Emory Upton and the Formation of Modern America

by

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Introduction

When I first assumed the duties of Genesee County Historian I quickly became aware of the mystique surrounding Emory Upton. In a short life that ended with suicide in San Francisco in 1881, he had left a farm in Batavia and made his way first to Oberlin College and then to West Point, graduating shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Rising to the rank of Major General by the end of the war – and only in his mid-twenties – he had displayed his bravery and leadership skills at such noteworthy Civil War battles as Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg. A uniquely talented professional officer who was also a gifted scholar, he authored such books as The Military Policy of the United States, published posthumously in 1904. As subsequent scholarship reveals, his legacy can be seen even today.

Upton’s army was a military force enjoying great success by the end of the Civil War – and one that descended into decay in the post-Civil War period, culminating in the year 1877, a year in which officers and enlisted men were not paid at all. The 25,000 man army saw officers holding the same rank for upwards of two decades or more, while the wider society viewed the army with apathy, if not outright hostility.

As America regained its traditional suspicion of the military, one momentarily interrupted by the fervor of the Civil War, professional soldiers such as Upton were left clinging to an ever-shrinking army. Despite this, Upton reinvented himself as an educator and policy maker through his tenure as Commandant of Cadets at West Point and, of course, through his research and writing. In his 1867 publication of A New System of Infantry Tactics he established himself as one sensitive to the eventual impact of innovative technologies on the modern battlefield. Along these lines, he urged an adoption of a more narrow battle line.
Consequently, officers would lose the customary control they had exercised over their troops. Therefore, Upton argued that a sensible compensation for the modern soldier was to undergo a training designed to enable infantrymen to think more on their own than had previously been the case. Upton played a pivotal role in the development of modern soldiers expected to be more self-reliant – soldiers as mere components in a military machine was one rapidly drawing to a close, and Upton pioneered this radical shift in battlefield tactics.

But maybe it was his last book that proved to have the greatest impact. In The Military Policy of the United States he called for far-reaching changes in America’s military structure that would later become the norm – a larger national army, a general staff, and the professionalization of officer education are but a few of the policy recommendations found in this work, and whose importance, and eventual normalization, are beyond question.

Throughout his military career he displayed a restlessness not apparent in many of his peers. He consistently straddled the boundaries between a traditional conservative respectful of tradition and a reformer agitating for change. This will become visible in the aftermath of his travels through Europe and Asia, culminating in the release of The Armies of Asia and Europe in 1878. For example, he saw the necessity of a larger army, but he also recognized the historic opposition to a large standing army made up of mostly draftees. Political opposition to an army that could be used for undemocratic purposes – not to mention the fiscal costs attendant to the maintenance of a standing army – meant that a compromise was needed. In The Armies of Asia and Europe that middle ground would take the form of a system of “National Volunteers” who could be called upon in an emergency to organize around a core of active-duty troops whose officers and enlisted personnel would provide leadership and experience necessary for an effective fighting force.

In Upton’s life there emerged a committed officer whose identity and hence emotional makeup cannot be separated from his battlefield exploits and striking scholarship. The farm boy from Batavia never really left him. Born on the 27th of August in 1839 on a farm near what is now Batavia, Upton was the tenth child
born to Electa and Daniel Upton. His ancestors include John Upton, a Scottish Puritan. While his parents were devout Methodists, the early influence of Puritanism remained discernible in his outlook. So too did the reform impulse of Western New York in the early nineteenth century, complete with its abolitionism and rejection of alcohol. The quest for a better world remained a part of Upton’s personality throughout his life – as did the seriousness of his parents. Emory Upton remained a complex mixture of farmer self-reliance, Puritanical sobriety and discipline, and Methodist reformism manifesting itself in sustained compassion for those less fortunate. His short stint at Oberlin College – with its abolitionists and African-American students in the years before the Civil War – only served to strengthen habits of empathy and sympathy inculcated since childhood. The rigors of West Point and army life subsequently combined these traits with a view of duty and habits of self-discipline that intensified as he moved deeper into adulthood.

A brilliant mind and a complex personality found a counterbalance in his brief marriage to Emily Martin. This relationship will be explored later in this discussion, as it provides insights into Upton’s hopes and anxieties about himself and the America becoming apparent in the years after the Civil War. While this talk is a very quick foray into the writings of Upton, it is also an extended dialogue with a man’s personal circumstances; conditions that were at least partly shaped by the wider American society which Emory was so much a part of.

