Mary Emeline Hurlburt & John Aaron Rawlins

Clan Ebenezer

General Grant's Right Hand

by Lori Hahn



Mary Emeline Hurlburt

By the time Munson cousin Mary Emiline Hurlburt became the second wife of John Aaron Rawlins in 1861, Rawlins had been through a lot. His start in life was rough with a drunken, absentee father, limited education, and poverty. He fought in the Mexican-American War and returned home. He studied for the bar and became a lawyer in 1854. He started his practice in Galena, where he met Ulysses S. Grant. They became very close friends. He also met and married Emily Smith in 1856. They had three children in quick succession, and then Emily died in 1861 of consumption (tuberculosis).

The Civil War had broken out, and Rawlins was given the rank of Major General. He was assigned to Ulysses S. Grant's staff as Chief of Staff because Grant trusted Rawlins' counsel and advice. Because of his experience with his father, he declared the Grant camp a teetotal camp. He also secured a pledge from Grant not to drink, as he was known to do. He fiercely guarded Grant's image.

Rawlins then married Mary Emeline Hurlburt, daughter of Stephen Ambler Hurlburt and Sarah Peete. In 1863, he developed a deep cough and was diagnosed with consumption. When Grant issued General Order 11 at Vicksburg, Rawlins strongly warned Grant against doing so. Order 11—which expelled all Jews from his miltary district—was based on his belief that Jewish businessmen were violating rules related to cotton sales and aiding the Confederacy.

In 1867, during Reconstruction, Rawlins accompanied Grenville Dodge as they plotted out the route to the coast of the Union Pacific Railroad. Rawlins stopped in Salt Lake City which he hoped would improve his health, but it didn't. He returned home to find his wife had delivered the first of three babies—none of whom would survive early childhood.

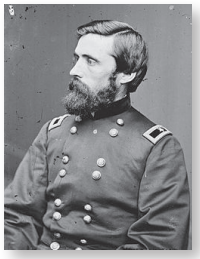
Upon his return, he became secretary of war for President Grant. He approved the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, and despite his illness, solved the major controversy between builder and government over the height of the span. When Cuban insurgents threatened Spanish rule in 1868, Rawlins urged aiding the rebels. Secretary of State Fish did not so no aid was provided. The problem would arise again at the century's end. Rawlins was then sent by Grant to Mormon territory in Utah to both regain his health and assess the Mormon situation. Rawlins' escort was a Mormon armed platoon. Upon his return to Washington, he convinced Grant to deal most harshly with the Mormons so they did not rebel and take over the state.

Grant named a new territorial governor to aid in the efforts and later, though polygamy had been banned in 1862, the Edmunds Act was passed in 1882 which allowed disenfranchisement of those who failed to follow the law from voting, holding office, or serving on juries.



Maj Gen Rawlins (left) and U.S. Grant (middle)

By Aug 1869, time was running out for Rawlins. While home in Connecticut with his family, he had a hemorrhage. He was called to Washington for a cabinet meeting and he started on his trip. He hemorrhaged again in New York and yet again once he arrived in Washington. He made it to the meeting and sat in his chair. The next day he had a several-hours long meeting with Grant, who then left for Saratoga with his wife. Rawlins was left alone, without family or friends and deathly ill. Fortunately, Ely Parker came to care for him. Upon getting word, Grant began his return to Washington so he could see his friend before he died. Secretary of the Interior Cox stayed at his bedside. He hung on until 4:12 the next afternoon, when the man Grant said could never be replaced, died.



Maj Gen Rawlins

His wife, Mary Emeline, was left with his two minor children to raise. General Grant assisted the family get a house to live in and unable to care for them, Grant took over as guardian to the children and ultimately, the maternal grandparents raised the children.

Mary Emeline had, for several years, also suffered from tuberculosis. In 1874, she went to Cheyenne to recover her health. She stayed at the Union Pacific Hotel. Unfortunately, she arrived too late to get any benefit, and she died on 06 Nov 1874. Her body was shipped back to Danbury, CT, for burial.