



December 1966

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.8, December 1966, p.341-354

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Colby Library Quarterly

Series VII

December 1966

No. 8

JOSHUA CHAMBERLAIN'S RETIREMENT BILL

By HAROLD B. RAYMOND

THE CIVIL WAR was the decisive event in the lives of an entire generation of Americans. For the men who took part in the conflict it remained a persistent memory and often a dominant interest. For over half a century aging survivors continued to refight the old campaigns and renew both comradeship and rivalries of army life. At the same time the veterans presented the republic and its government with a disturbing and basically unanswerable question: what honors and material rewards could the former soldiers expect from subsequent generations? The problems of the veterans and the government are illustrated in a series of eight letters (now in the Colby College Library) between two old friends and comrades of the famous Twentieth Maine volunteers — Joshua Chamberlain and Henry Merriam.

Joshua Chamberlain had left his professorship at Bowdoin College in 1862 to become one of the outstanding combat commanders of the Union Army. He entered the service as a lieutenant colonel without previous military experience. By the end of the conflict he had risen to the rank of brevet major general of volunteers. The heroic and perhaps decisive stand of his regiment at Gettysburg won him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Except for brief periods of convalescence from serious wounds, Chamberlain was in almost constant front line service until the end of the war. In 1865 he was the officer selected to receive the final surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox. Upon return to civilian life, Chamberlain led an active and distinguished career in spite of long periods of illness and pain stemming from his wartime injuries. He was three times elected governor of Maine and played a major role in the Republican party for over a decade. In 1871 he returned to the academic world, where he served as a controversial and reform-

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ing president of Bowdoin until 1883. Like many former generals, he tried his hand at several business enterprises, including railways and a Florida land company. Always a man of wide interests and a keen social conscience, Chamberlain was a member of numerous educational and philosophical societies and an active participant in veterans organizations.¹

In 1906 General Chamberlain was seventy-eight and in precarious health due to the renewed inflammation of the wounds which had troubled him from the time he had received them in the assault on Petersburg forty-two years earlier. His business ventures had met with little success, and since 1900 he had been dependent on his position as Surveyor of the Customs at Portland. This office paid a salary of \$4,500, but because it was a patronage position and made extensive demands on his health, provided little in the way of security.² It was under these circumstances that Chamberlain hoped to secure Congressional action which would place him on the army retired list as a brigadier general. This rank would give him an assured income of \$4,125 a year, and — what was perhaps more important to the proud old soldier — a final and specific recognition of his wartime services.³ He placed the management of this request in the hands of an old friend and comrade, General Merriam. Henry Clay Merriam had served with Chamberlain in the Twentieth Maine and had also won the Congressional Medal of Honor. After graduating from Colby College in 1864, he resumed a career in the regular army. Before his retirement in 1898, Merriam was promoted to brigadier general with the vigorous and enthusiastic support of Chamberlain who wrote to the president on his behalf.⁴

It might at first seem that General Chamberlain's record and his situation in 1906 would insure favorable action by Congress. Instead, his correspondence on the matter shows that he had little hope of success. It appears likely that little serious consideration was given to his claims. Senator Wallace Frye of Maine did offer a private bill on Chamberlain's behalf on May

¹ Willard M. Wallace, *The Soul of the Lion; a biography of Joshua L. Chamberlain* (New York, 1960).

² *Official Register of the United States* (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1905), I, 142.

³ *Ibid.*, 575.

⁴ Wallace, 39, 307; Ernest C. Marriner, *The History of Colby College* (Waterville, Me., 1963), 536-537.

77th CONGRESS,
1ST SESSION.

S. 6150.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MAY 14, 1906.

FRYE introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Military Affairs.

A BILL

authorize the appointment of Joshua L. Chamberlain, late a brigadier and brevet major-general of volunteers, to be a brigadier-general in the Army on the retired list.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That the President of the United States be, and he is hereby, authorized, in his discretion, to nominate and, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to appoint upon the retired list of the Army, with the rank of brigadier-general, Joshua L. Chamberlain, formerly a brigadier-general and brevet major-general of United States Volunteers during the civil war.

