

## General John McNulta (1837-1900)

John McNulta was born on November 9, 1837 in New York City, New York. His father was Irish and his mother was from Scotland.<sup>1</sup> McNulta received his education at a private school near Polham, New York.<sup>2</sup> He lived in New York City until 1850 when he began to travel throughout the southern United States, the West Indies, and Great Britain thanks to wealthy relatives.<sup>3</sup> In 1852, McNulta headed West at the young age of 15. To pay for his journey west, McNulta took on a variety of jobs: raced horses in Indiana and Ohio, was a farm worker, and a cook's mate on a lake steamer. McNulta then settled in Attica, Indiana and became a hotel clerk in 1853. While in Attica, he learned the trade of cigar making from George F. Dick.<sup>4</sup> Dick eventually hired McNulta to travel by wagon throughout Indiana and Illinois as a salesman and collector for his wholesale tobacco dealer company Dick & Co.<sup>5</sup>

McNulta came to Bloomington for the first time in 1856 while traveling for his job with Dick & Co. In 1859, at the age of 22, Dick sent him to Bloomington to set up a cigar store at No. 9 Center Street in the Hanna Building.<sup>6</sup> However, McNulta did not just want to remain a cigar maker and salesman, he wanted to expand his knowledge and interests and spent time reading law in the libraries of attorneys William Orme and Leonard Swett.

McNulta's studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. On April 12, 1861, shots were fired by Confederate forces upon Federal forces stationed at Ft. Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The fort fell two days later and President Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 men to help put down the insurrection. Less than 3 weeks later, on May 3, 1861, McNulta heeded that call and enlisted as a private in the Union Army, Company A of the First Illinois Cavalry. This was the first regiment of cavalry from the state of Illinois.<sup>7</sup> He was promoted to the rank of captain the same day by the original captain, John Rousch. Rousch appointed McNulta captain due to his youth, fitness, and experience with horses. The men of the company also had to furnish their own horses. Most of the horses the men of the company brought with them were rejected because they lacked speed and stamina that would be required of them in battle. Some of the leading citizens of McLean County then offered "the best horses in every neighborhood to be sold to the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary on credit."<sup>8</sup> McNulta received "a splendid black horse, which he has appropriately named *Black Diamond*."<sup>9</sup> In July 1861, McNulta's band of recruits, known as "Loomis Dragoons" (Dragoons meaning mounted infantry), were sent to Alton, Illinois by rail to be under the command of Colonel Ulysses S. Grant. There they joined the other six companies in the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary.<sup>10</sup> This meeting between Grant and McNulta was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. E Duis. *Good Old Times in McLean County* (McKnight & McKnight Publishing 1968), 857

<sup>2</sup> Scott W. Rager, *General John McNulta: Illinois Soldier and Statesmen* Thesis (Illinois State University 1981), 4

<sup>3</sup> Duis, 857

<sup>4</sup> Duis, 857

<sup>5</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I: The War Record of McLean County with other papers.* (Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co. 1899), 523

<sup>6</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, 523

<sup>7</sup> Duis, 857

<sup>8</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, 467-468

<sup>9</sup> ed. Don Munson, *It is Begun, The Pantagraph Reports the Civil War* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing & Stationery Co., 2001), 28

<sup>10</sup> Munson, 28

In September of that same year, Company A engaged Southern (Confederate) forces in battle at Lexington, Missouri. After a nine day battle, McNulta and the rest of the Union forces surrendered and were taken prisoner. A few weeks later in October, a note from a *New York Times* reporter was published in *The Pantagraph* stating that the reporter had, “left Lexington Monday, and by request of Capt. McNulta write to inform you that he is safe, but a prisoner. He received a ball in the breast, which produced, however, only a very slight wound. He is well treated, and will probably be exchanged within a short time.”<sup>11</sup> McNulta was made to sign a “Parole of Honor” certificate in which he “pledged his word of honor that he will not again during the present war take up arms against the State of Missouri or the Confederate States of America and that he will not give aid or combat... to the Government of the United States or any of its armies until he shall have been exchanged or otherwise released.”<sup>12</sup> In November, McNulta was returned to Union forces in exchange for Confederate Captain Thomas Whithill.<sup>13</sup>

