

THE SPYMASTER

GENERAL HENRY B. CARRINGTON

STEPHEN E. TOWNE



The U.S. Army officer most responsible for preserving Indiana from danger during the Civil War was a Connecticut Yankee who never saw battle. Although he yearned for action, chance denied Henry Beebee Carrington the opportunity to fulfill his dreams of martial glory. Small, frail, and sickly, he did not fit the mold of a soldier either in the mid-nineteenth century or today. Nevertheless, he fought for the Union from behind a desk and employed his gifts as an organizer and administrator. Thanks to his efficiency, tens of thousands of Indiana troops went to the field to put down the Confederate rebellion. But Carrington's greatest service to Indiana and the Union was in his role as perhaps the most important spymaster during the Civil War—a task that fell to him by chance.



A Harper's Weekly drawing of newly enlisted Union soldiers training at Camp Morton in Indianapolis at the site of the former Indiana State Fairgrounds.

From offices in Indianapolis, Carrington initiated and directed a vital army intelligence operation that preserved the Midwest from both invasion by Confederate forces and insurrection by home-grown conspirators who aimed to disrupt the Union war effort. His success at directing spies during the war made him indispensable to military commanders and politicians alike, who kept him at his Indianapolis desk, away from fields of glory and in the shadows of history.

If Carrington is remembered today by Civil War historians, it is to denounce him as a liar and fabricator of evidence pointing to the disloyalty of Democratic foes of Indiana governor Oliver P. Morton and President Abraham Lincoln, both Republicans. Partly because he was such an unlikely military figure, historians have found it easy to mimic the accusations of cowardice heaped on Carrington by Democratic poli-

ticians and editorialists. He dodged danger by serving Morton and other Republicans' political needs by concocting tall tales of treason, his critics said then and historians repeated later.

Deep research in archival records, however, dispels these errors and paints a different picture. The records make clear that Carrington's numerous spies, detectives, and informants uncovered real evidence of widespread conspiracy hatched by Confederate sympathizers, some of them influential politicians, in Indiana and the Midwest. Carrington did not fabricate evidence of their misdeeds. He gathered and furnished accurate information to Lincoln and Morton, both of whom used it to devastating advantage before the 1864 election.

It is important, then, to draw a new portrait of Carrington, one based on the archival evidence and not on false accusations. What emerges is a soldier driven by lifelong antislavery zeal to defeat the slaveholders' rebellion and Northern sympathy with disunionism. Often ignored and ridiculed by Washington, D.C., bureaucrats during his wartime service in Indiana, Carrington, through hard work and a lot of luck, succeeded in uncovering secret political organizations numbering many thousands in

the midwestern states that aimed to revolutionize the North and disrupt the Union war effort.

Born in 1824 in Wallingford, Connecticut, into an old colonial family, from his early youth Carrington studied the campaigns of General George Washington during the Revolutionary War. He desired to follow in his hero's military footsteps. Poor health, however, especially lung trouble that probably was tuberculosis, prevented him from matriculating at the Military Academy at West Point, New York. Instead, he studied and graduated from Yale College in 1845. Later, he studied law there while teaching school on the side. Following the pattern of many Connecticut natives, he relocated to Ohio, where he worked in the Columbus law office of a cousin and studied for the state bar. He later formed a law partnership with William Dennison, a rising Ohio politician, and practiced as a corporate and railroad lawyer. In Columbus he married into a prominent local family. Imbued with abolitionist fervor from boyhood to match his devout evangelical Christian beliefs, Carrington defended fugitive slaves. When his Whig Party collapsed during the political tumult caused by Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska bill in Congress, Carrington played a role in the formation of Ohio's Republican Party, a solidly antislavery organization.

Ohio's first Republican governor, abolitionist Salmon P. Chase, recognized Carrington's military ambitions and appointed him judge advocate general of the state militia. When Dennison succeeded Chase as governor in 1859, he retained his law partner in the position, later appointing him adjutant general of



Above: Camp Morton garrison troops huddle near prison entrance on land that is today bordered by Nineteenth Street, Talbot Avenue, Twenty-second Street, and Central Avenue. The fence around the camp was constructed of two-inch-thick oak planks. Opposite: Colonel (later General) Henry B. Carrington.



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237

Genl. Wm. B. R. ...

Ohio, commander of the militia. In that role Carrington exercised his organizational skills, bringing militia units together in mass drills. Ohio's militia was probably the best organized in the country by the start

and tumult in Columbus that focused much criticism on him, Carrington succeeded in sending newly minted Ohio volunteer regiments promptly to the relief of Washington. He also quickly organized

In the summer of 1862, Morton was in dire need of an efficient regular army officer to organize new Indiana volunteer regiments. He telegraphed the War Department for a competent officer and received Carrington.

of civil war in 1861. The demands of real war soon overwhelmed the pretensions of state militias everywhere.