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14, 1906, and again in the next session of Congress, but both bills were quietly consigned to oblivion in the military affairs committee of the Senate.⁵

The full story of Chamberlain's rejection cannot be precisely established, but an examination of his correspondence and the Congressional record shows why he or other former officers were sure to find their prospects extremely uncertain. Since the end of the Civil War, veterans' affairs had been in a political and legislative entanglement which involved partisan politics and the activity of numerous lobbyists. In addition to this, the feuds, rivalries, and traditions of the Union armies were carried on in the conflicts and divisions among the former soldiers. In one sense Congress had been exceedingly generous. Since 1861, over three billion dollars in pensions and bonuses had been paid out, and by 1905 there were nearly a million persons on the rolls of the Veterans Administration.⁶ Much of this sum, however, had been granted without adequate safeguards and under shameless political pressure. Heroes and bounty-jumpers were rewarded indiscriminately, and a major portion of every session of Congress was taken up with private bills and special grants for the former soldiers.⁷ In the chaos of this "great treasury raid," political connections and the support of the organized veterans groups had become crucial factors in the advancement of any claim in Congress. Chamberlain's letters reveal his recognition of this situation as well as his distaste for such affairs. By 1905 he had long since lost any political influence he might once have wielded. At the same time his somewhat unorthodox career in Maine politics had left some prejudice against him among the older party regulars.

General Chamberlain's case suffered not only from lack of strong political sponsorship but also from his involvement in the longstanding rivalries among the former soldiers. His open disapproval of some of the proposals of the organized veterans cost him their support and damaged his own claims. Unhappily for Chamberlain, an "omnibus bill" which provided for the

⁵ *Congressional Record* (59th Congress, 1st Session, 1906), 6794; Wallace, 338.

⁶ *World Almanac* (New York, 1905), 184.

⁷ Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865-1896* (New York, 1938), 460; Ellis Oberholtzer, *History of the United States Since the Civil War* (New York, 1931), II, 156-289; III, 170-171; IV, 353-356, 380-383, 465-470.

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mass transfer of brevet generals to the retired list was presented to Congress at about the same time he decided to advance his own case. While the Omnibus Bill would have included him, Chamberlain remained cool towards it for both practical and idealistic reasons. His letters show the persistent and age-old dislike of the combat officer for the "brass" and the "gold braid" soldiers who rose to high rank in staff and administrative positions. In the Civil War, the Union commissioned no less than 1,940 generals, many of whom never commanded troops in the field.⁸ A large number of these officers were promoted at the very end of the war, at which time 238 major generals and 969 brigadiers reached brevet rank after March 1, 1865.⁹ A recent historian of the Union armies has remarked that "brevet promotions had become almost as common as good conduct medals did later."¹⁰ The pride of the combat soldier was evident in Chamberlain's reluctance to be lumped together with late-blooming staff officers and quartermasters. He was also convinced that Congress would have grave doubts about a mass addition to the 268 general officers already on the retired list.¹¹

Chamberlain's doubts concerning the Omnibus Bill were soon proved to be well founded. The bill was introduced by Senators Nelson and Platt in 1905 but was allowed to die in the committee stage.¹² It became, however, a serious factor in the failure of the general's own claim for recognition. By failing to actively support it Chamberlain not only lost a chance to be included with the other officers but seriously undermined the hope for a private bill on his behalf. The organized veterans' lobby gave no support to his claims. This, combined with his lack of any powerful political allies, denied him the security and prestige of a place on the retired list.

Another factor in the Congressional indifference to Chamberlain's case may well have emerged from the ancient and often bitter rivalry between the regulars and volunteers. This dispute over the relative merits of the citizen soldier and the professional raged throughout the war and smoldered on for decades in memoirs, veterans' reunions, and in the allotment of honors

⁸ Ezra J. Warren, *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge, La., 1964), xviii.

⁹ Frederick Phlisterer, *Statistical Record of the Armies of the United States* (New York, 1883), 256-262, 290-316.

¹⁰ Warren, xvi.

¹¹ *Official Register* (1905), I, 570-575.

¹² *Congressional Record* (1906), 4794, 8694.

