Joshua L. Chamberlain was one of the Union Army’s great heroes at the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania in July 1863. His brave defense of the Union’s vulnerable left flank saved the North from certain defeat in the clash. Chamberlain received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valor at Gettysburg, and he went on to serve the Union with distinction for the remainder of the war.

Attends Bowdoin College

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was born in 1828 in Brewer, Maine. He was the oldest of three boys. His parents originally named him Lawrence Joshua, but their son decided to reverse the order of the names when he became an adult. Chamberlain’s father, Joshua Chamberlain Jr., was a successful farmer who also held several political offices in the community. He wanted Joshua to be a soldier, but his eldest son thought that he might want to be a missionary instead (a missionary is a person who does religious or charitable work in a distant or foreign territory).

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Joshua L. Chamberlain.
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)
Chamberlain enrolled at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where he initially struggled to keep up with his schoolwork. “The first two years in college were on the whole a pretty severe experience,” he admitted. “Well remembered are those weary nights when some problem would be given out for the next morning’s demonstration over which [I] sat staring at the words until the stars were lost in the flush of dawn.” As time passed, however, Chamberlain became a good student.

As Chamberlain continued his studies in theology (the study of religion) and foreign languages, he met two women who had a significant impact on his life. In 1851, he met Fannie Adams, the daughter of a minister, when Chamberlain became the choir director for a local church. They were married on December 7, 1855, and eventually had three children (although their only son died a few hours after he was born).

The second notable woman that Chamberlain met during his studies at Bowdoin College was Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896; see entry), a devout abolitionist (person who worked to end slavery in America). In 1851, Chamberlain attended several gatherings at which Stowe read excerpts from a novel that she was in the process of writing. This work, called Uncle Tom’s Cabin, was fiercely antislavery in its outlook. Chamberlain was profoundly moved by the passages that Stowe read at the gatherings. The author’s words helped him decide that slavery was an awful practice that should not be permitted to continue in the United States. “Slavery and freedom cannot live together,” he later said. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, meanwhile, became the most famous antislavery book of all time when it was published a year later.

Chooses a life of teaching

After concluding his studies at Bowdoin, Chamberlain accepted the school’s offer of a professorship. He became one of the college’s brightest young professors, teaching courses in foreign languages and rhetoric (writing and speaking effectively). He also bought a house in Brunswick, where his family thrived.
In 1861, however, long-simmering disputes between America’s Northern and Southern states boiled over into war. For years, the two regions had been arguing over slavery. Many Northerners believed that slavery was wrong and wanted to abolish it. But the economy of the South had been built on slavery, and Southerners resented Northern efforts to halt or contain the practice. In early 1861, these differences over slavery and other issues convinced several Southern states to secede from (leave) the United States. They announced their intention to form a new country, the Confederate States of America, that would continue to protect slavery. But Northern political leaders were determined to keep the Southern states in the Union. In April 1861, the two sides finally went to war over their differences.

**Takes a sabbatical to go to war**

When the Civil War began, Chamberlain decided that he wanted to do his part to help keep the Union together. He wrote to Maine governor Israel Washburn (1813–1883), who was in charge of organizing troops from Maine to serve in the Union Army. “I have always been interested in military matters and what I do not know in that line I know how to learn,” Chamberlain stated in his letter.

The administrators at Bowdoin College, however, did not want to see one of their most talented young instructors leave to go fight in a war. They refused Chamberlain’s request for a leave of absence. Instead, they offered him a big promotion and a two-year sabbatical (an extended leave of absence given to university professors to travel, rest, or study) in Europe. But Chamberlain was determined to serve in the Union Army. He accepted the college’s offer of a European study sabbatical, but instead of departing for Europe, he reported for military service.

When Chamberlain joined the army, Washburn offered him command of a new volunteer regiment called the Twentieth Maine, part of the Union’s Army of the Potomac. This offer was not completely unexpected. The Union Army often filled officers’ positions with educated men, even if they did not have any military experience. But Chamberlain sensed that he might not be able to handle all the responsi-
abilities of command immediately. Noting that he would prefer to “start a little lower and learn the business first,” Chamberlain instead asked to be named lieutenant colonel, the second-highest ranking position in the regiment.

A quick learner

On August 8, 1862, he reported to Colonel Adelbert Ames (1835–1933), commander of the Twentieth Maine. Over the next several weeks, Chamberlain quickly distinguished himself as a sharp young officer. Ames learned to trust his second-in-command, impressed by the former professor’s intelligence and desire to learn. In fact, Chamberlain seemed to spend nearly all of his waking moments talking with veteran officers in order to improve his knowledge of military strategy and other subjects. “I study . . . every military work I can find and it is no small labor to master the evolutions of a battalion and brigade,” he said in a letter to his wife. “I am bound [determined] to understand everything.” Joshua was joined in the regiment around this time by his younger brothers Tom and John, who would fight by his side for the remainder of the war.

