

# FIRST FALLEN

The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth,  
the North's First Civil War Hero

Meg Groeling



Savas Beatie  
California

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Proudly published, printed, and warehoused in the United States of America.

For Bree Meerjans, who was there at the beginning,  
and Robert Groeling, who is here at the end



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# Introduction

No comprehensive biography of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth has been published since Ruth Painter Randall wrote hers in 1960. I thought it was about time for another one. Ellsworth was one of those historical personages that never made it to the “A” list for some reason. Had he lived, he may have, but we will never know. Most people, including some Civil War historians, do not even know who he was. This book contains what we *do* know about him.

Elmer Ellsworth was the first Union officer killed in the American Civil War. Myths abound about him, but they are just that—myths. Ellsworth came from a working-class background, not poverty. He could have attended West Point had he chosen to do so, but he decided instead to join the legions of young Yankee men who left the family homestead and moved westward to make their own futures. Young Ellsworth not only worked in Abraham Lincoln’s law office, he passed the Illinois bar exam before leaving Springfield for Washington. He neither smoked nor drank, and he expected the same of his companions. He was handsome and sophisticated enough to charm the men (and women) of the moneyed class, gathering around himself influential political figures who moved and shook the North in the time immediately before the Civil War.

It was the influence of his performance group, the United States Zouave Cadets, and their tour of the Northeast that paved the way for the militia movement, which exceeded the quota of 75,000 volunteers that Lincoln called for after Fort Sumter was fired upon in Charleston Harbor. One might go so far as to suggest that it was Ellsworth’s military efforts that readied the North for the eventuality of the war itself. Although rarely mentioned, it was Ellsworth who provided military-themed entertainment at the Republican Convention in Chicago in 1860. Ellsworth, John Hay, and Ward Hill Lamon worked together to create enough interference at the “Wigwam” to move support from William Seward and other contenders to Abraham Lincoln, who finally won the nomination on the third ballot of a brokered convention. The use of marching militia members

influenced the growth of the “Wide-Awakes,” a group of young men that wore distinctive black capes and carried oil lanterns. At first, they escorted stumping politicians to and from the trains to the hustings, but later they held late-night parades supporting Republican candidates.

The self-made men of the North who had experienced 1850s politics saw the return to slave laws and Southern congressional control as a return to the past, erasing the progress of the Missouri Compromise. They saw themselves as “wide awake,” aware of the purposes of union and politics. Elmer Ellsworth is a perfect historical lens through which to examine this fresh face of America. He espoused discipline, self-reliance, and confidence, and he showed that there was indeed a chance for someone not born to wealth to exercise power at higher levels of politics and society. The example he set was followed by many, including those involved in numerous militia organizations.

During his short life—he died when he was just twenty-four—Elmer Ellsworth became “the most talked-of man in the country,” according to John Hay. Ellsworth was welcomed into the best houses in Illinois, including the Lincolns’. Mary Todd Lincoln loved Elmer much like a son and was heartbroken at his death. President Lincoln trusted the young man so much that he was put in charge of crowd control during the “Inaugural Express” train trip to Washington. When Lincoln realized his life was threatened and chose to leave the train early, he asked Elmer to take care of Mary and their sons.

When Lincoln called for volunteers in April 1861, Elmer Ellsworth was one of the first to leave Washington and travel to New York City to recruit a regiment. Ellsworth wanted the New York firemen in particular; he felt that the strength and discipline of the job of fighting fires would give these men an advantage in any imminent battles against Southern volunteers. If Ellsworth had done nothing except bring his regiment to Washington, that would have been as much as many. But he did more. He uniformed his men, armed them, and immediately began to teach them his French Algerian-inspired Zouave drill. This drill had some significant differences from the one that was currently used by the army, which had not changed much from the Mexican War era. Had Ellsworth lived long enough to continue this training, his units might have become forerunners of the elite forces used by our current military. After his death, many of the 11th New York Fire Zouaves, as Ellsworth’s men were known, complained that this training had been abandoned.

Even Ellsworth’s death helped the Union war effort. He was seen as the quintessential “Boy of ‘61,” and newspapers in many Northern cities ran black-banded headlines when his killing was announced. “Remember Ellsworth”



was a rallying cry throughout the war. It rang out in Irish brogues on the battlefield of First Bull Run. Francis Brownell, the private who shot the man who shot Colonel Ellsworth, became identified as “Ellsworth’s Avenger.” He was awarded the first Medal of Honor of the Civil War. Even the love story of Ellsworth and his young fiancé, Carrie Spafford, furnished a captivating tale to the nation, one illustrated most sadly when I paged through Miss Spafford’s scrapbook and found an assortment of funeral flowers pressed between its pages.

That Elmer Ellsworth is not more well-known today is a tragedy. His intriguing personality, his remarkable life—so tightly bound to the history of his time and to Abraham Lincoln—and his personal contributions to the war efforts of the North make him, I feel, too important to be forgotten. I have tried to present Ellsworth, along with his friends John Hay and John George Nicolay, the Lincoln family, and those early years in Chicago as clearly as possible. I have also included a chapter on James Jackson, the Virginia secessionist who killed Ellsworth. I am hopeful that my dedication and that of those who joined me in this process will help a new generation remember Ellsworth. “Never,” said the *New York Times*, “has a man of Ellsworth’s age commanded such national respect and regard in so short a space.”

## Acknowledgments

No project like a full-length book is finished without the help and encouragement of many. I hesitate to try to list all the beautiful people who helped me—I know I will forget someone, probably many someones. If I leave you off, call me. I will brew you a cup of coffee, and we can sit on the porch and pet the cats.

I particularly want to thank the former principal of Brownell Middle School, Greg Camacho-Light. Brownell Middle School is named for early California educator E. E. Brownell. Randomly, during an open house, Greg asked if I knew what the “E. E.” might stand for. Without thinking, I answered that it probably stood for Elmer Ellsworth. I added a comment about the name “Brownell,” who was known as “Ellsworth’s Avenger” for shooting James Jackson almost instantly after Jackson killed Ellsworth. We both started laughing. I had no idea my principal/boss was a Civil War buff, and he had no idea his new 7th grade math teacher was one as well. Over the next few years, Greg supported my effort to get a master’s degree in military history and to write the first iteration of this book. Nothing he did was necessary, but everything he did was much appreciated.