Emory Upton did not live long, dying a few months short of his forty-second birthday. This brief life looks even shorter, and more impressive, when one remembers that he spent little of it in the self-promotion so much a part of some career officer lives. As a result, for those thinking about Upton there is either the local history that can grow into myth, or there are the writings that leave their mark on public policy and military strategy. My goal in this brief exploration of Upton’s life is to instead reach a more balanced middle ground. In other words, Upton was not merely his writings, nor was he simply the stuff of mythology. He certainly should not be reduced to a mere tragic victim of suicide, for this, as we will see, can be understood from a variety of perspectives. Instead, a picture comes into focus in which his writings – and the local images that have grown up
around him, are expressions of who he was as a person. The writings and the legends, complicated by a suicide, all work simultaneously to yield, slowly but surely, the shape of a nineteenth century boy from Batavia who traveled a very long road indeed in a rapidly changing America.

To put it another way, Upton was more than a West Point graduate and a Civil War hero. He was more than an accomplished scholar who met a sad end. He was instead a clear product of his historical moment: the impact of industrialization on rural farm families; the place of the military in modern American life; the relationship between an embryonic American empire and traditional American ideas concerning democratic self-rule; the ritualization of love, marriage, and intimate friendship in middle class Victorian America; the dynamic of class relations in modern American life; the development of the professions in the nineteenth century; the influence of elite institutions such as West Point; the complicated interaction of race and ethnic relations in America; and the psychological consequences of modern warfare on those participating in it. An examination of the life of Emory Upton is not only an inherently fascinating story; it is also an intriguing microcosm of a rapidly changing America at a pivotal time in its history. To look at the America of Emory Upton’s day is to see its astonishing variety and complexity. To see the America of his day is to see the America of our own day.

But time constraints preclude what could easily be a book-length examination of what Emory’s life reveals about wider trends in the unfolding of the American experience. As a result, in our short time together we will consider five themes discoverable in his life – and what those motifs tell us about both him and the country he fought for. We will turn initially to the influence of Puritanism in his life, and how this remained a consistent idea from boyhood to adulthood. Secondly, an analysis of what some scholars have called the “reform impulse” in upstate New York is necessary because, as I will argue, this combined with his religious sentiments to produce a fascinating and consistently complex personality in Emory. Thirdly, I will set forth what his military career tells us about the raging debate ensuing in the wake of the Civil War – not to mention before – about the place of the military in American society. We will then radically shift
gears and focus on his marriage to Emily Martin Upton and what this tells us about intimate human interaction in Victorian America. Finally, we shall set our sights on his unfortunate death – and some of the ways one can speculate about its cause. With all of this in mind, let us turn now to the role played by Puritanism in the development of Emory Upton’s personality.

How did Puritanism Help to Shape the Emotional Makeup of Emory Upton?

While a cadet at West Point in 1859 Upton wrote a letter to his sister Julia. Despite his concerns in a previous letter about developments in his philosophy course he departed from academic concerns to ruminate about the place of God in his life. His theological speculations reveal an unusual depth for someone only twenty years old – suggesting that he had come out of a background in which such philosophical seriousness was the norm, which then raises the question of where such concerns originated. Upton’s worldview, in part, is anchored in the influence of his ancestors – such as John Upton, the Scottish Puritan who settled in Salem, Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. His descendants – such as Emory’s father, Daniel, who eventually settled in Batavia, brought with them and to their children an intellectual heritage refashioned – but not lost – in a departure from Puritanism to Methodism. As we will now see, Emory’s Christian perspective had as its base a Puritan creed articulated through a zealous Methodism. In that letter of 1859 he articulated quite clearly a Puritanical conception of God serving to relegate the things of this world to, at best, a secondary and transitory importance:

Life is but an instant – as compared with eternity, and where we reflect that our future condition depends upon our actions here in this world, it is but reasonable that we should bow before the Creator to acknowledge his supremacy. I ask his forgiveness for our manifold violations of his law. I feel that I could resign everything to do His will and to gain his approbation.
Such sentiments reveal the lingering influence of the Puritan stress on the centrality of faith. Upton admits to “manifold violations of his law” – in other words, human nature precludes the possibility of an eternal salvation attainable through obedience to God’s laws, as human nature does not allow for this. One can sincerely try to obey God’s laws – but that would be the result of faith. Leading a good life is not enough as human nature is so flawed that damnation – outside of faith – is simply unavoidable. Faith requires a continuous acknowledgment of God’s supreme authority, hence Upton’s admission that he “could resign everything to do His will and to gain his approbation.” One can say that this aspect of Upton’s theology is found in a lack of confidence – it was ultimately paramount for him to prove his faith to himself, which obligated him to lead a good life so as to be convinced of his eventual entry into heaven. Expecting good behavior of himself easily translated into an expectation of good behavior from others. Hence it should not surprise us that further on in this same 1859 letter he tells Julia that

through the prayers of others I hope to be able to do as much good in the army as in any other profession. I do not think that a Christian ever disgraced the profession of arms, on the contrary they are those who have most ennobled it.

