



Charles Stone's Redemption

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Charles Pomeroy Stone and his daughter Esther, who was known as Hettie, photographed together in the spring of 1863; Stone's USMA class ring can be seen on the little finger of his right hand. | LOC

Charles Pomeroy Stone had every right to expect a "good" war: high rank, battlefield command, public acclaim, honors. Instead, no federal officer who began the Civil War with so much promise suffered such extreme and unjust humiliation.

Born in Massachusetts in 1824, graduated seventh in his class from West Point in 1845, and combat tested at Vera Cruz and Molina del Rey in the Mexican War, Stone was just what the man the Union desperately needed in the spring of 1861. With nearly all the nation's 16,000 or so soldiers stationed on the western frontier, Washington, D.C., was dangerously exposed, sandwiched between Confederate Virginia and potentially disloyal Maryland. Stone, at the time a civilian engineer, happened to be in Washington writing a report on the Mexican state of Sonora. The new Republican government feared both an attack from Virginia and an uprising of local secessionists. At the urgent request of Gen. Winfield Scott, who had commanded him in Mexico, Stone took the capital's defense in hand, quickly organizing the few hundred troops on hand, arming clerks and other volunteers from government departments, neutralizing disloyal city militiamen, and preparing to defend the capital until relief forces arrived from the North.



Brig. Gen. Charles P. Stone | LOC

When George B. McClellan arrived to take charge of what would become the Army of the Potomac, Stone was one of the first men tapped to lead a division. Posted north of Washington on the Maryland side of the Potomac, this 10,000-man formation, known as the "Corps of Observation," was tasked with monitoring Confederate movements across the river. As pressure mounted for the army to redeem its July defeat at Bull Run, McClellan directed Stone to cross the Potomac and make "a demonstration" near Leesburg, Virginia. This fell to a brigade led by the bold but regrettably incompetent Col. Edward Baker, a personal friend of President Lincoln, a U.S. senator, and a man bent on glory. Instead, he led his brigade into the disastrous battle of Ball's Bluff, which resulted in the appalling loss of 1,000 men and Baker's death.

Charles Stone paid the price, and it was a harsh one. Although he was not directly at fault, he had failed to maintain reliable communication with Baker or to provide his men with enough boats to bring them back across the Potomac. In the event, hundreds were needlessly shot to death on the

shore or drowned trying to swim the river. The furious public demanded a scapegoat, and the rigid, regular-army Stone was not popular with his volunteer troops. In the inquiry that followed, soldiers told a congressional committee that Stone seemed suspiciously cordial to the Confederates across the river, that he had returned fugitive slaves to their masters, that he might even be a secret traitor. "I thought he was more of a Secesh than anything else," a New York lieutenant testified. Stone was unceremoniously stripped of his command and in February 1862 arrested and flung into the military prison at Fort Lafayette in New York, among interned secessionists. He remained imprisoned—part of the time in solitary confinement—for six months, but was never brought to trial or even informed of the charges against him.

He was abruptly released in August without explanation or apology, free finally, but permanently tarnished. The New York Times, which had taken up his cause, declared, "General Stone has sustained a most flagrant wrong" and the Union cause a lasting blot on its honor. Stone marked time for months without an assignment and was then appointed chief of staff to Gen. Nathaniel Banks in his dismally ill-fated Red River campaign. He later served briefly as a brigade commander during the 1864 siege of Petersburg but resigned his commission that September in despair of ever restoring his reputation.

Stone might easily have slipped away into oblivion, as many former officers did, restless, useless, obsessing on lost opportunities and bygone days, while many of his peers' names became household words. But his next act was an extraordinary one. (He would later have a third act, too.) In 1870, he received an unexpected offer: Would he consider taking a job as a military advisor to the Khedive of Egypt? Ismail Pasha, the country's young, ambitious ruler, hoped to pry Egypt away from the Ottoman Empire and build an African empire backed up with a modern army. He needed foreigners to help him do it and he wanted Americans, who had no imperial designs on his domain. Stone didn't hesitate. He gathered his wife and three children and set off to reinvent himself. He quickly established a warm personal relationship with Ismail, who appointed him army chief of staff and asked him to redesign the country's entire military structure.



Stone Pasha in the Egyptian Army | public domain

Under Stone's supervision, nearly 50 American military officers, most of them out-of-work former Confederates—among them Henry Sibley, William Loring, and Raleigh Colston were the best known—served along with him in Egypt. Although none of them were given the kind of field command they had hoped for, and few adapted well to live in the Muslim Middle East—many of the Americans' heavy drinking didn't go over well—they designed and built fortifications, revamped military schooling, advocated for a modern structure, mapped far-flung regions of Ismail's short-lived empire, and undertook expeditions of exploration which penetrated as far south as Uganda. Stone excelled as a sort of cultural acrobat, mediating between the often quarrelsome Americans and the suspicious Egyptians, overseeing scores of far-flung projects, and serving as perhaps the Khedive's most loyal personal advisor. Always "a kind, polished gentleman in his demeanor toward everybody," one of his fellow schemes. After his ruined career in his own country, Stone enjoyed the highest honors in Egypt, and a life more exotic and in its unique way more triumphant than all but a few of



Statue of Liberty by Currier and Ives, 1885 | public domain

his contemporaries. He remained in Egypt until 1883, when long-unpaid European creditors, backed by the British and French governments ousted Ismail, essentially annexed the country, and installed their own advisors. In the aftermath, the Stone family at last set sail for home.

Stone's *third* act? In 1884, he was hired to oversee the erection of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. In October 1886, as grand marshal of the parade that celebrated the dedication of the statue, he caught a severe chill which metastasized into what was probably pneumonia. He never recovered and died three months later. Among those who attended his funeral were former generals William Tecumseh Sherman, John M. Schofield, and Fitz-John Porter, who understood what kind of man the Union had lost by disgracing Charles Stone.



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