I would also like to thank my “family” at the *Emerging Civil War* blog, especially Chris Mackowski. They gave me my first chance to write history for the public. I’ve

never looked back! My professors at American Public University helped hone my writing and research skills. They were very supportive of on-line students, especially those of us who are women. No special treatment, just the same grueling study schedule for all. Huzzah!

Research! There are so many who deserve my thanks, especially Doug Dammann and Gina Radandt, the lovely folks who welcomed me to the Kenosha Civil War Museum in Wisconsin and helped me sort things out. Also, the people at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga, who talked to me for hours about the restoration of the Marshall House Flag and offered to help me in any other way I wished. They have curated the flag and the uniform in which Elmer met his death with much skill and care! Finally, I would like to thank Brown University and my research assistant, Kathryn Samp. She not only found Ellsworth things, but she also located information about Elmer's connection to the Wide-Awakes, creating my next project. Her best find was the writing Elmer did of his name using soldiers as letters. It was a perfect match for the one he did for Carrie. Nice catch, Kathy!

The on-line community, especially Facebook's *Civil War Faces*, was of incredible help in identifying and sourcing images. *Ancestry*, *Fold3*, and *Newspapers.com* are valuable sources that were not available even ten years ago. What a difference technology has made for all of us who toil in the history mines. The internet also allowed me to find and stay in touch with individuals whose interests in things Elmer Ellsworth in nature have kept me going when I thought I'd never solve a problem or uncover any meaning in my work. Thanks also to Allen Cebula, Mike Maxwell, Stephen Restelli, Harry Smeltzer of *bullrunnings.wordpress.com*, and the second version of the 11th New York Fire Zouaves: Shaun Grenan, Marc Hermann, Patrick Schroeder, and the late Brian Pohanka.

I owe a massive debt to publisher Theodore P. Savas, Managing Director of Savas Beatie Publishers, and his staff. They gave me my first chance to be published, with *The Aftermath of Battle* and have done so again with *First Fallen*. Ted introduced me to my editor extraordinaire, Mitchell Yockelson. Editing is hard enough, but editing during the time of Covid was about as much as I could handle. Mitch, thank you so much. Thank you, all.

There are more: all the powerful, determined women who are writing Civil War history now and never had to wait until they retired; I feel like their grandmother. Then there are the friends who never laughed at my efforts to do this work and kept me going when I just wanted to quit—Terry, Bree, and Gregory. Finally, there is the helpful, anonymous docent at the National Portrait Gallery who asked me what

was wrong and handed me a real cotton handkerchief to dry my eyes when I imploded at the 2011 exhibit, “The Death of Colonel Ellsworth.” That exhibit was the catalyst for this book. Somehow, I knew my life was changing, right there in the gallery.

Lastly, I want to thank my family. My sister Martha never loses faith, no matter what, and Robert, my husband, keeps the home fires burning when I am writing all night. Both assure me that my parents, John and Yvonne, would be proud.

## PROLOGUE

# The East Room: May 26, 1861, 3:00 a.m.

**THE** Washington night was utterly still. The two-story white house where the Lincolns now lived sat far enough off Pennsylvania Avenue that little noise penetrated its thick walls. For a third night, the moon remained so bright that no other light source was needed to illuminate the dark city.<sup>1</sup> Washington's early spring humidity had dropped only slightly since midnight, and a faint feeling of sticky staleness hung in the comatose air.<sup>2</sup>

Although it had rained in the early afternoon, the thunderstorms that regularly freshened the atmosphere along the Atlantic coast were not yet, by late May, a regular occurrence.<sup>3</sup> In a vain attempt to cool the big mansion, someone had left one window slightly ajar in the East Room, but there was no breeze to tinkle the crystal swags on the Andrew Jackson chandeliers or ruffle the lace that fell beneath the maroon velvet drapes hanging from ceiling to floor. The cloying scent of lilies, roses, and white trillium hung heavy in the motionless air of the aging, formal room.

1 John A. O'Brien, [www.lincolninwashington.com/2012/07/16/he-has-probably-gone-to-mr-sewards-house/](http://www.lincolninwashington.com/2012/07/16/he-has-probably-gone-to-mr-sewards-house/), accessed August 28, 2017.

2 Special Correspondent, *The New York Times*, May 26, 1861, [www.nytimes.com/1861/05/26/news/death-col-ellsworth-full-particulars-assassination-eye-witness-zouaves-swear.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=3](http://www.nytimes.com/1861/05/26/news/death-col-ellsworth-full-particulars-assassination-eye-witness-zouaves-swear.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=3), accessed August 28, 2017; *The Olathe [KS] Mirror*, June 13, 1861. Many eyewitness and newspaper accounts note the brightness of the full moon on May 24-25 and 25-26, and its reflection on the Potomac River.

3 James M. Gillis, *Meteorological Observations Made at the United States Naval Observatory During the Year 1861* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1873), 444; Robert K. Krick, *Civil War Weather in Virginia* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 25.

Mary Todd Lincoln had first set foot in the of disrepair and shabbiness left by previous occupant James Buchanan. Mary intended to commence refurbishment right away. Two months had passed, however, and the house still looked the same or worse. In mid-April, the East Room had been a temporary bivouac for General James Lane's rough Frontier Guards, one of the many volunteer militia companies pouring into the nation's capital. Soldiers tracked mud on the floor and left bits of equipment scattered about. Yesterday, May 25, 1861, the room had served only one purpose.<sup>4</sup> It had held the coffin of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth.

Over the last twenty-four hours, White House staff had rapidly planned for the arrival of Ellsworth's remains—scurrying about for flowers, coaches, and funeral ceremonies.

Although the once-elegant East Room had hosted presidential funerals, this was the first time a military officer lay in state within its walls. Thousands of people had read about Col. Ellsworth in the newspapers. Many had watched his regiment of New York Fire Zouaves become both the toast and, for some, the terror of the capitol, or had seen the United States Zouave Cadets during their 20-city tour in 1860. Mourners arrived to stand in line, then stand in respect, at Ellsworth's coffin, which was covered in a large bouquet of white lilies, all except for the small, oval glass window over his face. Shortly after eleven in the morning of May 25, the funeral service itself began.

President and Mrs. Lincoln entered the East Room and sat near the foot of the bier. Both were openly tearful, heartbroken by the sudden death of their friend.<sup>5</sup> Elmer Ellsworth had fit so easily into the Lincolns' life, both in Springfield and now here in Washington. He was handsome, cheerful, always reliable, and, at twenty-four, so very young. Ellsworth, along with Lincoln's private secretaries, John George Nicolay and John Hay, had been the heartbeat of Lincoln's presidential campaign and election. These three young men, best friends, had served as Lincoln's bodyguards on the train trip from Springfield to Washington, and in that dreary, muddy city, their bright exuberance and energy had been indispensable to the entire Lincoln family, from their youngest son, Tad, to the President himself.