When McNulta returned home to Bloomington, he immediately began recruiting new troops for the First Cavalry whose numbers had been depleted because of the previous battles.<sup>14</sup> While back in Bloomington, he married his eighteen year old fiancée Laura Pelton of Litchfield, Connecticut on January 15, 1862. They would go on to have eight children: Herbert, Robert, Donald, Nellie, Frederick, Laura, Josephine, and an unnamed infant. Four of those children died before they reached adulthood. The family made their home on North Main Street in Bloomington for many years.<sup>15</sup>

McNulta was then sent to southwestern Missouri in command of three cavalry companies and an artillery battery. His task was to counteract guerrilla activity in the area. Guerilla warfare was a non-conventional style of fighting in which groups of men would band together and attack both Union soldiers and Union sympathizers throughout the border and southern states. It was here that McNulta earned the nickname “Fightin’ Captain.”<sup>16</sup>

After the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry mustered out of service on July 17, 1862, McNulta sought to join a new regiment and continue fighting in the war. On August 20<sup>th</sup> he joined the ranks of the newly formed 94<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry under commanding officer, his friend, Colonel William W. Orme.<sup>17</sup> President Lincoln had made a call for 600,000 more men to volunteer, and the residents of McLean County were eager to oblige. The 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry was completely made up of men from McLean County. They were commonly referred to as “The McLean County Regiment.”<sup>18</sup> While he did muster in as a private, he was almost immediately elected to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and for much of the remainder of the war, McNulta was in command of the Second Brigade, Second Division, 13<sup>th</sup> Army Corps.<sup>19</sup>

The 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry left for their journey to St. Louis, Missouri on August 25, 1862 with 930 men. By September, they were on way to Rolla, MO by rail but Springfield was their final stop.<sup>20</sup> It was in Springfield, MO that McNulta spent the next six weeks training his men in battle tactics and drilling them in the art of war. Unlike many commanders during the war who

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<sup>11</sup> Munson, 39

<sup>12</sup> John McNulta collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Duis, 857

<sup>14</sup> Duis, 858

<sup>15</sup> “Gen. John McNulta Dead” *Daily Pantagraph*, Feb 23, 1900.

<sup>16</sup> Rager, 10

<sup>17</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, 523

<sup>18</sup> *History of McLean County* (Chicago: WM. Le Baron, Jr., & Co.: 1879), 273

<sup>19</sup> Duis, 858

<sup>20</sup> *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois Vol. I* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company: 1908), 810

still employed the tried and true Napoleonic battle tactics, (where troops marched in formation and fired several volleys at the enemy before engaging in hand to hand combat) McNulta trained his men to fire and reload in a prone position (lying on the ground). He taught his men to use every “crook and cranny of the natural landscape” to protect themselves while engaged in battle.<sup>21</sup> This training, which McNulta had tirelessly drilled into his men, would be tested for the first time in battle on December 7, 1862.