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and rewards. Faced with the steady movement of regular army officers onto the retired list Congress was hesitant to add further to the payroll from the host of those who had held volunteer commissions. The degree of feeling that could be engendered by this issue is illustrated in the fact that it could cause a serious misunderstanding between such old friends as General Chamberlain and his ardent supporter, General Merriam. In 1906 they had both spoken at a veterans' encampment and Chamberlain's remarks on behalf of the "citizen soldier" offended Merriam, who regarded them as a rebuttal to his own speech extolling the regulars. Chamberlain was anxious to disclaim any such intention, but the incident shows how sensitive the issue could be even among lifelong friends.

The Chamberlain-Merriam correspondence reveals some of the pressures and conflicts which surrounded veterans' legislation. It also demonstrates why a proud and somewhat reserved man had little chance of promoting his own case on its own merits. Chamberlain failed to win this final recognition but his letters show that while seeking it he retained a genuine modesty, devotion to complete factual accuracy, and sense of proportion. The scholar and humanist is clearly revealed within the former soldier and politician. It is in the remarkable combination of these roles that Joshua Chamberlain has established his claim to greatness.

LETTER 1

Portland
January 17, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I thank you very much for your generous interest in my behalf. I thought it likely you would find members of our delegation rather lukewarm in the matter, although I know of no reason why it should be so.

I do not know which of our Senators would take interest in a bill for me, but will try to find out.

Today I have your second letter. In regard to Webb, he did once ask me to join in a proposed "omnibus bill," but on receiving my reply he retired from advocacy of that bill, and instead (as I understand) voted a private bill. I enclose copy of that letter of mine to Webb, which, may I ask you to preserve, as it is my only copy.

I have written out as brief a sketch as I can without making it a mere "abstract of titles," of the points and passages of my career most likely to be considered "germane to the question" — expanding only the details

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of my being sent to command the parade at Appomattox, as you especially desired me to do this.

This is not, of course, to be set forth at length in any statement to be published for the use of Congress. I suppose only the barest "headings" would be proper for such a purpose.

This is for you to look over, and see what should be made up. When receiving your corrections and criticisms I will prepare it more properly. I was going to look up the passages in Gordon's and Lee's books and quote pages but I send it along as it is.

I do not go into many matters of fact in my "career" which, though important to me, must have no bearing on the point now at issue — which, I suppose, is chiefly the military.

Thanking you much,
yours
J. L. Chamberlain

I think the "appropriation bill" passed.

LETTER 2

Portland, Maine
January 21, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I am followed up closely with rather reproofing comments on my declining to join the movement for an omnibus bill retiring General officers and Colonels of Volunteers who have received the brevet of Brigadier General, upon a special basis of Volunteer Retired List. I am now assured by the movers in this that this bill is sure to pass: still I am urged more strenuously than ever to give my approval to the bill.

My reasons for not joining in the movement were chiefly the following: It is so sweeping in its scope that it seemed to me it could not be favorably received by the Congress; It should have been limited to officers who had not only been "with" troops in the field a year, but had actually commanded troops in the capacity of their brevet rank. You know many of us were all the time commanding in a grade above our actual rank, and this in the case of colonels commanding brigades was a hardship, by reason of the increased expense attaching to the position of command.

Brevets were scattered so promiscuously after the war that they are no indication of service in the field or anywhere else. It seems to me hardly just to base the application of this measure upon the brevet rank rather than on the actual service rendered. This, in fact, is my chief objection to the measure now proposed. I cannot truthfully say I approve this bill. And yet it seems a little ungracious for me to withhold assistance to old comrades deserving consideration, on account of the inclusion of some who do not stand on the same ground.

What would you advise?

Yours
J. L. Chamberlain

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LETTER 3

Portland
January 23, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I sent you a letter stating the embarrassment I am under in declining to join my "comrades" in petitioning for the "omnibus" retiring bill. I showed you my reasons for this declining in the copy of my letter to Webb. I do not however oppose that bill, but being of opinion that it had no chance of a passage, I did not wish to impair any influence I might have in promoting a more limited measure. But "they" will now probably call me selfish and fight me on a personal bill. This is unfortunate. Had I better join them in the present petition, and then if they fail and things look right, put in my personal bill on the Hawley precedent?

You know with Genl Fessenden's death, his retired pay might fairly be claimed by me.