Nicolay and Hay, along with Simon Cameron, Salmon Chase, and other members of Lincoln's cabinet, were seated close to the President and First Lady. So

4 Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington: 1861-1865* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1949), 59.

5 Charles M. Segal, ed., *Conversations with Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 122-123.

was General Winfield Scott, senior commander of the United States Army. Newspaper reports on the funeral specifically mentioned the general, now seventy-four years old and in poor health.<sup>6</sup> They told how difficult it seemed for Scott to look upon the coffin of a soldier as full of military promise as he himself had once been, and now taken early in his career. What a loss to the Union cause, Scott must have thought.<sup>7</sup> One soldier at the end of his career, general-in-chief for President Lincoln, trying to build an army out of three-month volunteers; another, dead before the beginning of his, trying to develop and enact a plan to quickly put the various militias of the North into full military service.

At noon, the minister, Reverend Dr. Smith Pyne of Saint John's Episcopal Church, gave the funeral oration.<sup>8</sup> Reverend Pyne only knew Ellsworth by reputation, but spoke about the young officer as though they had been long-time acquaintances. Elegantly, Pyne told about the gallant and brave actions of Col. Ellsworth and the way in which he had been able to instill an almost instant affection for himself in his troops. Using the power of love as the theme for his sermon, Pyne closed by intoning, "The Scripture tells us of a man who approached our Divine Savior, and when He looked upon him, He loved him."<sup>9</sup>

Members of Ellsworth's regiment, the 11th New York Fire Zouaves, walked past his casket in silent tribute, weaponless, heads bowed in grief. Military officers and diplomats joined them. Julia Taft, the sixteen-year-old sister of Holly and Bud Taft, neighbors and playmates of the Lincoln boys, described the scene in her memoirs. She laid a wreath of white roses among the lilies on Col. Ellsworth's rosewood bier. The sight of his pale features, seen only days before at Camp Lincoln, where Ellsworth had been cheerful and full of plans for the future, made young Julia feel faint.<sup>10</sup>

6 *White Cloud Kansas Chief*, June 20, 1861.

7 *Ibid.* The thoughts expressed in the article in the *Chief* are from the pen of Colonel John W. Forney, who owned the *Philadelphia Press*, among other things. His piece on Ellsworth's funeral, which was printed in many papers, pointed out the irony of the old general and the young colonel "meeting" in such a manner. Though a Democrat, Forney was a favorite journalist of the Lincoln administration.

8 "St. John's Episcopal Church," Abraham Lincoln Online, [showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/sites/stjohn.htm](http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/sites/stjohn.htm), accessed, June 1, 2011.

9 Charles P. Poland, Jr., *The Glories of War: Small Battles and Early Heroes of 1861* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2004), 24.

10 Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 23; Julia Taft Bayne, *Tad Lincoln's Father* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, reprint, 2001), 15.

Mrs. Lincoln herself, weeping, placed a photograph of Ellsworth surrounded by a wax wreath of laurel at the foot of the coffin. She spoke of the dead colonel's great energy on behalf of her husband and the Union.<sup>11</sup> "He looks as natural as though he were sleeping a brief and pleasant sleep," she commented sadly. Doctor Thomas Holmes, the mortician who volunteered to perform the arsenic embalming, then a new science, had done an excellent job; he would have ample opportunity to hone his craft over the next four bloody years.

By the end of the afternoon, a multitude of tears had been shed. Attended by mourners, the coffin was taken, in procession, to Washington's Union Station. Rare was the Washington citizen, regardless of political sympathies, who failed to turn out to witness the public spectacle of Ellsworth's funeral parade. At Union Station, his remains were placed on a special train and transported to New York. Double lines of spectators filled the streets of Capitol Hill, waiting in silence for the funeral cortege. Companies of soldiers marched in slow procession with arms reversed, drums muffled, banners furled. Four white horses pulled the glass carriage containing Ellsworth's coffin. Its pall was the American flag. Six bearers walked beside the hearse, followed by a small, representative band of Fire Zouaves. Ellsworth's entire regiment could not be spared at one time, as Alexandria, just across the Potomac in Virginia, was still under martial law. After the Zouaves came Ellsworth's riderless black warhorse.<sup>12</sup>

The huge Confederate flag from the Marshall House, stained by Ellsworth's blood, followed. It was carried by Private Francis E. Brownell, who would be accompanying the body of his colonel to its final resting place in Mechanicville, New York. During this sad procession, Brownell had angrily stabbed the flag with his bayonet and hoisted it into the air.<sup>13</sup> As a part of the small group of soldiers and

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Camp Lincoln was just one of the many impromptu "camps" created to contain the thousands of soldiers who had responded to the president's call for volunteers. They ringed the city of Washington and mostly bore patriotic names. Camp Lincoln was situated near the Potomac to the southeast of the city, and the 11th New York, Ellsworth's Fire Zouaves, was ordered to camp there.

11 Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1949, 81-82.

12 Harry E. Pratt, ed., *Concerning Mr. Lincoln: In Which Abraham Lincoln is Pictured as he Appeared to Letter Writers of his Time* (Springfield, IL: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1944), 81.

13 William Eleazar Barton, *The Life of Clara Barton: Founder of the American Red Cross*, 2 vols. (Boston: Harvard College Library, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Roosevelt Memorial Association, 1943), 1:116-117.

reporters that had accompanied Ellsworth to Alexandria that fatal morning, Brownell had been the one who fired the shot that killed Marshall House hotel proprietor James Jackson seconds after a blast from Jackson's double-barreled shotgun fatally struck Ellsworth near the heart. Brownell was now "Ellsworth's Avenger."<sup>14</sup> He was followed by coaches carrying Washington government officials and led by President Lincoln and his cabinet. One story says that the flag was returned to the White House. Mary Lincoln, sickened by its sight, folded it up and put it in a bureau drawer. She never wished to see that flag again.<sup>15</sup> This is just one of the Marshall House flag myths that endures, even now. There are several more.