Upton’s concern with the traditional Puritan conception of what can provide entry into heaven did not diminish, even amidst the rigors of modern warfare. A good life resulting from faith is a conception he carried through his later life, and it was one that he learned early on under the watchful eyes of his parents. In the 1893 publication of the *Upton Family Records: Being Genealogical Collections For An Upton Family History*, we find a description of Daniel Upton in which one can clearly discern the Puritan theory that a good member of society was one motivated not by mere social constraints, but rather, by following God’s dictates; teachings which had been internalized – the “true” Christian was one whose faith prompted a person to do all that they ultimately did:

For more than fifty years he (Emory’s father)
was a radical teetotaler, and he was the first man in Batavia to “raise” a building without using alcoholic drinks. He zealously opposed slavery, was one of seven to cast the first abolition votes in the town, and tirelessly aided the operation of the famous “underground railway.” “Many a panting fugitive, seeking a home of freedom, found sustenance, protection, and safe conveyance under his prudent and skillful direction.”

In Emory we can therefore see the reproduction of a rare combination – the Puritan notion of a salvation translating into laudable social conduct with a Methodism which by its central creed desired “to reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands.” Originating in eighteenth century England as a movement within the Church of England, it softened the harsher approach to salvation demanded by Puritanism and instead stressed that God offered salvation to all who desired it. Holiness was not merely a matter of faith producing good people – it was instead a holiness rooted in what one did in society, and it was those actions that created a sustained faith translating into eternal salvation upon death. This union of faith and social action was especially visible in Western New York in the early nineteenth century, and it spawned a “burned-over” district in which we find Batavia and the Upton family.

*The Reform Impulse in Western New York – and How it Affected Emory Upton*

In the first half of the nineteenth century Western New York was the site of an intense religious revival first discernible subsequent to the War of 1812. The power of what some scholars have called the “Second Great Awakening” (the first having taken place in the first half of the eighteenth century) echoed the observations of a foreign observer, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville. In *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835, he observed that

> In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses dramatically opposed to each other; but in America I found that they were
intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.

In other words, religious belief in antebellum America tended to reinforce notions of freedom and democracy. In the way that Americans insisted upon a political system in which ordinary people had a say in how government was run, so too did those same Americans insist upon a religious system featuring plain language fashioned to reach the hearts of people – rather than impressing their intellect through complicated theology.

An intense, accessible religion became visible in Connecticut as early as the 1790s, and it spread westward where it peaked in Western New York in the early to mid-1800s. A growing belief in the immanent Second Coming of Jesus was a feature of this revival. As Stephen E. Ambrose put it in his biography of Upton in Upton and the Army (1992),

Emory grew up on the edge of the “Burned-over District,” an area so named because of the religious revivals and Pentecostal beliefs prevalent there. Dorothea L. Dix toured the region to advocate kinder, more intelligent treatment of the insane. William Miller, of Hampton, New York, convinced thousands in the area that the Second Coming of Christ would take place on October 22, 1843. The Millerites sold all their goods and, to be closer to heaven, awaited the Second Coming on roofs, hilltops, and haystacks.

Accordingly, it should not surprise us that twenty years before in Batavia’s Spirit of the Times we find two articles extolling the simplicity and truth of biblical principles. In one, entitled simply “The Bible,” the readers were told, on October 24th, 1823, that

There are four grand arguments for the truth of the Bible: The first is the miracles
it records – 2d the prophecies – 3d the goodness of the doctrine – 4th the moral character of the penmen – The miracles flow from Divine power – the prophecies from Divine understanding – and the excellence of the doctrine from Divine goodness.

In that same issue, on the next page, the growing intensity of religious fervor is revealed in an article that includes the following excerpt:

. . . the progress of error may be arrested; that everything unfriendly to the reign of righteousness may be destroyed; that Christians of all denominations may be more and more united in affection and effort; (and) that the Missionary cause and the cause of Bible Societies, may be extended and made to triumph in every part of the world. . .