On December 7, 1862, the 94<sup>th</sup> was involved in the Battle of Prairie Grove in Arkansas. It was the “first time they were ever under fire... first time they had ever heard the booming of cannon, and the sharp rattling of musketry.”<sup>22</sup> Some 30,000 Confederate troops “stood poised to attack a badly outnumbered Union contingent at Prairie Grove and the 94<sup>th</sup> was among those Union Regiments called in to help.” The 94<sup>th</sup> marched an incredible 120 miles in 84 hours.<sup>23</sup> During the march, McNulta was reportedly sick and unable to ride his horse because of it: “[McNulta] went into the engagement, being unwell still, and conducted himself with calmness and bravery and proved himself a skillful and excellent commander.”<sup>24</sup> The Battle of Prairie Grove was a devastating loss for both sides of the war. However, under McNulta only one man died and twenty-six were wounded.<sup>25</sup> He was praised by Colonel Orme for “inspiring his men with courage” and for training his men hard on firing and reloading their weapons while lying down.<sup>26</sup> McNulta’s men maintained a long irregular line in which they took “advantage of every stump, fence and irregularity of the ground” and they maintained “so destructive a fire that no troops could be brought against them without being cut into pieces.”<sup>27</sup> A *Pantagraph* article on December 31 commended McNulta saying that “He would ride up and down the line, encouraging his men, and giving them directions how to fire, seemingly daring the enemy’s bullets to strike him. He is a man of superior judgment.”<sup>28</sup> McNulta was attributed with protecting his men, especially from “unnecessary exposure to action.”<sup>29</sup> In the end, the Confederates retreated during the night leaving the Union forces victorious on the battle field.

When Colonel Orme was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General, McNulta was promoted to the rank of a full Colonel in 1863. The Ninety-fourth was also awarded time away from the war from March 31 to June 3. After recuperating, McNulta and his men returned to Rolla, Missouri and continued to drill and train until they were ordered to join U.S. Grant in the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Grant needed the 94<sup>th</sup> to battle the Confederate forces at Vicksburg in order to succeed. The 94<sup>th</sup> dug trenches and captured rifle pits (fox holes) to aid in the battle.<sup>30</sup> “Here, again, the indefatigable McNulta was constantly among the men in the trenches, rapping them on the head when they needlessly exposed themselves and keeping so sharp a lookout that...the Regiment only sustained the loss of one man killed and five men

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<sup>21</sup> rev. by J.N. Reece, Report of the Adjutant General Vol. V (Springfield, IL: Phillips Bros., State Printers 1901), 406

<sup>22</sup> Munson, 87

<sup>23</sup> Munson, 85

<sup>24</sup> Munson, 88

<sup>25</sup> *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois Vol. I*, 810

<sup>26</sup> Rager, 20

<sup>27</sup> Reece, 407

<sup>28</sup> Munson, 86

<sup>29</sup> Reece, 406

<sup>30</sup> *Brief Historical Sketch 94<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Infantry Folder 1* McMh Archives

wounded during a month long siege of the city.”<sup>31</sup> On July 4, 1863 the Confederates surrendered Vicksburg, which was their last stronghold on the Mississippi River.<sup>32</sup>

After the victory of Vicksburg, McNulta and his men were sent on an expedition up the Yazoo River and then back down again into Louisiana. It was in Louisiana near Morganza where McNulta was wounded.<sup>33</sup> In September of 1863, McNulta participated in a running battle at Morganza when the 94<sup>th</sup> came under heavy shelling. A twelve pound cannon went off not more than twenty feet from him, causing him to be thrown from his horse, Black Diamond, but he continued to fight regardless of his injuries. He sustained injuries to his back and hip, which plagued him the rest of his life.<sup>34</sup> McNulta was never concerned about his own safety, only the lives of the men he commanded.

In December 1863, McNulta was put on an extended leave to recover from chronic dysentery, which is an inflammation of the intestine, (usually caused by severe dehydration, unsanitary living conditions, and poor diet) which often caused severe diarrhea. During his recuperation, McNulta lobbied to be promoted to the rank of Brigadier General as soon as possible. McNulta solicited General Francis Herron to write letters of recommendation to Judge David Davis and President Lincoln.<sup>35</sup> Much to his disappointment, McNulta did not receive the promotion. On March 12, 1864, McNulta was back in command in Brownsville, Texas with the 94<sup>th</sup> under General N. J. T. Dana. “The Ninety-fourth was part of the garrison force assigned to remain at Brownsville with General Dana while General Nathaniel Banks proceeded on. Within three weeks he had taken nearly the entire Texas coastline.”<sup>36</sup> McNulta and the 94<sup>th</sup> were in Texas from March to July of that year.<sup>37</sup>