Carrie Spafford, Ellsworth's eighteen-year-old fiancée, did not journey to Washington for the funeral. She remained at her family's house in Rockford, Illinois, having returned from her New York boarding school for the summer. A severe ankle injury and the quick turnaround between Ellsworth's death and his funeral kept her at home. Devastated by the sadness of these events, she wouldn't attend any of the ceremonies, including the interment in Mechanicville. Carrie spent the next few years grieving in isolation, mourning Ellsworth in death longer than the two and a half years she had known and loved him in life.<sup>16</sup>

Ellsworth's parents were to meet their son's remains when the train reached Grand Central Station in New York City. From there it was to be moved to lie in state in City Hall. Later in the day, the Astor House Hotel had scheduled a private viewing for the Ellsworth family and close friends. In continuing tribute, a steamer draped in both black and bunting would then take the casket to Albany, where the body again would lie in state. Lastly, another funeral train would bring Ellsworth to his boyhood home of Mechanicville, for burial on May 27.<sup>17</sup>

President Lincoln's exhaustion was visible. Ellsworth's passing was a bitter, personal blow. Everything had taken its toll—the attack on Fort Sumter, the parade of secessions in the South, the need to build an army for a war he did not want, and

14 *Harper's Weekly*, June 8, 1861, 357-358, [www.harperweek.com](http://www.harperweek.com) [www.harperweek.com](http://www.harperweek.com), accessed July 6, 2013.

15 *Olathe Mirror*, June 13, 1861.

16 Bayne, *Tad Lincoln's Father*, 15-16.

17 Kathi Kresol, "Voices from the Grave: Carrie Spafford, a life of sorrow the tragedy of one of Rockford's founding families," *The Rock River Times* [Rockford, IL], October 8, 2014; "Her Summons Comes Sunday: Mrs. Carrie Spafford Brett Expires Without Warning in Her Sister's Arms," *Rockford* [IL] *Daily Register-Gazette*, October 9, 1911; Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth: A Biography of Lincoln's Friend and the First Hero of the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown Publishing, 1960), 270.



now . . . this death. Abraham Lincoln loved the young man in the coffin. Elmer Ellsworth was like another son to him, a glimpse of Lincoln's hopes for his own children, Robert, Willie, and Tad. The young soldier could be counted on to do anything he could for the Lincolns: tease Mary into a smile, play with the younger Lincoln boys, and graciously accept whatever came his way as far as military employment. Ellsworth came into Lincoln's life unexpectedly during a militia practice, brightened it, and had now, just as unexpectedly, left it.

After tossing and turning, around 3:00 a.m., Lincoln rose from his bed. Walking the presidential mansion at night would become a familiar ritual to Lincoln, but he had only lived there two months, and no one habit was yet a routine. Quietly, so he would not wake Mary or Tad and Willie, he walked down the two short flights of stairs from his bedroom to the first floor, then turned right. The worn marble muffled his steps as he entered the East Room. The lack of light dulled the red, orange, and gold carpet, and the long velvet drapes looked black. The chandeliers were lit with the lowest of gaslights, left on, perhaps, so the darkness would not dishonor Ellsworth's memory.<sup>18</sup> Lincoln walked to the hastily-created plank and barrel bier, where the coffin had lain, and bowed his head. "My boy! My boy! Was it necessary this sacrifice should be made?"<sup>19</sup> Then he turned and sought a chair from the several left after the funeral, still scattered in a semicircle around the edges of the room.

The President folded his tall body into the same seat he had used earlier in the day and put his hands on the armrests of the worn and creaky furniture. The low light of the chandeliers threw the top of Lincoln's hands into deep relief. Veins stood out prominently, and the skin stretched, then fell into wrinkles. He looked down at his well-worn hands that had held an ax, a pen, a book. Now they lay on the chair arms, limp and ineffective. Over the next four years death would be a

18 Undated, unspecified newspaper clippings describing Ellsworth's various funerals found in Carrie Spafford's personal scrapbook, Civil War Museum, Kenosha, WI (Lake Forest Academy). Hereafter cited as KCWM/LFC.

19 [www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/washington/mr-lincolns-white-house-maps/](http://www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/washington/mr-lincolns-white-house-maps/), accessed August 18, 2017. This site is dedicated to chronicling the changes that occurred to the Executive Mansion during the Civil War.

constant presence, and the President took every war casualty to heart. At this moment Lincoln closed his eyes, remembering Ellsworth.<sup>20 21</sup>

20 Owen Edwards, "The Death of Colonel Ellsworth," *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2011), <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/The-Death-of-Colonel-Ellsworth.html> accessed July 5, 2012.

21 This last paragraph, inspired by the statue at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, is, admittedly, fictional. Lincoln was very affected by Ellsworth's death, and may very well have sat quietly in the East Room, contemplating the future. There are several accounts of his nightly wanderings given by his secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, especially during times of personal emotional stress.

## CHAPTER 1

# Inauspicious Beginnings

“I have been advised to prepare a memorandum of events occurring in the life of my son Elmer, that would serve to illustrate his peculiar cast of character in order that they may be available hereafter should his biography be written.”

“I know that mothers are partial judges of their children, even whilst they live, and that death hallows and beautifies to them what to others may seem faulty; yet, I trust in view of my great bereavement, I shall be forgiven if I have given too much weight to small things; the more especially as I shall confine myself to facts, and leave it to the historian to make selection of what he shall think proper.”<sup>1</sup>

— Phebe Ellsworth's *Memoranda*

**NINE-YEAR-OLD** Elmer Ellsworth had a new project in mind: he would turn two of his drawings of military heroes into full-fledged oil paintings. After all, he loved looking at martial artwork, and he spent a great deal of time sketching. His parents had never discouraged this tendency and were usually on hand to admire his efforts—which generally consisted of soldiers in fanciful uniforms. The drawings in question were of General George Washington and his staff, and General Andrew Jackson and his staff. Elmer's immediate problem was to gather supplies to complete his project. He had already decided that the fabric of his mother's window shade would make a perfect canvas for his work. Now all he needed was paint. He cast about Malta and found he could get industrial paints at a carriage shop, talked the shop owner out of a small number of various colors, brought them

<sup>1</sup> Phebe Ellsworth, “Memoranda—Diary, Letters, and Poem,” dictated manuscript, written by Charity Louisa (Steadwell) Mabbitt, New York State Historical Society photostat copy, KCWM/LFAC, 1.

home, and went to work. His mother, Phebe, was left with a most unusual window shade.<sup>2</sup>

The America of 1837, the year Elmer Ellsworth was born, bore little resemblance to the America that had won its independence from Great Britain just fifty-four years previously. After the Treaty of Paris, which had ended the Revolution in 1783, the new country scrambled to create workable systems to allow each newly minted state to govern within its borders; but it also had to devise a way to encourage a viable, united effort for the country as a whole to pay for the war it had just won. By the time the Constitution was ratified in 1788, the states were already in profound disagreement as to how this should take place; they made progress, however, over the next four decades. With the construction of the Erie Canal in 1825, New York's Hudson River towns, some of which had previously consisted of only two or three buildings, boomed. The trail of candle glow along the canal route lit up like a string of Christmas lights as small towns became more substantial, and the resultant small cities grew in population and economic importance. Almost every place along the length of the Erie Canal became prosperous, providing the inns, restaurants, shops, and entertainments necessary to support the Canal trade. Malta, where Elmer Ellsworth was born, was one such town.