That this religious zeal spread throughout Western New York should not surprise us. The Uptons, like many in the area; were descendants of Puritans whose hunger for religion had never waned – but instead, was refashioned within the context of an area offering economic hope in large part due to the completion of the Erie Canal. The blending of high expectations with religious enthusiasm prompted the growth of a belief that people – and hence society – could become what they chose to be. Fittingly, older notions of Puritan damnation yielded to the belief that people, and society, could be improved. Hence, as Ambrose put it, “as a child, Emory imbibed reform.” Puritan sternness merged with Methodist optimism to produce efforts to make the world a better place through disciplined, focused, and hopeful action.

As a result, abolitionism, temperance, and the improvement of the Army were three elements of reform with roots running deep in the family roots of Emory Upton. In a way that would suit his later life as a professional officer, Emory the
reformer – like Emory the career soldier – gave his ultimate loyalty to a cause and not a particular political party. There was a certain aura of righteousness to his temperament, and this was typical of the reformers of nineteenth century America. God was viewed as being on the reformer’s side of the issue. Turning initially to abolitionism, we can quickly discern a view of slavery with deep family roots – which in turn were anchored in the abolitionist sentiments of antebellum reformers.

In 1885 Peter S. Michie, a member of the faculty at West Point and a fellow classmate there of Emory’s, published *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*. In this work Michie stressed the strong abolitionist sentiments of Upton while still a cadet at West Point:

His courage and independence had already been proved by sturdy resistance to the arrogance of his Southern classmates. He had at his very advent at the Academy boldly announced that he was an abolitionist, and in sympathy with whatever tended to promote the freedom of the slaves.

Indeed, this strong opposition to slavery had its roots in a religious equation of slavery with sin, and such a view, originating in the Upton household, was if anything nurtured by Emory’s brief time as an Oberlin College student. The very origin of Oberlin was the result of an abolitionist bolt from Cincinnati’s Lane Theological Seminary. To be an abolitionist was to embrace a life that could be dangerous – witness, for example, the 1837 murder of abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois. Abolitionist advocacy was not for the faint-hearted, and his very open advocacy of this position revealed both the depth of his reformist passion and the independence of mind characterizing his life to the end. It must always be remembered that events such as those in Alton, Illinois were also evident closer to home, in Genesee County. For instance, relevant here was a meeting of approximately one hundred abolitionists gathered at the Batavia Court
House in March of 1836. These opponents of slavery assembled for the express purpose of

Convincing all (of) our citizens by arguments addressed to their understandings and consciences that Slavery was a crime in the sight of God, a perpetual violation of his law, and (in) the best interests of all concerned required its immediate abandonment.

But in what was a prelude to the national trauma that erupted on the battlefields of 1861 that would include young Emory Upton – and so displease some in Batavia – we also see another reality. As remembered by Seth M. Gates in the Wyoming County Mirror in 1859, this abolitionist meeting was besieged by a crowd “who had ordered the delegates to adjourn.” Refusing to leave, the abolitionists were confronted by the group outside the Court House who “interrupted the proceedings by the blowing of horns and whistles, the jingling of bells and unearthly howling. . . “

The intimidation of the mob outside of the Court House compelled the abolitionists to stop their meeting. But their temporary defeat only translated into a redoubling of their efforts – and their numbers. Their next meeting was in Warsaw and attracted over three hundred abolitionists. Many of those convening in Batavia and Warsaw had previously met a year earlier in LeRoy. Meeting in a church basement, Gates described how

. . . the windows of the room were broken, the audience was drenched with water and a twelve foot hemlock plank was pitched in upon them through the window while the outer door was fastened and held by a rope. Judge Hascall and other respectable LeRoyans were stoned for their efforts to disperse the mob.
Gates, who had been a member of Congress in 1840 and who was, that year, threatened by slaveholders, had experienced a public solicitation for his murder. One A. Wilkins, a resident of Pembroke, Georgia, offered a reward of $500.00 for anyone able to bring Gates to Georgia. That same Congressman in 1835 lived through an attack on his home, in which

Windows of Mr. Gates were that same evening (in LeRoy in August of 1835) smashed by brickbats (and) his wife and children (were) driven to their bedroom for refuge, and all as punishment for attending an abolitionist meeting. . .