I have noted a few points in the draft you were kind enough to prepare — on the whole shortening it. The suggestions I made are:

1) As to the statement that I commanded a brigade in *all* the battles of '64 up to Petersburg. I was not in the "Wilderness" and would you not introduce Genl Grant's testimony in the way I have indicated?

2) Would you not add the fact of being twice wounded in '65?

3) I did actually command the Division till we were leaving Appomattox. The fact was, that as my being so severely wounded in June '64 cost me the old command — the veteran brigade of the Division — and I cheerfully accepted the command of the youngest (and hardest) brigade in members. Griffin invariably ordered the 2nd brigade to "report to me" in every action after that time, so that my "command" was really equal to my old one in importance. It was a case where my cheerful acquiescence in an assignment of *reduced* importance took the attention of my superiors. It is the truth that I "commanded two brigades."

4) I do not like to say Grant honorably designated me. When he left he told the "Commissioners" Gibbon and Griffin (Sheridan had gone) that I was to command that phalanx. So they told me, officially. Would it be proper to add the fact that I was recommended for promotion to *Major General* by all my superiors of the army of the Potomac.

I venture to strike out the "*argumentum ad misericordiam*" in stating how used up I am, and saying how gratifying it would be to me to receive this recognition.

To save you trouble, I have my suggestions embodied in a typewritten form. Whether we shall decide best to do anything with it — you must judge. Genl Raum is at the Ebbitt, trying to push the omnibus bill. Genl Grosvenor is my friend, but he is in the "*Reserve*." So is *Spear*. I hate to set myself up above as distinct from my old *comrades in arms*. The rest of them I do not mind.

Yours as ever,
J. L. Chamberlain

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LETTER 4

Portland
January 29, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I thank you for your kind interest. I have thought the matter over, and it appears best on the whole for me to aid the "crowd" as far as I can without "going back" on my former statements of opinion. My *opinion* and reasons remain as before, but perhaps the form I have sent Genl Raum may serve him and my letter, frank as it is, ought not to offend them.

Yours as ever,
J. L. C.

I can't see how they can take advantage of my frankness in the letter to Genl Raum of which I enclose a copy. I endorse the *principle* tho' not the particular reasons proposed. If they do not begin to abuse me, my "opinion" enclosed may help them.

Yours,
J. L. C.

LETTER 5

Portland, Maine
February 19, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I thank you for your constant watchfulness, and for the letter just received, telling of the new bill now in progress.

I am glad they place the measure on a basis of service instead of "brevets." But now taking the whole body of officers who were "with" troops a year, runs into one of the obstacles affecting the former bill. There is a legion of those, many of whom, young at the time, are likely to be alive for some time yet, and this will make a big drain on the Treasury. This will be ground of opposition, and defeat, will it not?

Why did they not put it "in command of troops," not less than a brigade? There seems to be a disposition to "carry in" a lot of officers whose real service hardly warrants it.

Of course it is evident now that the "precedents" of Hawley and Osterhaus are not in any way the points to be made.

I don't know what will come of this new bill. But I can afford to wait a while, as you say, and see what turn things take. I greatly prefer to be put on the same basis as Hawley & c. There would be half a dozen others in the same case as I, no doubt. Such a case as that of Curtis should be treated on its own merits.

I hope I shall not tire you out.

Yours as ever,
Joshua L. Chamberlain

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LETTER 6

Brunswick, Maine

March 11, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I deeply feel the kindness and generosity you are manifesting in the interest you take in securing my appointment on a "retired list" on status.

Your careful details of procedure set forth in your recent letter, which came to my hands just as I was leaving Portland last week for a few days at home by reason of a sudden "set-back" threatening a bad time of the old sort with my wounds, lets me see the necessity of my seeking immediate response in the best way I can.

1) If the pending bill goes through, although I do not like it, and believe it to be doomed to rejection, I suppose I must accept its conditions — although I confess, this will be with reluctance. But this will, of course, effectually bar any personal action on my behalf forever if it passes. You can perhaps, imagine that I am not anxious for the passage of the bill. I never endorsed it, but only the *general principle* of retiring general officers of volunteers.

2) Now, if it does *not* pass, the course you recommend for me may be taken up *if there is any chance for its passage*. Unless we are aware of this, I would feel like letting it all go by. I do not want to be set up just to be knocked down. I would much rather stand on my present record and place.