Lincoln's call for volunteers from the loyal states caused organizational chaos throughout the North. Amid confusion

an Ohio force that marched into western Virginia, fought the first battles of the war, and secured the pro-Union mountain region that later became a new free state, West Virginia. When Congress voted to expand the United States' "regular" army,

Chase, now Secretary of the Treasury, secured a colonelcy for his friend and follower. The new officer used his organizational skills to whip together the Eighteenth U.S. Infantry Regiment. However, before he could lead his new creation to the battlefields of the South, Carrington was called away to other service; he would never command his regiment in action during the war.

In the summer of 1862, Morton was in dire need of an efficient regular army officer to organize new Indiana volunteer regiments. He telegraphed the War Department for a competent officer and received Carrington. It is important to note that Morton did not specifically request Carrington. When Carrington arrived in Indianapolis on August 18, he quickly brought order and efficiency to the business of organizing volunteer units. He



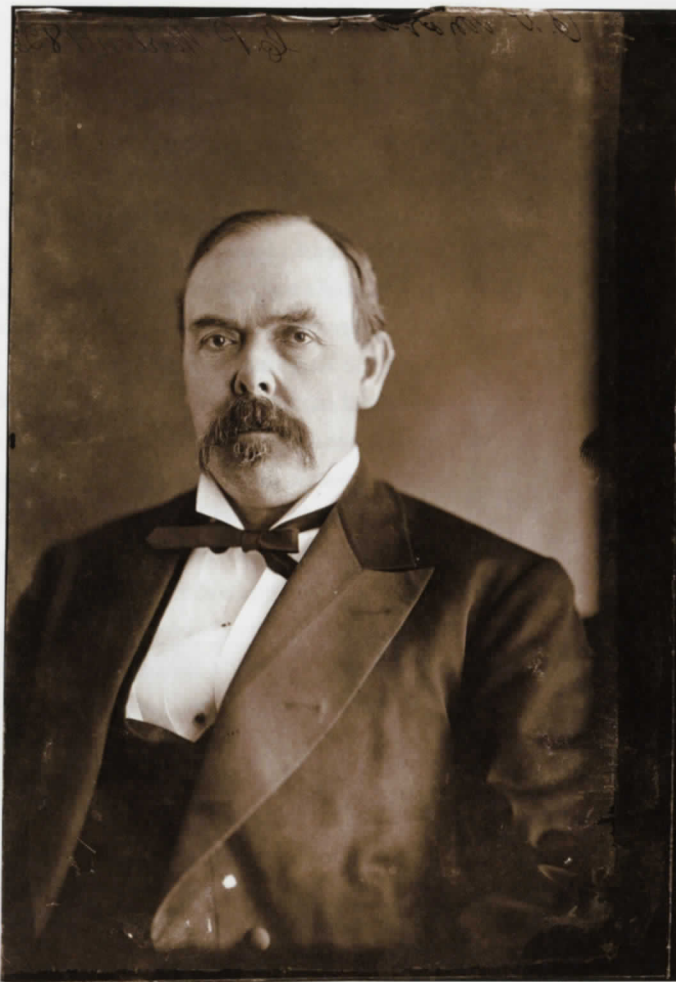
An 1865 print imagining President Abraham Lincoln meeting with the leading Union military officials, from left: General Andrew Porter, Admiral David Farragut, Lincoln, General William Tecumseh Sherman, General George Henry Thomas, General Ulysses S. Grant, and General Philip Sheridan.

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officered, equipped, fed, drilled, and sent off to Kentucky dozens of Indiana regiments that helped turn back a Confederate invasion of the Ohio River valley. Carrington's actions received bipartisan commendation from newspapers, who praised his hard work and effectiveness. Morton thanked Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for sending Carrington, telegraphing, "A better appointment could not have been made." It was the beginning of an important working relationship between the governor and the Union army officer.

While not the commanding officer in Indianapolis, by his workaholic habits and good results, Carrington effectively took control of military affairs in the city and state. During this time, amid the fall 1862 elections that saw opposition Democrats win majorities of the Indiana General Assembly and the state's congressional delegation, the army became embroiled in Hoosier politics. Responding to War Department orders to arrest persons who interfered with recruiting and enlistments, including political figures who criticized the faltering war effort, Carrington sent troops to various corners of Indiana to arrest draft resisters and anti-war speakers. After Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September announcing the freedom of all slaves in areas controlled by Confederate rebels (to commence January 1, 1863), opposition to the war in Indiana increased in intensity. With it came massive desertion from the Union armies, as thousands of soldiers snuck away from their units and returned home, encouraged by family and friends. By late fall Carrington reported arresting hundreds of Indiana deserters each week.

Carrington's career as a director of espionage and intelligence operations began in December 1862 in response to the desertion scourge. During that month, he discovered that soldiers in camps around Indianapolis were members of secret organizations that aimed to obstruct the war effort and protect deserters from arrest. He promptly report-



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The first Indiana-born man to become the nineteenth state's governor, Oliver P. Morton was one of the organizers of the Republican Party in the state. Historian James Ford Rhodes called Morton the "ablest and most energetic of the war governors of the Western States" during the Civil War. