A Civil War General
from Briar Creek:
Brig. Gen. Samuel M. Bowman

W. M. Baillie

"Bowman" is a familiar surname in Columbia County, and has been since Thomas Bowman came here in 1790 from Northampton County; as a pioneer Methodist he built the Old Stone Church near Fowlersville. His sons John and Jesse developed and operated mills, farms, orchards, lime kilns and other businesses throughout Columbia County under the name "J & J Bowman Co." His grandson Thomas Bowman became a noted bishop in the Methodist Church.

Colonel Samuel M. Bowman

Less well known now is the bishop's cousin, Samuel Millard Bowman. Born to Jesse and Anna (Brown) Bowman at the Briar Creek homestead in 1815, Samuel became a successful lawyer in St. Louis and then in San Francisco. During the Civil War he came East, received an officer's commission, and rose to the rank of brevet Brigadier General in the Union Army. He participated in some key battles and later was a primary figure in enlisting former slaves into Colored Troop regiments. He was a war hero and afterwards a pioneer chronicler of the War. He deserves to be better known.

Long before the War, young Sam Bowman was educated to age 15. He tried his hand at storekeeping in Danville but found that he wasn't suited to the merchant's trade. He moved West in stages and eventually became a well-to-do attorney. We will trace this part of his career later, but first review his Civil War service.

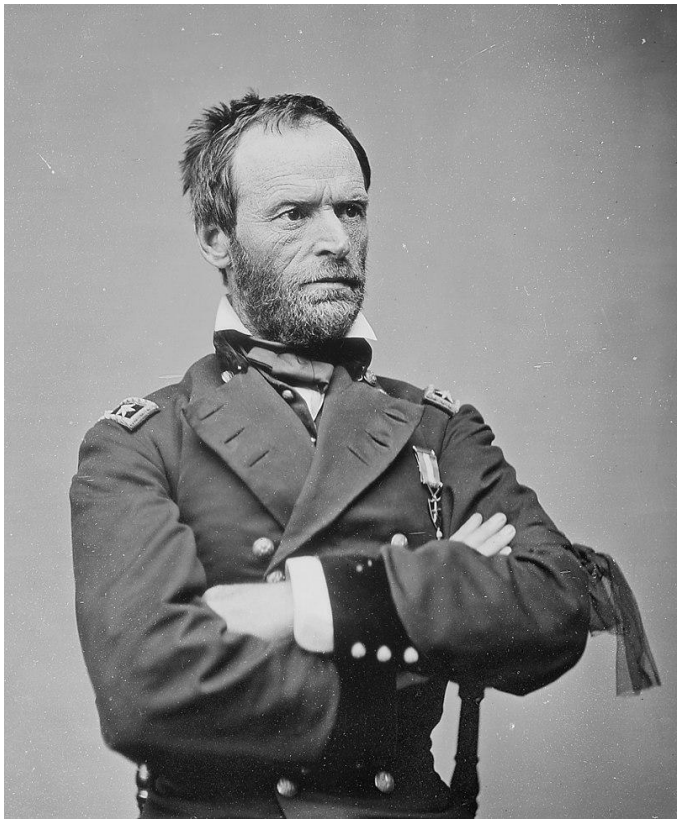
When the Civil War began, Sam was practicing law in San Francisco. He returned from the West Coast and accepted an appointment from the governor of Illinois as a Major (second-in-command) in the 4th Illinois Cavalry Regiment. Although Sam had no prior military experience, he was a quick study and learned enough tactics and procedures to serve effectively as commander of a fast-moving mounted regiment. He was a superb horseman and took great pride in riding his very large Arabian named Prince—a fiery stallion who would let no other rider mount him.

After a period of additional recruiting and training in the Fall of 1861, the 4th Cavalry moved to Tennessee and participated in General U. S. Grant's successful campaigns against Fort Donelson and Pittsburgh Landing (Shiloh).

In April 1862 Major Bowman was selected by his friend General Sherman to lead a choice troop of 100 cavalrymen on a raid into Confederate territory to destroy the railway bridge across Bear Creek in Alabama. The Major not only accomplished the task against the odds—his troopers had to drive off a large Rebel contingent guarding the bridge—but also prompted the Rebs at another bridge to burn it rather than be captured. The loss of these bridges prevented the Confederate western army from moving northward.

In a letter to President Lincoln, General Sherman noted that:

> The breaking of that [rail]road was the great object of the movement up the Tennessee. . . . The cavalry was followed by infantry, but Major Bowman accomplished all before the infantry got up, and he did the work effectually.



General William Tecumseh Sherman (photo by Matthew Brady, May 1865)

For his exploits Bowman was promoted in April to Lt. Colonel and appointed the commander of the 4th Regiment. (The first leader, Colonel Murray, had been shot dead in a battle.) Before Bowman assumed command, however, he returned to the Briar Creek area on a 30-day leave, and while here Gov. Curtin offered him a Colonel's commission to lead the 84th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. This unit had already achieved fame for its rugged fighting and tight discipline. Bowman accepted with alacrity, and thus moved from the war's Western theater to the Eastern.

The 84th regiment had been recruited chiefly in Western Pennsylvania (but also in Columbia County) and was mustered into the Army on 23 December 1861. Before Bowman joined them, they had fought well, but had lost nearly half their numbers to death, wounds and disease. Bowman's first task as regimental commander was extensive recruiting and training.

Then followed a wearying series of long marches and fierce battles in Maryland and Virginia. At the Battle of Fredericksburg, the regiment charged into a railroad cutting and held it for twenty-four hours against fierce assault.

When the army was reorganized, Bowman was given command of a brigade of three regiments, including his 84th. At Chancellorsville, 3 May 1862, a sudden gap in the Union lines threatened a wholesale capture of hundreds of blue-clad soldiers. Bowman stood in his saddle and rallied his regiments with quick commands: *Left face—Forward—double-quick—March!—*. He galloped

Elizabeth Adeliza (Boardman) Bowman

forward and led them into the gap and held it until the whole army went into retreat. In this battle his brigade of about 1100 men lost nearly 600 killed, wounded, or captured.

During the marching toward Gettysburg in the spring of 1863, Bowman was reassigned from infantry leadership altogether. He was posted to a special duty: overseeing enlistments and officering of Colored Troop regiments from slave states, first in Maryland and then also in Delaware. In a later essay, Colonel Bowman admitted that like most white men, he did not believe at first that slaves could make useful soldiers, but after "a great deal of experience" with colored troops he found that "the value of such troops has been proved over and over again."

The recruitment of ex-slaves, nonetheless, caused huge resentment and turmoil in the border states. Plantation owners and businessmen alike complained that Bowman was drawing off all their workers; Maryland's governor appealed directly to President Lincoln.

Lincoln consulted Colonel Bowman, who acknowledged: "Mr. President, I cannot help these complaints. I reckon they are well-founded. If our friends in Maryland will not fight themselves when we are so hard pressed by the enemy, the least they can do is to let their slaves do their fighting and do their own work." Lincoln, who with his sense of humor appreciated this sardonic comment, sent Bowman back to continue hiring ex-slaves. (Eventually, nearly 180,000 African-Americans served in the Union army; over 40,000 of these died during the War.)

For his battlefield heroics and his administrative success, in March 1865 Bowman was promoted to Brigadier General, and ever afterwards he was known as General Bowman.

Bowman's wartime battles were not the only notable events in his life. He had earlier adventures as a lawyer and politician; he survived a wagon trek across the continent with his family and a sea voyage to Europe. He wrote important books and closed his life as a respected lawyer in Kansas City.

As a teen Bowman spent two years at Cazenovia Seminary near Syracuse, NY. While at Cazenovia Sam met a younger student from Athens, PA named Elizabeth Adeliza Boardman; four years later, in 1836, he married her. They were still youthful—he was 21, she only 18—but they were intrepid, ambitious, and hard-working.