Located in Saratoga County, New York, Malta is rich in colonial and revolutionary history. At least two of Elmer's relatives participated in the American Revolution. His paternal grandfather, George Ellsworth, fought in the battle of Saratoga at only fifteen years old. He was present at the surrender of Burgoyne after the subsequent battle, at Bemis Heights.<sup>3</sup> Another relative, Peter Ellsworth, is listed as an officer in a New York unit, and he received a pension for his services in the Continental Army.<sup>4</sup>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 1; Pension File of Charles Ellsworth, no. W19226, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as NARA); "Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service, compiled ca. 1800-1912, documenting the period ca. 1775-1900," M804, 300022, New York State, online version: [www.fold3.com/image/17125638?terms=George%20Ellsworth](http://www.fold3.com/image/17125638?terms=George%20Ellsworth), accessed June, 2011.

4 William Thomas Roberts Saffell, *Peter Ellsworth—Records of the Revolutionary War* (Phoenix, AZ: Heritage Books Reprints, 2007), 418, online version: [www.fold3.com/image/1/17125534](http://www.fold3.com/image/1/17125534), accessed June 2012.

Elmer's father, Ephraim Daniel Ellsworth, came from a large family. He was born on May 22, in either 1809 or 1810, one of fourteen brothers and sisters.<sup>5</sup> As an adult, Ephraim Ellsworth learned and practiced the tailor's trade at Waterford, New York. He moved his business to Malta in 1836, the same year he met and married Phebe Denton. Elmer's mother descended from the large, relatively well-off English-Scottish Denton family. Many of her half-brothers and sisters resided near Malta. In the 1840 census, Ephraim Ellsworth's occupation is not listed.<sup>6</sup>

A year after his parents married, Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth was born on April 11, 1837—the same year that the nation's most significant financial panic (up to that time) occurred. New York was struck especially hard. Within two months, the state lost nearly \$100,000,000 in value.<sup>7</sup> During the first three weeks of April, 250 business houses also failed. No one was left untouched, from the wealthiest bankers to the mechanic, the farmer, or the basest laborer. Financially, eight states partially or entirely failed, and the central government could not pay its debts. Trade ceased almost completely, and there was no confidence in business. The impact of this disaster lingered until 1843.<sup>8</sup>

Young Elmer's father suffered along with other businessmen. Tailoring is the creation of new clothing, not the repair of old. In a stressed economic environment, getting a new suit of hand-tailored clothes might not be as high a priority as it was before the financial downturn. Ephraim Ellsworth lost his business in the ensuing panic and turned to other ways to support his family. He peddled oysters and netted then-abundant (now extinct) passenger pigeons to sell as meat. According to John Hay, the Panic of 1837 "ruined" Ellsworth's father, but there is evidence to the contrary. Ephraim may have lost his tailoring business, but

5 McAbee, Ephraim Daniel Ellsworth Family Tree, March 23, 2009, [www.geni.com/people/Ephraim-Ellsworth/6000000003288068328#/tab/media](http://www.geni.com/people/Ephraim-Ellsworth/6000000003288068328#/tab/media), accessed September 5, 2017.

6 1850 Census for Malta, New York, United States Census; [www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1840%2f005154829%2f00449&parentid=usc%2f1840%2f005154829%2f00449%2f009](http://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1840%2f005154829%2f00449&parentid=usc%2f1840%2f005154829%2f00449%2f009), accessed September 3, 2017.

7 The Lehrman Institute, "Andrew Jackson," accessed June 4, 2016. (Specific cite/article?).

8 Ibid.

according to the census of 1850, he made a decent living as a butcher in Mechanicville.<sup>9</sup>

Ephraim, Phebe, and their little son lived in a “low-browed cottage,” so-called for the two small, rectangular windows on the upper half-story, which suggested eyes peering out from under the eaves. The baby was named for his father (Ephraim) and a family friend (Elmer) and was christened “Ephraim Elmer,” but when he was fifteen or so, young Elmer decided to reverse the names so he would not be confused with his father.<sup>10</sup> They were joined by Elmer’s little brother Charley, born in 1840.<sup>11</sup>

A few stories concerning young Elmer Ellsworth survive. The source of these anecdotes is Phebe Ellsworth’s forty-three-page manuscript, “Memoranda—Diary, Letters and Poems.” Some of it is questionable—what mother would make her son sound anything less than perfect? Her manuscript was composed in response to many requests after her son’s death:

I have been advised to prepare a memorandum of events occurring in the life of my son Elmer, that would serve to illustrate his particular cast of character, in order that they may be available here after should his biography be written.<sup>12</sup>

Phebe, seriously afflicted with a palsy that made writing impossible for her, dictated her stories to a family friend, Charity Louisa Steadwell Mabbitt.<sup>13</sup> One of the more interesting of these is the one wherein Elmer, then about three years old, “purchased” his newborn brother, Charley. Elmer, as an older brother, was fascinated by and very fond of the new baby. Elmer paid his debt in good faith, although Phebe does not tell how he earned the money:

9 1850 United States Census, “The Town of Half-Moon, Saratoga, NY,” [uscensus.gov](http://uscensus.gov), accessed June 8, 2016.

10 Birth certificate for Elmer Ellsworth, online version: [search.ancestry.com/search/category.aspx?cat=123](http://search.ancestry.com/search/category.aspx?cat=123), accessed June 9, 2016); Charles Anson Ingraham, *Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth, First Hero of the Civil War*, reproduced by the War College Series (February 2015), 4; Ellsworth, “Memoranda,” 1.

11 Malta, New York, Census of 1850, [www.newyorkfamilyhistory.com](http://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.com).