In September 1862, Chamberlain and the other soldiers of the Twentieth Maine were stationed near Sharpsburg, Maryland, site of the bloody Battle of Antietam. The Twentieth Maine was never ordered into the battle, but the troops saw plenty of evidence of war’s terrible toll. Chamberlain recalled that the sight of one dead Confederate soldier holding a Bible in his lifeless hands haunted him for the rest of his life. “I saw him sitting there gently reclined against the tree . . . this boy of scarcely sixteen summers,” he stated. “His cap had fallen to the ground on one side, his hand resting on his knee. It clasped a little testament opened at some familiar place. He wore the gray. He was my enemy, this boy. He was dead—the boy, my enemy—but I shall see him forever.”

Chamberlain takes command

In the last months of 1862, the Twentieth Maine regiment took part in some of the Civil War’s fiercest engagements, including two conflicts in Virginia—the Battle of Fred-
Chamberlain Recalls Fredericksburg

Joshua Chamberlain witnessed many terrible scenes of warfare during his period of service in the Union Army. One of the worst of these battles took place at Fredericksburg, Virginia, where a large federal army under the command of General Ambrose Burnside (1824–1881; see entry) failed in its attempt to dislodge troops led by General Robert E. Lee from their defensive positions. After the war, Chamberlain recalled what it was like to listen to wounded soldiers after night fell on the Fredericksburg battlefield: “Out of that silence . . . rose new sounds more appalling still . . . a strange ventriloquism, of which you could not locate the source, a smothered moan . . . as if a thousand discords were flowing together into a key-note weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear, yet startling with its nearness; the writhing concord [similar-sounding moans] broken by cries for help . . . some begging for a drop of water, some calling on God for pity; and some on friendly hands to finish what the enemy had so horribly begun; some with delirious, dreamy voices murmuring loved names, as if the dearest were bending over them; and underneath, all the time, the deep bass note from closed lips too hopeless, or too heroic to articulate [speak about] their agony.”

When the sun rose the following day, Chamberlain and his regiment were forced to spend the entire day hiding behind the stacked bodies of fallen comrades as Confederate troops tried to pick them off. “The living and the dead were alike to me,” Chamberlain remembered. “I slept [but] my ears were filled with the cries and groans of the wounded and the ghastly faces of the dead almost made a wall around me. We lay there hearing the dismal [gloomy] thud of bullets into the dead flesh of our lifesaving bulwarks [defensive barriers].” On the night of December 14, Chamberlain and his regiment finally received orders to withdraw from their gruesome positions. They and the rest of Burnside’s army then left the area, leaving Fredericksburg to the rebel victors.
berlain to colonel of the Twentieth Maine. Chamberlain’s leadership qualities continued to blossom in his new position, and the soldiers under his command developed a solid respect for him. His horror of war continued to stay strong during this time. But Chamberlain felt that his military service had given him a rare opportunity to improve himself, and he sometimes confessed that he loved the excitement and challenges of his new existence. “No danger and no hardship ever makes me wish to get back to that college life again,” he wrote. “I would spend my whole life campaigning rather than endure that again.”

**Battle of Gettysburg**

In the summer of 1863, the Twentieth Maine and the rest of the Army of the Potomac marched into Pennsylvania to stop an invading Confederate force led by General Robert E. Lee (1807–1870; see entry). Lee hoped that by bringing the war into the Northern states, he could capture Union supplies and create a surge of antiwar sentiment in the North. The Confederate commander knew that President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865; see entry) would not be able to continue the war against the South if he did not have the support of the Northern people. But Lee’s progress was stopped outside of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, by the Army of the Potomac, a ninety thousand–man force led by General George Meade (1815–1872; see entry).

The first major clash between Meade’s forces and Lee’s seventy-five thousand–man Army of Northern Virginia erupted on July 1, 1863. The Union Army barely held its ground during the first day of fighting. As the morning of July 2 approached, both armies knew that the next several hours might determine the winner of the whole battle. Meade and his Union officers prepared their defenses for the upcoming Confederate attack, but mix-ups created a big hole in the Union defenses. A wooded hill on the far left flank of the Union defenses was accidentally left unprotected. If the Confederates gained possession of this hill, known as Little Round Top, they would be able to sweep in behind the Union defenses and crush Meade’s army.
Defending Little Round Top

The Battle of Gettysburg resumed on July 2, as Lee continued with his efforts to push Meade out of the area. But the Confederates were slow to reach the Union’s left flanks. A Federal (Union) officer eventually realized that Little Round Top had been left unprotected, and the North scrambled to send troops to defend it before the rebel (Confederate) soldiers reached the area. The last of four regiments sent to defend the hill from the Confederates was the Twentieth Maine. Chamberlain and his men set up defensive positions on the top of Little Round Top, at the very end of the Union line of defenses. “It was a critical moment,” remembered one soldier in Chamberlain’s regiment. He noted that if the advancing Confederate line “was permitted to turn the Federal flank, Little Round Top was untenable [not capable of being defended], and with this little mountain in the Confederates’ possession, the whole [Union] position would be untenable. It was a most fortunate fact for the Union cause that in command of the Twentieth Maine was Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.”