Within a year after Sam's marriage to Adeliza, the young couple took the advice of Horace Greeley to "Go West." They settled in the tiny frontier town west of Chicago named Dixon, Illinois, which was then a village of just a few log houses and a ferry. Sam studied for and passed the bar, but found the village too small for a law practice. In 1843 he moved to the much larger opportunity available in St. Louis and in eight years there made a successful career. The family was stricken with bad luck in 1849, when the Great Fire in the city wiped out both their home and his business office. Not long after, their only child, a son, died at age two, and Adeliza was unable to have more children.

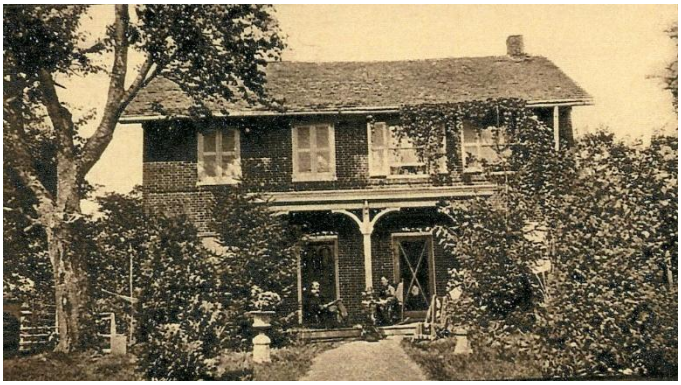
It was after these misfortunes that the exciting opportunities in Gold Rush California beckoned. In the spring of 1852 the pair set out to cross the continent with Sam's younger brother Joshua called "Soule" and a few others. In a five-month trek they fought Native Americans, killed buffalo for meat, crossed raging rivers and parched deserts, traversed frigid mountain passes, and made it to California at a rate of about two hundred miles a week. Soule kept a journal which provides the flavor of the trip:

> June 18. Found to-day the ford of the Sweetwater deep; crossed, drove up two miles, made raft and got ready to float our wagons. Fine grass and good living for our half-starved animals.
>
> June 19. Ferried our wagons on log raft, sunk one—got all over safe at last. Carried our loads over the rocks.

In San Francisco lawyer Samuel Bowman lived next door to bank manager William Tecumseh Sherman. The two families grew close, and when Mrs. Sherman had to go East, Adeliza kept her three children for months at a time. The two households were practically one. Thus it was not surprising that the two men's friendship continued to flourish when both were in the Union army.

Sam's law practice prospered and in 1857 he was admitted to argue before the U. S. Supreme Court. While Sam was at his law work, Adeliza made a name for herself as the head of a women's commission to raise money for Methodist causes. Within a few months the groups that she led collected the remarkable sum of $100,000 (worth at least $3,230,000 in today's dollars). She grew sickly, however, and in later years went twice to Europe to recover her health.

General Bowman's childhood education fostered a love of serious writing. He was still a teenager in Dixon when he wrote a panegyric about the grand opportunities in "the West." While on a journey to Europe he wrote back to a St. Louis newspaper a lively series of letters describing scenes, customs and people that he met with. The essays were later gathered into a book. In 1865, just after the end of the War, he co-wrote a "military biography" of his friend William Tecumseh Sherman, who granted him free access to all his papers and records. This biography was the first



General Bowman's childhood home, Briar Creek, Columbia County, PA

of its kind from the War, and since Sherman was a controversial figure the book sold well—over 60,000 copies within a few months.

After the War, General Bowman lived in New York City and on a large estate in Virginia, but he settled at Kansas City. There in 1885 he died and was buried; his full-honors funeral procession through the city was over a mile long. He left an estate estimated at $150,000. Although he was only a General for two months before his retirement at the end of the War, his native Columbia County can be justly proud of his achievements.

Principal Sources:

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