12 Ellsworth, “Memoranda,” 1. KCWM/LFAC

13 Mrs. Ellsworth may have suffered from Parkinson’s, for she is described as having shaky hands in her later life. She was physically unable to write out her memoirs herself and asked a friend for help.

Before long Elmer had his 'moments of disillusionment' about babies, finding out that they cried a great deal and had other disconcerting and irresponsible habits which made for a lot of work. Then he would say that 'he had got cheated,' and made 'a poor bargain.'<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Ellsworth adds that Elmer assumed a sort of supervision over his little brother, which grew into paternalistic care in time. Charley, however, never developed the sense of responsibility that made itself evident in Elmer from an early age. As Charley grew to adulthood, he was in danger of becoming a financial liability to his parents. Several years later, while he was living in Chicago, Elmer sent for his brother in order to relieve the burden of upkeep for his parents and to attempt to instill in Charley some sense of adult responsibility. Elmer tried to find employment for his brother and, of course, promptly enrolled him into the militia group begun by Elmer himself, the Chicago Cadets. Because of Ellsworth's own abilities, Charley was readily accepted by the group.<sup>15</sup>

Phebe Ellsworth's "Memoranda," written on foolscap and tied at the top, in the center, by a faded ribbon, offers several specific examples of times when young Elmer was bullied or teased by others because of his short stature and what he referred to as his "limited means." His mother wrote about one time in particular, "the day he came home fighting mad because another boy had twitted him with the fact that his mother wore *patched shoes*." Another such occasion involved Elmer having been called "oyster keg."<sup>16</sup> Elmer's father told his wife that youngsters are often thoughtless and cruel, and that lean economic times stress children as well as adults. These were painful experiences for the youngster, and no doubt, created ugly memories. Still, none of this sounds much different from the general run of bullying, which seems to increase on the schoolyard whenever the economy is fragile. Phebe Ellsworth matter-of-factly narrated these events, mentioning twice that she felt this was merely typical childhood behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Mentioned within Phebe's "Memoranda" are several instances in which her son used poor judgment, resulting in punishment. Elmer was not a naughty child but, like all little ones, he sometimes needed to be reminded that behavior has

14 Ellsworth, "Memoranda," 3. KCWM/LFAC.

15 Grave of Charley Ellsworth, author's collection; Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 164.

16 Ellsworth, "Memoranda," 15.

17 Ibid.

consequences. Mrs. Ellsworth used terms like “great energy” and “indomitable pride” to describe her son’s early character. Occasionally, those attributes earned him a reprimand:

I used sometimes for punishment to sit him on the floor requiring him to sit there still and unemployed. He would beg me to whip him and release him, for that he could bear, but to sit in disgrace on the floor in constant expectation that some of the neighbors would come in and see him there, was more than his philosophy could cope with.<sup>18</sup>

Phebe Ellsworth’s oldest boy often took things literally. Whatever someone told him was taken at face value, although young Elmer often attempted to test the truthfulness of what he heard. At about four years of age, his mother had told him, “in order to make him more sensible of the nearness and supervision of the Almighty,” that God knew and saw everything he thought and everything he did. She explained that when God caught him being naughty, he would put down a black mark next to his name. Phebe warned Elmer that too many black marks would result in punishment. His mother claimed that she erred by making the impression “rather too material and tangible,” because Elmer sat down next to six-week-old Charley’s crib to put the whole idea to the test.<sup>19</sup>

Elmer looked innocent enough, watching his baby brother and peering out the window, but as soon as his mother turned away, Elmer pinched Charley. His wounded sibling gave a sharp cry, but Elmer reassured his mother that nothing was wrong. A few minutes later, Elmer repeated his pinch. This time Mrs. Ellsworth asked him, “What are you doing to your brother?” Elmer replied that little Charley was saying his prayers. Elmer then pinched the unsuspecting baby again, but this time he decided his experiment was over:

There, Mother. The Lord has told a lie himself—for I have been naughty—I’ve pinched my little brother, and I’ve told a lie, ’cause I told you I hadn’t done anything to him—and the Lord hasn’t seen me nor done anything to me for it, so he’s lied himself for you say he says he will punish naughty boys.<sup>20</sup>

18 Ellsworth, “Memoranda,” 7.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. 9.



This story made the rounds in Elmer's hometown. Soon afterward, a neighbor decided he would have some sport with the budding agnostic. Young Elmer went alone to pick up the mail, and, in the front room of the post office, the neighbor—Stephen—lifted a book from the counter. Stephen told Elmer that the book was the Bible, and “the Lord said that Elmer Ellsworth must die and go to hell!”<sup>21</sup> Elmer, truthful himself, did not suspect that he might be being “made sport of.” He asked the man if he knew his letters and if he could spell. The rascally neighbor answered “yes” to both questions.

Elmer thought for a moment and then asked the postmaster, “Would you call Stephen a good reader?” after which the postmaster vouched for Stephen's literacy. Elmer grabbed the mail and ran for the door. He came “flying in” to the Ellsworth house and looked directly at his mother. “Ma, get the Bible and read it through quick for I want to know what the Lord says about me.”<sup>22</sup>

She explained that God did not put down individual names but only said good and bad boys. Elmer was not satisfied. He asked his mother for some paper and told her he would write a letter “to the Lord himself.”<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. Ellsworth continued:

To keep him from teasing, I gave him some paper, and he climbed up to the desk and soon marked it full on both sides, and started once more for the office, where he presented his *letter* with the request that they should send it to the Lord;—they told him there was no mail ran there and they couldn't send it. The bystanders seeing his perplexity, began to tease him, and asked him what he was going to do in such a case. He seemed purred [*sic*] for a moment, and then replied, 'I'll go and ask a lawyer—he will tell me.'<sup>24</sup>

Young Elmer attended Malta's public schools and mastered his lessons quickly. Another story from Phebe Ellsworth concerns his love of reading. One day the adult Ellsworths had to attend a funeral.<sup>25</sup> They planned to be gone from about eight in the morning until four in the afternoon. Elmer was left at home with specific instructions to feed the pigs at noon, and was very excited at the idea of

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, 9-10.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid,” 16-18.

both the freedom and the responsibility. He pulled down the window shades, found a comfortable seat, and began to read a book he had brought from school. His parents returned at four to a house that looked deserted. When his mother opened the door, Elmer looked up, gasped, and asked, “Why Ma, what are you back for?” She told him it was already four, just when they said they would return. At this point, Elmer jumped up, laying his book aside, and exclaimed, “I didn’t even think it was noon! Let me run and feed the pigs.” It must have been a good book, for Elmer had read for eight hours straight.<sup>26</sup>

