 1862, however, Chamberlain could resist no longer, and on July 14, 1862, wrote to Governor Israel Washburn Jr.: “I have always been interested in Military matters, and what I do not know in that line, I know how to learn... Your Excellency presides over the Educational, as well as the Military affairs of our State, and, I am well aware, appreciates the importance of sustaining our Institutions of Learning. You will therefore be able to decide where my influence is most needed.” Washburn decided that influence was most needed in the military, and appointed Chamberlain the lieutenant-colonel of the forming 20th Maine Infantry Regiment.²

When President Abraham Lincoln asked for the northern states to contribute an additional 300,000 troops to federal service in July 1862, Maine officials planned to raise four new infantry regiments, starting with the 16th Maine. However, so many men turned out that a fifth regiment, the 20th Maine, was created from the surplus volunteers. The individual companies came from all over the state, and would be commanded until the following May by Adelbert Ames, an 1861 graduate of West Point. Ames was a hero of the First Battle of Bull Run and would later be awarded a Medal of Honor for his bravery during that conflict in refusing to leave the field even after being wounded.

Chamberlain, as he had promised Governor Washburn, studied hard to learn military tactics. Ames, a professionally trained military man who had seen battle, was a good teacher. Additionally, Chamberlain soon realized, “Every bit of my experience in former life and studies is of the utmost value to me here. Habits of perception, quick judgment, reflection, of self-control – and of command too – everything helps me.” The 20th made it to the front in time for the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, but was held in reserve along with the rest of the V Corps. Their first action came three months later at Fredericksburg. The unit lost four men killed, and Chamberlain spent a night pinned down in front of the infamous Marye’s Heights, sleeping between corpses to keep out the driving wind. Just a week earlier two men from the regiment had frozen to death in their tents, and Chamberlain was lucky to survive the night. Indeed harsh

² Joshua Chamberlain to Israel Washburn, July 14, 1862, Maine State Archives.

weather and disease took a vast toll on the regiment: by March 1863 only 550 of the original 979 enrollees were still with the unit.³

At the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863 the regiment was again held back, this time due to bad vaccinations that left the men incapacitated and contagious. Shortly after the battle Ames was given a brigade in the XI Corps, and Chamberlain took command of the regiment. A promotion to colonel would come on the last day of June. During the spring he had considered accepting a position on Major General Oliver Otis Howard's staff, or as the colonel of a newly forming regiment, but ultimately declined both and was rewarded with his promotion to colonel and commander of the 20th Maine. How different history might have been had he leapt at one of those other opportunities.

On May 20, 1863, the day he took over the regiment, Chamberlain received word that as many as 180 mutineers from the 2nd Maine were to be assigned to the 20th. When these men enlisted they were told it was for two years, but the papers they signed said three years. Commanding Major General Joseph Hooker made the arbitrary decision that any man who had signed the three year papers by May 31, 1861, would only be held to two years' service, but anyone who signed them June 1 or later would have to stay for the extra year. This decision potentially had life or death consequences: fourteen percent of the men in the 2nd Maine had died during the first two years of the war, and of the 100 men ultimately transferred to Chamberlain, forty-one had already been shot.

Not surprisingly, the men mutinied and refused to do duty. They were arrested, placed under guard, and denied food. After three days they showed no signs of breaking. It was then that corps commander Major General George Gordon Meade sent the entire group to the 20th Maine and told Chamberlain he could deal with them in any way he saw fit, up to and including executing the whole lot. In addition to the large group of men who were transferred en masse other small groups of men also trickled in throughout May and June. Chamberlain met with each group as they arrived, listened to their problems, and tried to win over their hearts. The letter Chamberlain wrote to Governor Abner Coburn on May 25, 1863, gives us great insight into his leadership:

The transfer of the "three years men" of the 2d Maine has been so clumsily done, that the men were allowed to grow quite mutinous – left uncared for in their old camp after the 2d had gone for several days, & having time and provocation to work themselves up to such a pitch of mutiny that Gen Barnes had to send them to me as prisoners, liable to serve penalties for disobedience of his orders. You are aware, Governor, that promises were made to induce these men to enlist, which are not now kept, & and I must say that I sympathize with them in their view of the case. . . . They need to be managed with great care & skill; but I fear that some of them will get into trouble for disobedience of orders or mutiny.

³ Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, October 19, 1863, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

My orders are to take them & put them on duty – which they have already refused to Gen. Barnes & others. I shall carry out my orders whatever may be the consequence; but I sincerely wish these men were fairly dealt with by those who made them their promises.⁴

Two days later Chamberlain wrote the governor again, noting, “I have taken a liberal course with them, because they are nearly all good & true men, but I shall be obliged to carry a firm hand. They are now ordered on duty, & their orders must be carried out. They are expecting to hear from you, in reply to a communication of theirs & their expectation of this keeps them in an undecided state of mind as to doing duty.” Chamberlain used the same approach with these men that he had with the students at Bowdoin, and it garnered him a ninety-nine percent success rate: ultimately only one man would refuse to rejoin the regiment. Just six weeks later those men would become critical to the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg.⁵

On June 13, 1863, Chamberlain’s men headed north, pursuing General Robert E. Lee’s Confederates toward Pennsylvania. On July 1 lead elements of the armies clashed at the small crossroads town of Gettysburg, a name and place that would become quite special for Joshua Chamberlain. On July 2 his 20th Maine was sent to the top of a small hill called Little Round Top with orders to defend his position to the last. A brutal, all-consuming fight, first with elements of the 47th Alabama, then with the entire 15th Alabama, brought the Mainers to the breaking point. In the midst of the battle Chamberlain realized that his flank was exposed, and while under fire he reorganized his line so that it bent back on itself and protected the vulnerable flank. Finally, after an hour and a half of fighting, his men began to run out of ammunition. At the critical moment Chamberlain screamed the word “Bayonets.” His men knew what the order meant, and before he could say more the soldiers of the 20th Maine began charging toward the enemy. Their success was overwhelming; ultimately the Mainers captured 308 prisoners from multiple regiments, securing their position and place in history. Little Round Top was one of the places where Gettysburg might have been lost for the Union army had the 20th Maine not been equal to their task. Chamberlain’s leadership at Gettysburg would be recognized with a Medal of Honor in the 1890s and by promotion to brigade command later that summer.

Chamberlain’s health, though, had become a problem. He had missed much of the march to Gettysburg due to illness, and would be forced to take sick leave three times in 1863. He was able to visit Gettysburg with Fanny in the spring of 1864, the first of his many return visits to the Pennsylvania battlefield. With the reorganization of the army in 1864 Chamberlain was assigned a new brigade, and was at its head on June 17, 1864, outside Petersburg, Virginia, when he was struck by a bullet that nearly took his life. The bullet entered near his right hip and nearly came out on his left side; surgeons had to use a ramrod to find the bullet. The surgeons cast Chamberlain aside as a hopeless case, but

⁴ Joshua Chamberlain to Abner Coburn, May 25, 1863, Maine State Archives.

⁵ Joshua Chamberlain to Abner Coburn, May 27, 1863, Maine State Archives.

old friend Dr. Abner Shaw of the 20th Maine found him and operated for hours. Assumed to be on his deathbed – his obituary would be printed in the *New York Times* – Chamberlain was promoted to Brevet Brigadier-General. The wound would ultimately kill Chamberlain, but it would take fifty agonizing years to do so.

After a long recovery Chamberlain returned to duty only to be wounded again in March 1865 at Quaker Road, his sixth and final injury during the war. The Mainer's fate caught the eye of Lieutenant-General Ulysses Simpson (Hiram Ulysses) Grant, and when Robert E. Lee's army formally surrendered less than two weeks later Grant tapped Chamberlain to accept the surrender. As the now-defeated Confederates approached Chamberlain ordered his men to "carry arms" as a sign of respect to the South's brave fighting men. Forever thereafter Chamberlain would be a welcome man in the former Confederacy.

With the war over Chamberlain was tasked with keeping order in Dinwiddie County, which surrounded Petersburg. He treated the civilians with such compassion that they wanted to throw a feast in his honor, but he declined owing to their scanty resources. Chamberlain remained in the army for a time, waiting for a much needed surgeon to clean up complications from his 1864 Petersburg wound, but soon was moving on.

Almost as soon as the war ended Chamberlain was in demand as a speaker on the recently completed war, and by the summer of 1866 was named the Union Party (Republican) nominee for governor of Maine. Chamberlain supported the ideals of Radical Reconstruction rather than the more lenient terms favored by President Andrew Johnson, but in his state the major issues were more basic: he advocated utilizing the state's natural resources, improving transportation, and attracting out-of-state investment and businesses. Chamberlain served a total of four terms, one year each. He declined to run for a fifth, having only run for the fourth due to a lack of alternative candidates. Despite being considered for both ambassadorships and a senatorial spot Chamberlain would never again achieve high political office, a result of his uncompromising nature and unwillingness to trade favors in the era of machine politics.