Once the Twentieth Maine arrived at Little Round Top, Chamberlain rushed to arrange the 350 men under his command behind trees and boulders. Ten minutes later, Confederate troops came charging up the hill in a furious attack. Chamberlain’s troops pushed back the first assault, only to be hit with another one a few minutes later. The fight for possession of the hill became vicious and desperate, as Chamberlain’s men pushed back wave after wave of attack, despite being badly outnumbered. “The edge of the conflict swayed to and fro, with wild whirlpools and eddies,” Chamberlain recalled. “At times I saw around me more of the enemy than of my own men; gaps opening, swallowing, closing again. . . . All around, a strange, mingled roar.”
By mid-afternoon, Chamberlain’s regiment had lost nearly half of its men and was nearly out of ammunition. Chamberlain himself had been wounded. But the former professor refused to give up control of the hill. Instead, he ordered his troops to prepare for a bayonet charge into the midst of their Confederate attackers (bayonets were long blades that could be attached to the ends of rifles). Chamberlain’s daring strategy worked. As his battered soldiers charged down the hill, hundreds of stunned rebel soldiers surrendered. The rest of the Confederate troops fled, but many of them fell under a final deadly burst of gunfire from one of Chamberlain’s companies. “We ran like a herd of wild cattle,” admitted the Confederate commander at Little Round Top. “The blood stood in puddles in some places on the rocks; the ground was soaked with blood.”

Chamberlain’s brave and daring stand at Little Round Top enabled the Union Army to withstand the Confederate offensive. A day later, Lee mounted one final attempt to break the Union Army. When it failed, however, he was forced to retreat to Virginia. The South never invaded the North again. Chamberlain, meanwhile, received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his exploits. He and the other members of the Twentieth Maine were praised throughout the North for their bravery and fighting spirit.

Wounded at Petersburg

In November 1863, Chamberlain was forced to give up his command when he came down with malaria, an infectious disease. Transferred to Washington, he performed light duties during his recovery. In May 1864, his doctors said he was ready to resume his command of the Twentieth Maine. He promptly rejoined the Army of the Potomac, which was engaged at the time in a bloody stalemate with Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.

But Chamberlain’s return to active duty lasted only a few weeks. In June 1864, he took part in a Union assault on Petersburg, Virginia, where Lee’s army had erected strong defenses. The Union offensive failed, and Chamberlain was seriously wounded in the attack. A single Confederate bullet smashed through both of his hips and his pelvis. As the bul-
let continued through his body, it also tore into important arteries and nicked his bladder. Yet Chamberlain stayed on his feet despite his wound. He leaned on his sword with one hand and waved his men forward with the other until they had passed him by. He then collapsed in a bloody heap.

When Chamberlain was dragged from the field of battle, nobody thought that he would live. His doctors believed that his wounds were mortal, and Chamberlain himself dictated a farewell letter to his wife. Union commander Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885; see entry) immediately promoted him to brigadier general as a way of honoring him before he died. Obituaries mourning Chamberlain’s death even appeared in several Northern newspapers. But the former language professor stubbornly refused to die. As the days passed by, he delighted his doctors and superior officers by beginning a slow but remarkable recovery.

Confederate surrender at Appomattox

In November 1864, Chamberlain returned to active duty at Petersburg, where Lee’s troops had been trapped by Grant’s Army of the Potomac. Over the next few months, Chamberlain participated in several important Union victories, even though his earlier wounds caused him great suffering. Walking was extremely painful for Chamberlain, and he sometimes had to be helped onto his horse. But still he pressed on, performing so well in battles at Quaker Road and Five Forks that he was promoted to the rank of major general.

On April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered to Grant, and the Civil War finally came to an end. The two generals made arrangements to hold a formal surrender ceremony on April 12. Of all the soldiers in the Union Army, Grant selected Chamberlain to preside over the ceremony.

Governor and college president

When the war ended, Chamberlain returned to his native Maine. His war injuries continued to bother him—he had been wounded six different times during the course of the war—but he became a leading figure in state politics. He
served as governor of the state for four years, and in 1871 he began a twelve-year tenure as president of Bowdoin College in Brunswick. On February 24, 1914, Chamberlain finally died from health problems associated with the war wounds he had suffered fifty years earlier.

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