Elmer was interested in much more than school, drawing, and reading. He was cheerful by nature and enjoyed the variety and wealth of his surroundings. Elmer loved to be active and outdoors as much as he loved to read. He was athletic, and enjoyed sports and team competitions. This was something Elmer carried with him into adulthood. He also liked water. There were many lakes near Malta, including Lake Saratoga and Round Lake; it was here that Elmer learned to row and to become fascinated by the mysterious ebb and flow of waterways. When he was twenty-one, he wrote a description of the ideal home he wanted to provide for both his parents and for himself. It would be a large house near a town or city, “situated on the banks of a fine river or lake.”<sup>27</sup> He felt that life somehow would be incomplete without the charm of a nearby waterway. Elmer liked to draw and paint pictures with water in them. One of his works of art is painted in pigments of the type found in a carriage shop. It shows a wide river with a sailboat in the foreground; hills rise on the far side of the river. On the hills are castles with turrets and flying flags, looking as if they have come right out of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The Hudson probably served as the model for this river.<sup>28</sup>

As a family, the Ellsworths had habits—they were quiet, sober, and religious—that made them valued members of the community. As such, their sons were playmates of the children of Robert Sears, a well-to-do merchant living close by in Mechanicville. Elmer, Chester Denton (Phebe’s half-brother), and Charley played with the Sears children, Charles and his sister, Mattie. With Mattie’s help, Ellsworth learned to ride Mink, the family’s working horse.<sup>29</sup>

26 Ibid. 17.

27 Elmer Ellsworth to parents, November 15, 1858, KCWM/LFAC.

28 Elmer Ellsworth to “Friend Parks” (Henry Parks), December 12, 1858, KCWM/LFAC.

29 Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 27.

“In his tenth year,” according to Mrs. Ellsworth’s dictation, Elmer went to work and “live with a man who kept a saloon and grocery together,” which presented a difficult choice for the youngster. According to his mother, Elmer was very distressed about such matters as the consumption of alcohol. As a small boy, he had been taken to a temperance lecture and listened attentively. Within a day or so, he asked to borrow a “gun and ‘cussion cap.” When asked why he needed such items, he informed his parents that he was going to “shoot the Devil.” More questions followed, including just where he thought he would find the Devil, to which young Elmer replied that the temperance man had said the Devil was in a cider barrel, and he knew just where he could find one.<sup>30</sup>

When he was nine, Elmer had managed to join a local temperance society, at which point he informed his mother that he would never drink. This earlier pledge made it difficult for Elmer to work in a general store that sold liquor and sundries.<sup>31</sup> However, he wanted that job! Should he accept the living arrangements and the responsibilities that went with them? Elmer and his employer, Mr. DeGoff, finally arrived at an agreement that satisfied everyone’s concerns: Elmer would not serve alcohol, wait on alcohol customers, wash their glasses, or in any way have anything to do with liquor. Working for DeGoff was Elmer’s first job as a clerk and storekeeper. Moreover, he kept his temperance pledge until the end of his life.<sup>32</sup>

About a year later, Elmer had to quit his job at the general store when his family moved to Mechanicville, not far away. When Ellsworth was older and had a personal financial setback that shook his faith in people, he confided to a diary his longing for the times of his boyhood, when the world was still a perfect place and his thoughts free from disillusionment:

With mind free from care, I wandered away into the green old hills, or in my boat drifted slowly down the Hudson and dreaming of the future built castles in the air and longed for the time to come when I could commence the battle with the world. And I . . . with the generosity of boyhood peopled the world with the brave, the good—the noble hearted.<sup>33</sup>

30 Ellsworth, “Memoranda,” 10.

31 Ibid, 11.

32 Ibid, 11-12.

33 Ellsworth to “Friend Parks,” December 12, 1858.

There can be little doubt that Ellsworth's proximity to Saratoga, his having direct relatives who had fought with Washington, and the fact that many men and women of the Revolutionary period were still living in the area, created a powerful, compelling influence over him as a youngster. The intense feelings of those who actively participated in the struggle for liberty from England, and the energy that possessed them to engage in the "great experiment" of democracy, provided a template for Ellsworth's sense of patriotism, military duty, and his love of country. Early in his life, he gave evidence of a propensity for things military. His mother pointed out that he did not play "soldier, but "officer." He was usually in command, but his playmates showed no objection to his skillful leadership. Phebe's manuscript quotes Elmer's maternal grandfather, himself a veteran, as saying, "'That child will be a great military character if he lives,'—adding impressively 'remember what I tell you.' . . . I thought it the childish fondness of the grandfather, but since then it has assumed the shape of prophecy."<sup>34</sup>

Various sources have influenced history's perception of the Ellsworth family's precarious financial position, including Ruth Painter Randall's biography of Ellsworth, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, and Charles Ingraham's *Elmer E. Ellsworth*. Unfortunately, these works rely only on the collection of Elmer Ellsworth's letters to his parents and how he talked about his parent's finances to friends like John Hay. Both of Ellsworth's parents objected to this portrayal during their son's lifetime: Phebe's "Memoranda" mentions that Elmer's constant concern about his parents' "poverty" so annoyed his father that Ephraim claimed such concern was "proof of insanity."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Elmer always maintained a genuine affection for his family. From an early age, he informed his mother that "when I'm a man I'll work and earn money, and you shall ride in a carriage."<sup>36</sup>

\* \* \*

Living in Malta put young Elmer in direct contact with the road that ran through the little town on the way to Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa, two of the most fashionable resorts in New York. During "the season," coaches driven by

<sup>34</sup> Ellsworth, "Memoranda," 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 18-23.

liveried drivers would pass along the road, carrying expensively dressed ladies and top-hatted gentlemen representing another world entirely to a small boy who saw himself as very poor. As Elmer got a little older and left home, these fanciful images continued to haunt his thoughts, and became responsible for his ideas concerning the trappings that indicated wealth. His working-class parents may have seemed, by comparison, poverty-stricken.