McNulta continued to command and serve in the Union Army until July 17, 1865, when he mustered out of service.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the war, McNulta was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General for “gallant and meritorious” service; a sort of equivalent to a medal for his service.<sup>39</sup> McNulta went by the title “General McNulta” for the rest of his life although he left the Army as colonel.<sup>40</sup> McNulta arrived back in Bloomington on August 6, 1865 ahead of his regiment because of the untimely death of his infant daughter Josephine.<sup>41</sup>

After the war, McNulta went back to the study of law and was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of Illinois in 1866.<sup>42</sup> That same year, he formed the law firm Weldon & McNulta with Lawrence Weldon in the building which also housed the Bloomington National Bank located on the southeast corner of Main and Washington Streets.<sup>43</sup> In 1868, McNulta was elected on the Republican ticket to serve four years as an Illinois State Senator. In 1870, McNulta started his successful campaign for United States House of Representatives and was elected in 1872. He was the first McLean county citizen to be elected to the House of

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<sup>31</sup> Reece, 407

<sup>32</sup> *Brief Historical Sketch* 94<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Infantry

<sup>33</sup> Reece, 407

<sup>34</sup> Reece, 406

<sup>35</sup> Rager, 25

<sup>36</sup> Rager, 24

<sup>37</sup> Rager, 26

<sup>38</sup> Rager, 30

<sup>39</sup> Rager, 31

<sup>40</sup> Munson, 213

<sup>41</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I, 523*

<sup>42</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I, 523*

<sup>43</sup> Rager, 36

Representatives of the U.S. In 1874, he ran for a second term in the House of Representatives, but was defeated by Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson I.

In 1894, McNulta and his family moved from Bloomington to Chicago to be closer to his work as a receiver. From 1885 to 1900, McNulta gained a nationwide reputation as a receiver, where he was given control of businesses to put them back on firm financial ground. A receiver was in most cases “appointed by the court to manage the affairs of a bankrupt business until it could be made solvent or until a buyer was located.”<sup>44</sup> Among his first big tasks as a receiver was the Toledo, St. Louis, and Kansas City railway.<sup>45</sup> He was known as the “Great American Receiver” in part due to his successes with the Wabash Railway, the Whiskey Trust (the Illinois Distilling and Cattle Feeding Company), and National Bank of Illinois.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout his life, McNulta was a member of many organizations, starting in 1865 when the McLean County Soldier’s Union was formed. Naturally, McNulta was elected chairman of that union.<sup>47</sup> His active connection to politics and his dedication to the Republican Party led him to be chosen as permanent presiding officer.<sup>48</sup> McNulta was also elected to a minor judgeship as Master in Chancery from 1881-1885, working in a type of court which handled petitions and lawsuits not dealing with financial solutions.<sup>49</sup> McNulta served as President for both the National Mutual Accident Association of Bloomington, and the Corn Belt Bank in the late 1880s to the early 1890s.<sup>50</sup>

McNulta was also a very active veteran. He participated annually in a reunion of his infantry company at the Society of the Army of Tennessee reunion. At the 12<sup>th</sup> annual reunion of the society in 1879, held at the Palmer House in Chicago, IL., McNulta and members of the reunion created a time capsule to commemorate the event. The time capsule, a ten-sided glass jar with a glass stopper, was filled with newspaper clippings to document his company’s reunion, badges from McNulta’s military career, a theater ticket, a photograph of his wife Laura, and even a cigar that once belonged to Ulysses S. Grant (who was in attendance at the reunion).<sup>51</sup> On the bottom of the jar was a small piece of paper with the explicit instructions “Do Not Open for 100 years.” It was sealed on November 14, 1879.<sup>52</sup> The jar remained in the care of the McNulta family until 1957 and then it was given to the McLean County Museum of History, where the capsule and its contents remain to this day. The time capsule was opened on November 11, 1979 by the Museum in the presence of members of the McNulta family and members of the community in the Pavilion at Miller Park.<sup>53</sup> *Time* magazine even published an article about the opening of the time capsule.<sup>54</sup>