It was within this context that Emory announced that he was an abolitionist to his southern classmates at West Point. Scholars such as Ambrose have argued that he was in fact the first cadet to do so. The courage to speak so directly and openly on such a volatile issue speaks not only to his character, but additionally, to a passion learned both at home and absorbed within the abolitionist circles of Genesee County. That zeal was exhibited in such publications as Batavia’s Republican Advocate. On March 19th, 1833, a front-page article appeared, entitled “Visit to a Slave Ship.” After long and graphic descriptions of “infants torn from (the) breasts (of their mothers) and thrown upon the ground,” and of a young man witnessing the murder of his wife and then only to himself be fatally wounded after a suicide attempt, the author concludes with his response to the slave ship captain’s invitation to dine:

. . . (I) was about to depart, when the captain of the brig expressed a hope that I would not leave them in anger, but that I would walk below, and join them in a glass of wine. I promptly declined, assuring him that it gave me very unpleasant feelings to breathe the same air with men
engaged in this abominable traffic; but were I to drink with them, I should feel guilty of an act of wanton impiety that had stained the untarnished lustre of the flag I sailed under.

It was this same moral outrage that guided the reformers boundless energy in the area of alcohol consumption. The sin of slavery led quite naturally into a view of alcohol consumption as yet again a blemish on one’s personal character and that of the nation as a whole. Writing “my dear sister” from West Point on January 20th, 1860, Emory exclaimed that

I can not be too thankful for having been reared under Christian influences, for especially at this time do I need the assistance of God to keep me in the path of rectitude. We are living in perilous times. Government, society, everything seem to be on the verge of revolution.

It is here that he inserts alcohol as a factor and merges it with the other sins which he sees evident in American life:

We may ask, How have we incurred his displeasure? The answer is easy. Mormonism, spiritualism, intemperance, slavery, corruption in politics, either of which is almost sufficient to curse a people.

This legacy from his father, once described as a “radical teetotaler,” continued well beyond his West Point student days, and was a family tradition most certainly nurtured by the strength of the temperance movement in Genesee County. While there are many examples of this in historical sources from the County’s antebellum history, an article in Batavia’s Spirit of the Times well
illustrates this broad trend. On February 8th, 1842, Gerrit Smith, in an article entitled “The Temperance Reformation,” argued that

Among the gratifications of man’s unnatural wants – the gratifications of his perverted nature – is the drinking of alcoholic liquors. The abandonment of this practice by the American people, together with the consequent abandonment of other practices, would be a saving adequate to command all the leisure from manual labor, which they need to qualify themselves for sustaining the political and religious institutions, that they have chosen; and for enjoying and perpetuating the blessings of Christian freemen.

The fervor exhibited by Emory, a product of both his parental home and Genesee County, was one not confined to the reformer’s focus on social inequality and drunkenness. It was an enthusiasm resulting in a belief that the world could be improved and one in which that world included the army and the country it served.

*An Army Appropriate to Modern America*

The reformist energy Emory Upton brought to the abolitionist and temperance movements was one visible in his understanding of the place of the Army in industrializing America. America in the post-Civil War period was a society in flux. Westward movement reaching the Pacific Ocean, the emergence of big business, urbanization, and a political scene of growing complexity all suggested that older notions of where precisely the armed forces stood were ideas in need of reassessment. The experiences of the Civil War and the growth of an overseas empire only worked to add urgency to the question of what role the military
should play in an America that had changed radically when compared to that of
the revolutionary period. In the early years the suspicion directed towards a large
standing army had roots in both the republican conception of limited government
and the experience of British tyranny. Not surprisingly, the very size of the army
was an expression of its proper place in American life. When the War of 1812
broke out, the army was made up of about 12,000 soldiers – out of a total
population of approximately seven million people. By the time of U.S. actions
against Mexico in 1846, the size of the U.S. army had actually *fallen* to about
7,640 men. The enormous armies of the Civil War were quickly disbanded upon
the war’s completion – so that by the closing decade of the nineteenth century
the number of U.S. troops was an insignificant 27,000 enlisted men and officers.
Emory Upton, detecting the future necessity of armed forces appropriate to a
modern, large, and far-flung country, thus began to reconsider the role of the U.S.
military in ways that most other officers and policy makers simply did not pay
attention to. Sometimes with biting sarcasm, he called for new thinking about the
role that a modern army should play in a modern America. This was evident in an
1877 comment on how the country showed its gratitude to those participating in
the Battle of Brandywine during the Revolution. In a recognition of the sacrifices
of that day, “Congress,” wrote Upton in a September 30th letter of that year,
“thought (it) proper to reward their valor by voting a bounty of thirty hogsheads
of rum as a complement to their gallant services.” Writing this in the same year in
which officers and enlisted men were not paid at all, Upton displayed a view that
the place of the army in American life was an issue of the utmost importance. He
therefore set out to delineate what that place should be – and how it should be
achieved.