Elmer repeatedly mentioned his promise to his parents that he would, somehow and somewhere, amass enough money to alleviate the perceived “hardships of his early life.”<sup>37</sup> Several points of information argue, however, that, although certainly not wealthy, the Ellsworth family was at least working class. The psychological underpinnings of Ellsworth’s fixation on his parents’ financial state—always undervaluing their monetary worth and exaggerating their efforts to subsist—is not clearly defined. One could speculate that he needed to create his own mythological beginnings. Elmer Ellsworth was a complicated man, and speculation is usually a waste of time in these cases. The facts concerning the Ellsworth finances are, on the other hand, undeniable. Both the house in Malta and the later one in Mechanicville were purchased outright by Ephraim Ellsworth. The Mechanicville home was a working farm, complete with the usual assortment of domestic animals such as cows, dogs, pigs, poultry, and Mink, the farm horse.<sup>38</sup>

By 1838, the Ellsworths had taken in a boarder of sorts. Phebe Ellsworth’s younger half-brother, Chester Denton, came to live with the family. As Mrs. Ellsworth explains, the offer to care for her brother was made to help out a family member, not to improve finances.<sup>39</sup> Phebe and Ephraim worked hard to help the family make ends meet, but the ends always met. The national economy was challenging for everyone, but there was still a safe, loving home and plenty of food on the Ellsworth table—hardly the poverty that dutiful son Elmer talked of and wrote about to his friends.

37 John Hay, diary, undated, John Hay Collection, Brown University, Providence, RI. Hereafter cited as BU/JHC.

38 Malta, New York, Census of 1850; Ellsworth, “Memoranda,” 2.

39 Ibid.



Elmer's parents, Ephraim (above) and Phebe (below). *Chicago History.org*



Later, as commander of the 11th New York Fire Zouaves, Colonel Ellsworth proudly rode a large, handsome black horse called “Joseph.”<sup>40</sup> This horse was such a source of pride to Ellsworth that, upon his death, Elmer’s father went to a great deal of trouble and expense to bring the animal back to Mechanicville. In a letter to “Friend Jackson,” dated January 26, 1862, Mr. Ellsworth wrote:

I have been to Washington and got our son’s horse at last. The first time I went there after him I could not find him. They said they had sold him for his bill but could not tell where he was nor who had him. But I put a man on watch and he said he was down in Sickles’ Brigade and then I started again and maid [sic] out to find him but I had to give one hundred and fifty dollars for him before they would give him up. I paid them for him and got him home safe.<sup>41</sup>

40 “Introducing Our Own Authors: Dr. Charles Ingraham Tells Us More of Colonel Ellsworth Whose Life We Have Just Published,” *Press Impressions for December* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), 3; Ingraham, “Ellsworth,” 28.

41 Ephraim Ellsworth to “Friend Jackson,” January 26, 1862, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia, “Portraits of Civil War Heroes,” [www.rosenbach.org](http://www.rosenbach.org), accessed July 27, 2011.

A young Elmer Ellsworth  
*Chicago History.org*

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Today, that amount of money would be worth over \$2,000.00, further evidence that the Ellsworth family was not in the dire financial circumstances described continuously by their son.<sup>42</sup>

Although John Hay did not know Ellsworth's family, he wrote after Ellsworth's death, "His parents were plain people without culture or means. One cannot guess how this eaglet came into so lowly a nest."<sup>43</sup> In retrospect, the nest was not so lowly. The Ellsworths recovered from the Panic of 1837, owned their houses, and were able to keep their sons healthy and in school. It took his father working outside the home and his mother taking in boarders, but the Ellsworths were not poverty-stricken. After all, Abraham Lincoln himself came from a humble log cabin that would have made the Ellsworth homes look almost palatial.

Fortunately, a trio of ambrotypes from J. W. Blanchard's Photographic Gallery in Troy, New York, is in the photographic archives of the Chicago History Museum. Two of them are of Mr. Ephraim D. Ellsworth and Mrs. Phebe Ellsworth.<sup>44</sup> The third is an image taken of Elmer Ellsworth when he appears to have been about five or six years old. It shows a handsome little boy with large eyes and a sensitive mouth. His full head of dark hair appears combed into place, but a couple of stray curls may be seen above the boy's forehead. Elmer is dressed neatly in a dark suit with the white collar of his shirt showing at the neckline. The buttons

42 "Introducing Our Own Authors: Dr. Charles Ingraham Tells Us More of Colonel Ellsworth Whose Life We Have Just Published," *Press Impressions* for December, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), 3 and Ingraham, "Ellsworth (sic)," 28.

43 John Hay, "A Young Hero: Personal Reminiscences of Colonel E. E. Ellsworth," *McClure's Magazine* (1896), volume 6, books.google.com/books, accessed August 10, 2013.

44 [www.chsmedia.org:8081/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1504LW5Q31048.61805&source=~lh-orizon&profile=public&page=5&group=0&term=Ellsworth&index=.GW&uindex=&aspec t=subtab112&menu=search&ri=1&ts=1504565279471&deduping=](http://www.chsmedia.org:8081/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1504LW5Q31048.61805&source=~lh-orizon&profile=public&page=5&group=0&term=Ellsworth&index=.GW&uindex=&aspec t=subtab112&menu=search&ri=1&ts=1504565279471&deduping=), accessed Sept. 1, 2017.

on the front of the coat appear to be brass, and the boy within the jacket looks healthy and confident. In the 1840s, when these images were taken, an ambrotype's average cost was about twenty-five to sixty-five cents per picture.<sup>45</sup> In today's currency, this would be between \$20.00 and \$50.00, a significant amount for a working-class family to spend.<sup>46</sup> Ephraim and Phebe felt it was important to travel from Malta to Troy to have their images captured, perhaps to share with other family members. The simple, honest faces in the ambrotypes make it easy to see that these were likable people and a family of which to be proud.

Looking at the evidence available, Elmer's parents worked hard, provided well, and gave their sons as much love and gentleness as was possible in the 1840s. They offered examples of sustaining religious faith, integrity, and patriotism. Elmer absorbed these values and made them his own. Financially, the family was working class, but Elmer grew up in emotional and intellectual abundance. The grinding fear that real poverty brings with it as surely as we all have shadows was, thankfully, not often a visitor to the "low-browed" cottage.<sup>47</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it is not difficult to feel that an earnest little fellow with curly brown hair and hazel eyes could continue to kick at the dust along the tow road next to the Champlain Canal. Young Elmer Ellsworth was assured of safety and love, and free to dream his childish daydreams of martial glory.

45 [www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/lilj/ambrotypes.html](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/lilj/ambrotypes.html), accessed August 25, 2017.

46 [www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/](http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/), accessed August 28, 2017.

47 Ellsworth, "Memoranda"; John Hay's various letters and diary entries; Census information from New York; George Nicolay's letters and diary entries, *et al.*