

This Week in Saratoga County History – Elmer Ellsworth

Submitted by Paul Perreault May 28,2020

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On Friday, May 24, 1861 President Lincoln received two visitors: a Senator and a reporter. Years later the reporter gave this account of the occasion. “.. As we entered the library we observed Mr. Lincoln before a window, looking out across the Potomac..... “Excuse me,” he said,” but I cannot talk.” Then to our surprise the President burst into tears, and concealed his face in his handkerchief. After composing himself somewhat, Mr. Lincoln sat down and invited us to him. “I will make no apology, gentlemen,” he said, “for my weakness; but I knew poor Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard.”

Elmer Ellsworth was born in Malta on April 11, 1837. His search for wealth and fame took him to Chicago where he became involved with a group of young men known as Zouaves. They wore striking uniforms, practiced intensive drills and paraded in competitions on public occasions. Each group needed an “expert” on drill and military practices and Elmer quickly filled this role, adopting the honorary title of Captain. This led to an appointment as Assistant Adjutant General of the State of Illinois with a title of Colonel at the age of 22. His duties brought him to the capital, Springfield, where he met Lincoln and was invited to the house to meet the family and to read law in Lincoln’s office.

After the fall of Fort Sumter, he resigned his position with the Lincoln administration and went to New York City to raise a regiment of volunteers from the New York City Fire Department. On May 24, 1861, he led his regiment across the Potomac River to Alexandria, VA. On seeing a Confederate flag atop of a hotel, he led a small party to seize it and was shot and killed by a southern sympathizer. Thus, he became the first Union officer killed in the Civil War.