3) If there is a fair chance of its passing I would agree with you that it is best to have it introduced first in the Senate. But I am told that neither of our Senators is friendly to me — for what reason I do not know. Nor do I know to what *degree* of dislike they entertain this feeling, nor whether it would oblige them to *oppose* my being recognized on military grounds. Perhaps they dislike only my conservative political ideas. I think Senators Gallinger, Lodge and Proctor would favor us, and perhaps one of the older Senators from the western states.

By the "rule" or "law" or "courtesy" of the Senate, I suppose any bill for me must emanate from one of the Maine Senators. In this case I must probably write to them both asking them to interest themselves for me, and introduce my bill. Possibly you might find out what their feeling is and advise me.

I think the Maine members of the House would favor a bill for me but would not like to push it with the committees. Mr. Alexander of New York, Mr. Stevens of Minnesota would warmly support me. Perhaps Mr. Capron of Rhode Island, also. He is on the Military Committee. The member of that committee from Minnesota is a Maine man, and might favor me. You see how slight a hold I have on the politicians as such. But it is possible that as *men* the congressmen might not be wholly ignorant of me nor ill-disposed towards me.

I dislike more than I can well express, to press you into disagreeable service. But I would be glad if you could find what the feeling would be on the part of Mr. Hull and other members of the House Committee towards a private bill. Or would it be proper or wise for me to write

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them stating that I had withheld the presentation of a private bill in order not to antagonize the efforts of comrades for a general bill, but now, (that is, after the defeat of this latter-named bill) I desire to make a personal application, or present a private bill, and ask if this would meet their approval. I had at the first, and before the session, written to Congressman Allen of Maine, and Stevens of Minnesota, and had very kindly answers.

You will see by this letter that in spite of my "good intentions" and effort to render myself worthy of your interest, I am in a depressed and dispirited mood, and this may vex you. I am not as well as I could wish, and cannot make myself rally as I wish.

I shall not take it ill if you drop all further effort for me. But I will conform to any suggestions you may make. I do not, however, like to "go to Washington" to press my interests.

Yours with sincere and grateful regard,
Joshua L. Chamberlain

LETTER 7

Portland, Maine
May 7, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

Why is it that our friends of the Volunteer Retirement Bill do not see that what is killing their proposition is the large inclusion of officers who were not commanding officers at all to say nothing of their being "General Officers" or not?

As I understand the phrase "with troops," it is expressly intended to take in a lot of brevet brigadier generals, who were colonels and majors on the staff in the field. Deserving as many of them are, I do not think they fairly come into the category of "General Officers" as contemplated in the sentiment justifying the retirement of Hawley and Osterhaus.

I am deluged with circulars, ably drawn, urging the principle of retiring General Officers, which I approve and would endorse; but the application is immediately made to staff brevet brigadiers, who do not logically nor, in my opinion fairly, come under the range of the argument referred to.

Now the statement comes that they are going to carry their scheme over into the next session. This, of course, knocks me out on a special application, for another year. This whole movement has worked directly against me from the beginning. Yet I am urged often to send them money to pay for this kind of work. It does not seem to me reasonable.

I have pleasant letters from Senator Frye, who thinks my chance much better on a private bill than on such a plan as the proposed. But now, it seems, nothing at all can be done.

I thank you for your patient interest and labor for me.

Yours truly,
Joshua L. Chamberlain

Brunswick
September 24, 1906

Dear General Merriam:

I am much grieved and not less surprised that you felt hurt, as I judge by the letter sent me by General Mattocks, that I "saw fit" to reply to you on my remarks on the *volunteers* at the Lewiston reunion. I was, in not a thought or word, replying to you, or taking any exception to what you said: I was only supplementing or complementing, your remarks by giving mention to the citizen soldier after your interesting presentation of the Regulars. You suggested (as I said at the time) a *theme* for the hasty words, I was called on to utter at the close, or rather breaking up, of the long stretch of talk at the "festival." I had been informed I was to speak first or second in this list, and not being called until everybody was tired out, and very many *gone out*, I had all my intended "speech" knocked out of my head. When at so unpropitious a stage of the proceedings I was called up, it struck me that the most appropriate thing I could do at a reunion of *volunteers*, to say a word to *them* and of them, following the tribute so worthily given to the Regulars and suggested by it. I did not "reply" to you, but only followed you. I did not disparage the Regulars, but pointed out, in too hasty a manner no doubt, some of the characteristic differences in the fundamental character of a citizen-soldiery and professional troops. I afterwards pencilled down the line of my remark, for I thought it partly of better interest on some other occasion, and I will look these notes over and see what I was so unfortunate as to say which could possibly have grieved you. You must know that I could not willingly, nor possibly, intend anything to do that.