Upon leaving the governor's mansion Chamberlain was offered the presidency of the new state university in Orono, but declined, holding out for a similar offer from his *alma mater*. That offer came in 1871, and Chamberlain assumed the presidency of Bowdoin that fall. Chamberlain's major job was to secure the financial footing of the college, an ongoing project that met with mixed results. He also overhauled the curriculum, offering courses in science and liberal arts and instituting a required military sciences program. The changes were controversial, none more so than the military sciences requirement, and led to a rocky tenure. After a dozen years at Bowdoin's helm Chamberlain retired in 1883, largely due to continual flare ups from his Petersburg wound that left him incapacitated at times.

Perhaps the greatest crisis Chamberlain ever faced, even greater than that on Little Round Top, came in January 1880. The previous fall the three candidates for governor of Maine split the vote, giving none a plurality, and throwing the election into the state

legislature. In theory the Republican majority would elect their candidate, Daniel Davis, but accusations of fraud and bribery by the other parties turned the situation volatile. As armed mobs began forming, Chamberlain was called in as the Major-General of the State Militia and ordered to keep the peace while the State Supreme Court deliberated. Disavowing force, Chamberlain did not call out the state militia, instead relying on the city police force. At one point a mob threatened Chamberlain's life, but he talked them down and the peace was preserved. After twelve days the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Republicans, settling the crisis without bloodshed. One former soldier wrote, "We were never so proud of you as now." A former classmate ruminated that Chamberlain was "the man who conquers rebels in Virginia; preserves the power in Maine and teaches the boys in Brunswick to talk English and walk Spanish."⁶

After leaving Bowdoin Chamberlain spent several years investing — or speculating — in Florida real estate. Throughout his career Chamberlain struggled with financial stability, and the Florida venture left him no better off than he had been before. In the late 1880s he moved to New York City, a convenient location for the many trips he was then taking to Gettysburg to participate in the various dedications of Maine monuments. The 20th dedicated their monument in 1888, and Chamberlain delivered one of his many orations on the unit's actions during the battle. In 1898 Chamberlain volunteered for service in the war against Spain, but was turned down due to his age and health. Ironically, his foe on Little Round Top, Colonel William Calvin Oates, was given a commission as a Brigadier General.

In these years Chamberlain owned a hotel resort named Domhegan, and in 1899 was appointed surveyor of the port of Portland, a mid-level patronage appointment that offered some measure of financial stability. In the early 1900s Chamberlain visited several Civil War battlefields, including Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Appomattox, and of course, Gettysburg, and wrote and lectured widely on his wartime experiences. He last visited Gettysburg in May of 1913 in preparation for the fiftieth anniversary of the battle. His declining health meant he was unable to attend the reunion, and he would pass away on February 24, 1914, tended by Dr. Abner Shaw to the end.

Lawrence Joshua Chamberlain

⁶ D. M. Shapleigh to Joshua Chamberlain, January 15, 1880, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA; Truman Merrill to Joshua Chamberlain, January 21, 1880, National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA.

Born	September 8, 1828, Brewer Maine
Died	February 24, 1914, Portland, Cumberland County, Maine
Buried	Pinegrove Cemetery Brunswick, Cumbeland County, Maine
Father	Joshua Chamberlain
Mother	Sarah (Dupree) Chamberlain
Career Milestones	1856 Professor at Bowdoin College August 8, 1862, appointed Lieutenant Colonel in the 20 th Maine first action December 13, 1862, Marye's Heights Fredericksburg June 30, 1863, promoted to Colonel and command of the 20 th Maine May and June 1863 averted a rebellion by mutinous 2 nd Maine troops assigned to the 20 th Maine July 2, 1863 successful defense of Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg June 18, 1864, severely wounded at the Siege of Petersburg June 1864 promoted to Brigadier General March 29, 1865, wounded at Quaker Road and brevetted Major General April 12, 1865, Union Officer in charge of accepting the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia 1866-1869 elected Governor of Maine 1871-1883 appointed President of Bowdoin College 1888 presided over the dedication of the 20 th Maine monument at Gettysburg 1893 Awarded the Medal of Honor for the defense of Little Round Top.