While space and time limitations do not allow me to expand exhaustively on
Upton’s thinking here, three relatively brief points can be made. The first of these
is his call for the recognition that there is a threat to democracy posed by a
standing army. Accordingly, he saw little to be gained by strengthening the
militia. Instead, it made far more sense – financially and professionally – to
improve the regular army already in existence. But while scholars such as
Ambrose have stressed the sense of practicality evident in Emory’s thinking here,
I want to suggest that what may be a deeper understanding of his thinking on the place of the regular army has as much to do – maybe even more so – with the religious basis of his reformist agenda. Upton saw his place in the Civil War as one expressive of what can be called a holy war – it was just and Godly and imperative that the Confederacy be beaten – and beaten decisively. Here we can detect his Puritan ancestry – a devotional discipline and a purposeful church were the necessary ingredients for redemption. For example, compare the following two statements, one from Richard Sibbes, an English Puritan of the seventeenth century, and Emory, in a letter dated September 30th, 1861, in which he is outraged by the disorder evident among some of the Union soldiers. Sibbes, likening an army to a secular church, wrote that

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\text{The people of God, are beautiful, for order is beautiful. . . An army is a beautiful thing, because of the order and the well-disposed ranks that are within it. In this regard the church is beautiful.}
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Informal militias and amateur officers, on the other hand, were for Emory potentially anything but orderly and Godly, as he says below regarding an incident taking place on that September 30th date in Alexandria, Virginia:

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\text{The conduct of our troops was disgraceful beyond expression. They burned buildings, destroyed furniture, stole dishes, chairs, etc., killed chickens, pigs, calves, and everything they could eat. They would take nice sofa-chairs, which they had not the slightest use for, and ten minutes after throw them away.}
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He then sarcastically added:
Talk about the barbarity of the rebels! I believe them to be Christians compared to our thieves. The houses entered yesterday belonged mostly to Union people, yet they were unmolested by the rebels. One of our volunteer majors walked up to a looking-glass, worth about twenty dollars, and deliberately put his foot through it. I wish I had witnessed it. He would have had the benefit of a court-martial.

For Emory, this incident in Alexandria points to the essential problem of America’s amateur army – while it could be fighting for a just cause, it was conducting itself with behavior that was anything but just. As a result, the place of the army in modern America was a purposeful force trained to conduct righteous wars and, by necessity, led by officers whose profession was that of the regular army officer. To do this, the army had to be expanded and trained to conduct war – an evil necessity – within strict moral boundaries. In effect, what Emory saw as the justifiable aggressiveness of the Old Testament was one that should guide the modern army. To do that, one needed professionally trained officers and non-commissioned officers – “voluntary majors” simply would not do.

This clearly raised the question – what was a professional soldier, and how could they be trained – and retained? True to the ideal of a professional, he rejected the tradition of promotion by mere seniority. Instead, Upton urged the adoption of examinations designed to test the training process officers and officer candidates would be subject to. Stressing a merger of professional training and the democratic impulse, he argued for the inclusion of talented and ambitious noncommissioned officers who could also secure commissions subsequent to the passage of examinations necessitating study. Anticipating the ROTC programs of later generations, he also urged the possibility of commissions for students who had studied military science in America’s land-grant colleges of the nineteenth century. The point was clear – the days of governors appointing officers on the basis of political connections was one that had to end if the American army was to
achieve the level of readiness Upton sought. In *The Military Policy of the United States*, he located the political foundation of this practice in a mistaken understanding of states’ rights:

The policy of giving governors the authority to commission the officers, may have been suggested by the belief that this bestowal of patronage was essential to the speedy organization of the troops; but there are strong indications that it was dictated by mistaken ideas in reference to States rights. Many of the Senators and Representatives held that the volunteers were militia, or State troops, whose officers under the Constitution could be appointed by the Executive of their States.

But the call for a professional officers corps, urged with all of the urgency that only a nineteenth century reformer could display, would have had a limited effect if not accompanied by an equally zealous call for a reconsideration of tactics. Here as well Upton was ahead of his time. It was during the Civil War that one of his important tactical contributions became evident. In the midst of General Ulysses S. Grant’s Overland Campaign in May of 1864, then Colonel Upton proposed a radical idea in infantry assault. He urged an advance that featured a quick and narrow formation that did not stop to fire. In the spring of 1864 the typical infantry attack was characterized by a wide and slowly moving battle line that stopped along the way to fire. The idea was adopted and came to be the foundation for subsequent infantry assaults during the war. As discussed after the war in *A New System of Infantry Tactics*, this manner of infantry organization

. . . provides for all column movements required in an open country and by the columns of fours, for the movements necessary in narrow roads, wooded or
obstructed countries, without the extension incident to ordinary movements by the flank.