I am "used up" and "laid up" with a long heavy cold.

Yours as ever,
Joshua L. Chamberlain



[*Facsimile of Biographical Memorandum*]

*Copy of Memorandum filed with Bill before the Senate, (S. 6150),
May 14th, 1906, in case of General Chamberlain.*

GENERAL JOSHUA L. CHAMBERLAIN was born in Maine in 1828, and was professor of languages in Bowdoin College from 1855 till the outbreak of the Civil War, when he was commissioned as Lieutenant-Colonel in the 20th Maine Vols. Was assigned to the Army of the Potomac and took part in the campaigns of 1862. He became Colonel of his regiment and greatly distinguished himself in the campaigns of 1863, receiving the Congressional Medal of honor "For daring heroism and great tenacity in holding Little Round Top, and capturing Big Round Top, at Gettysburg July 2, 1863." So runs the formal order, and such was the prompt official recognition of the magnificent work of Colonel Chamberlain and his gallant 20th Maine Regiment in seizing and holding for the Union Army the key of the Gettysburg battle field. The tactical value and importance of that position continues to grow in appreciation as time and study develop the strategy of that mighty struggle.

Only a few days ago, in this Capitol, while paying eloquent tribute to his deceased colleague, John Macpherson Pinckney, and referring to his part in the battle as a gallant Confederate soldier, the Honorable Scott Field, member from Texas, said "He was at the storming of Round Top Mountain at Gettysburg, where human valor reached its highest flood-tide, and where, could the crest of the mountain have been held for a few brief moments, the Confederacy would have lived and the history of the world been changed!"

Commanding brigade from that time General Chamberlain took part in the bloody battles of 1864. He was desperately wounded in leading a most gallant assault on Petersburg June 18th. Of this Gen'l Grant says (Memoirs, Vol. II, P. 297) "Col. J. L. Chamberlain was wounded on the 18th. He was gallantly leading his brigade at that time, as he had been in the habit of doing in all the

engagements in which he had been engaged. He had several times been recommended for a brigadier-generalcy for gallant and meritorious conduct. On this occasion, however, I promoted him on the spot, and forwarded a copy of my order to the War Department, asking that my action be confirmed and Chamberlain's name sent to the senate for confirmation without delay. This was done, and at last a gallant and meritorious officer received partial justice at the hands of his Government which he had served so faithfully and so well."

On the first of November, before he was able to mount his horse without assistance, he rejoined his brigade in the field, and led his command with characteristic energy, winning the brevet of Major General "for conspicuous personal gallantry in action," and receiving special commendation in orders, "for prompt and skillful handling of his command in the battle of Five Forks." In this campaign also he was twice wounded.

In the following-up and out-flanking of Lee's army and the final action at Appomattox, he commanded two brigades of the famous Fifth Corps. Of this General Griffin, the Corps Commander, says in his official report, "In the last action General Chamberlain had the advance, and was driving the enemy rapidly before him when the announcement of the surrender was made." Another honor awaited him here at the hands of General Grant, who designated him to command the ceremonies at the formal surrender of Lee's army.

He was thereupon advanced to command of a Division, and was recommended for promotion to Major-General by all his superior commanders of the army.

The quotations indicated in this statement are taken from official orders and reports.

On the disbandment of the army of the Potomac, General Chamberlain was temporarily retained in the service. He declined a Colonelcy in the regular army on the reorganization in 1866, and returned to Maine. Here he was honored with four successive terms as Governor, after which he was President of Bowdoin College for twelve years. He is now residing in his old home, having the confidence and esteem of all who know him.

For more than forty years he has greatly suffered from his desperate wounds, frequently completely prostrated and requiring skilled surgical treatment. He is now in the 78th year of his age.