As a veteran of the Union Army, McNulta was also eligible to join the Grand Army of the Republic, known as the G.A.R. The G.A.R was a fraternal organization (much like the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars today) that was instituted and organized in Springfield, Illinois in 1866. The first post in the U.S. was mustered-in in Decatur that same

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<sup>44</sup> Rager, 86

<sup>45</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I, 523*

<sup>46</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I, 523*

<sup>47</sup> Rager, 32

<sup>48</sup> Rager, 85

<sup>49</sup> Rager, 85

<sup>50</sup> Rager, 86

<sup>51</sup> Dan Craft. “Centuries joined with puff of mild tobacco,” *The Pantagraph*, November 12, 1979

<sup>52</sup> “Time Capsule...A jarful of History,” *Bloomington Normal Magazine*, January 1979, p.6-7

<sup>53</sup> Greg Conroy. “Link to yesterday will be broken today,” *The Pantagraph*, November 11, 1979

<sup>54</sup> Jane O’Reilly. “In Illinois: Cigars and Bottled History,” *Time*, December 17, 1979

year.<sup>55</sup> There were nine G.A.R. posts in McLean County. To become a member of the G.A.R., “a man had to have served in the U.S. Army, Navy, or Marines between April 12, 1861 and April 9, 1865 in the War for the suppression of the Rebellion, to have been honorable discharged . . . , and not to have bore arms against the Union.”<sup>56</sup>

McNulta first belonged to the GAR Post #146, the William T. Sherman Post, in Bloomington, Illinois which was organized on July 26, 1882. While a member of that post, he served on the committee which helped support the Illinois Soldiers Orphans Home in Normal, IL.<sup>57</sup> After he and his family moved to Chicago, IL., he became a member of GAR Post #28, the Ulysses S. Grant post, and remained a member until his death.<sup>58</sup>

While on business for the National Bank of Illinois on February 22, 1900, McNulta died suddenly at the age of sixty-two, in his room at the Hamilton House in Washington D.C. His good friend and former law partner Lawrence Weldon was with him when he died. The cause of death was ruled to be angina pectoris, chest pain which comes from a lack of supply of blood to the heart. W. B. Lawrence, a friend of McNulta’s, wrote the following in memorial of McNulta’s life: “The State and Nation has lost a loyal, patriotic and devoted citizen, who was always courageous in his convictions, and who, as a soldier and statesmen, served his country well.”<sup>59</sup> McNulta’s funerals in Washington D.C., Chicago, and Bloomington reflected the impact he made on friends and comrades. In one of the many newspaper articles written about his death, it was written that “Gen. McNulta was loved and respected by the soldiers who served under him in war.” One of the members of the 94<sup>th</sup> regiment whom McNulta commanded also said . . . “I don’t suppose there ever was a man better liked by his men than Col. McNulta. He was noted on that.”<sup>60</sup> He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington next to four of his children who had preceded him in death.

By: Kelsey Schreck, 2011

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<sup>55</sup> The Library of Congress, “The Grand Army of the Republic and Kindred Societies: Introduction,” <http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/gar/garintro.html>

<sup>56</sup> “Journal of the Seventy-Fourth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic,” September 1940, Grand Army of the Republic Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>57</sup> “Historic Roster of William T. Sherman Post, 1911,” Grand Army of the Republic Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>58</sup> Dennis Northcott and Thomas Brooks. *Grand Army of the Republic Department of Illinois Transcription of Death Rolls, 1879-1947*. (Northcott Genealogical Publications, 2003) p.312

<sup>59</sup> John McNulta collection

<sup>60</sup> “Gen. John McNulta Dead”