While *A New System of Infantry Tactics* outlined the intricacies of facilitating a new approach to infantry tactics first displayed in the Overland Campaign, it should also be recognized that this “system” is making its appearance in 1867, at the very moment that Victorian culture is just beginning to peak. As many scholars have long remarked, it was a culture stressing detailed rituals – especially in the middle class world of which Emory was so much a part of. The pages of precise instruction and detailed illustrations of the manual of arms remind us of just how formalized and ritualized Victorian middle class culture was. Should it then surprise us that Emory’s personal life also exhibited the same complex rituals evident in something as seemingly unrelated as *A New System of Infantry Tactics*?

*The Personal Relationship of the Victorian Emory Upton*

In October of 1867 Emily Norwood Martin, a young woman in her early twenties, wrote to Emory while he was on duty in Paducah, Kentucky. She told him that

For many months I have seldom closed my eyes without praying for you, my friend, and I feel that I can not bear to see you shutting yourself out from God’s favor without making this last effort to assure you that some one cares and prays for your soul.

She goes on:

This must be my excuse for this letter, for I feel too sinful to advise or caution others. I have faith to believe that the prayers offered this day, while at the table
of the Lord, will be heard and answered.

This woman would eventually become Emory’s wife on February 19th, 1868, when they were wed in a small church in Auburn, New York. In a brief marriage that ended with her death from tuberculosis a little more than two years later, on the 30th of March, 1870, Emily came to embody the nineteenth century middle class ideal of what some historians have called the “cult of true womanhood.” The essence of this ideal was the role played by a wife as someone displaying the traits of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. While this ideal could suggest an alleged female inferiority by the standards of early twenty-first century America, this conception actually carried a very different – and surprising – assumption in nineteenth century America. In that period these traits were understood as actually positioning a woman in a superior position over men in terms of virtue. Given Upton’s religious beliefs and his deeply ingrained sense of duty and purpose, it should not surprise us that he fell deeply in love with a young woman whose character and intelligence all blended to reveal the period’s notion of an ideal wife.

In their letters we can detect their assumption of a gender-based organization of virtue in which Emily occupies the dominant role. This takes us back to the aforementioned correspondence of October, 1867. In that letter she reflects upon her fear that subsequent to Emory’s battlefield experiences his faith had been shaken. Emily told him that “I have been frequently led to think of what you told me last spring about your spiritual state, and I have deeply mourned over it.” After speculating at length about what may have prompted Emory’s spiritual suffering, she concludes, despite also feeling “sinful,” that she must assume the role of teacher and spiritual guide. She then reveals that

I have given you one of my greatest treasures, my own Bible, which has never left me before; may it be a comfort to you, and the truths contained therein be the means of once more bringing you into the kingdom!
True to the ideal of womanhood in nineteenth century America, Emily comes across as a virtual tower of moral strength and virtue. Yet, her struggle with illness comes to represent the other side of this feminine ideal – that of a woman who is strong in terms of virtue but nonetheless delicate and vulnerable and hence in need of the strength that a husband can provide. So while the newlyweds left Auburn to return to Emory’s childhood home in Batavia before leaving for the south of France Emily was already exhibiting poor health. While this undoubtedly had a physiological basis it should also be remembered that it fulfilled the era’s expectations of “true womanhood.” Moral strength and a position of superiority also revealed an ironic vulnerability; vulnerability captured in a letter written to her by her mother, Cornelia, less than a month after her daughter’s wedding. After saying explicitly that “your strength will lie in a sense of your weakness,” Cornelia tells Emily that

He is now teaching you an important lesson
by making you sensible of your weakness;
submit patiently to his dealings with you,
but never lose your hold on that arm that
moves the world.

Fulfilling her role as the embodiment of virtue continued after her tragic death. She continued to exercise a moral superiority rooted in religious empowerment by successfully restoring Emory’s shaken faith. She had succeeded in formulating acceptable male behavior – Emory’s faith had been restored despite the deep sense of loss he clearly felt over her premature death. In a letter to his parents written shortly after his wife’s death, he exclaims his faith despite the deep grief he feels:

I strive to bow to this affliction, and to
acknowledge in it the goodness of God;
yet I selfishly long for my darling. I know
this feeling to be wrong, since Emily,
having finished her labors, has simply been
called to her heavenly rest. She was prepared
to go; her life was complete, and God has called her to himself.

He then added this:

I know that in her death I have been drawn nearer to Christ, and that I can now lay hold of the plan of salvation as I never could before.

But being “drawn nearer to Christ,” while fulfilling the social role expected of his wife, was an act that did not translate into earthly happiness for Emory. Hence this incredible man, whose impact was felt far beyond the Batavia of his youth, ended his own life a little more than a decade after his beloved wife’s death. How can his suicide be understood?

The Death of Emory Upton

On March 15th, 1881, Emory Upton committed suicide while serving as the Commanding Officer of the 4th U.S. Artillery at the Presidio in San Francisco. His body was discovered by a Chinese servant, Ah Sing, who saw Emory slumped over his desk in a pool of blood. A pistol was discovered on the desk. Four days later soldiers of the Fourth Artillery escorted his body to Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, where the Fourth Artillery men were replaced by soldiers from the Second Brigade of the California National Guard. His funeral was held on March 29th in Auburn New York, in the same church where he and Emily were married. He was laid to rest next to Emily in Sand Beach Cemetery. Questions soon abounded in the Army and among family and friends. Why had he taken his own life? For some, it was believed that he never fully came to terms with Emily’s passing. For others, it was the result of severe headaches which had become so overwhelming that the only recourse was this ultimate physical escape. But maybe his sister Sara said it best when she remarked that her brother’s “sad death is a great sorrow to me and it always will be shrouded in mystery.” But maybe there is yet an additional way to look at what appears to be inexplicable.
It is no secret among historians that the Civil War is the first example of an industrial war. New technologies combined with mass production to produce a radically different kind of conflict. In effect, the modern battlefield – and its many casualties – was a precursor to what warfare would routinely look like in the twentieth century. While the psychological effects of modern warfare did not have a name until the “shell shock” of World War One, there is little doubt that individuals during the Civil War experienced that modern battlefield in a variety of ways – and some coped better than others with the emotional costs involved.

Could it be that Emory Upton suffered the long-term effects of what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder? It is possible that his involvement in such battles as the one at Spotsylvania – in which he led an assault at the Mule Shoe Salient that involved hand-to-hand combat – left its mark on him, emotionally and physically. Those marks – those symptoms – are in evidence well after the war was over.

For example, a full two years before his death he showed a tendency to avoid other people. Despite his many accomplishments, he spoke of seeing himself as a failure – this feeling of worthlessness, along with the avoidance of other people – is once again a common characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder. He suggested that he had trouble concentrating – for example, shortly before his death, he attended a play staged by troops under his command. He admitted to another officer that he could not recall the play’s first act at all. As one physician commented in a report on Emory’s final months, Upton admitted to him “that he was in a state of nervous depression. . .” A loss of self-control is also a feature of post-traumatic stress disorder – should it surprise us then that this man of such public dignity and decorum should break down and sob in response to a fellow officer’s query about how he felt a mere two days before taking his own life?

**Conclusion**

Despite the tragic end to Emory Upton’s life I believe it is a mistake to feel discouraged. As I have tried to suggest throughout this brief and admittedly superficial foray into this amazing man’s story one is struck by the uniquely American story that is Emory Upton. His life is the life of many modern Americans
who have strived to fulfill their potentials. One could say that in this sense his story embodies the clear progress evident in modern American life.

The lesson of Emory Upton’s life is that if one persists things can change. The harsher features of Puritanism gave way over time to a softened and one could argue more compassionate Protestantism. The persistence of the abolitionist translated over time into not only the eradication of slavery but also, down the road, into an increased awareness of labor conditions and the necessity of improving them. Temperance advocacy in nineteenth century America compelled increased attention to a variety of health issues that could only serve to enhance the lives of millions of Americans in the modern period.

Emory’s life is an American success story punctuated nonetheless by tragedy that to one degree or another is inescapable. While he constructed a good and honorable life for himself he also worked to make the society he lived in better and safer for all Americans. He reminds us that if we are hoping to improve American society then we must admit what is questionable in that society and hence, what should be challenged and changed.

In his confrontation with fellow West Point cadets over the issue of slavery, and in his struggle against an entrenched bureaucracy to bring needed changes to the Army, we are taught that what appears to be normal and resistant to rightful change is anything but. Even his untimely death teaches a lesson – that war produces casualties, and some of those wounds are not immediately visible. Emory Upton embodies some of the finest qualities in American life – faith, a sense of right and wrong, and a patriotism resting on the necessity of acknowledging the need for improvement. All of this is hard work, and it requires the kind of courage Emory routinely displayed. But the prize is great. After all, he recognized this early on, as a nineteen year old at West Point, when he remarked in a letter that “the more difficulties we triumph over, the greater will be our reward.”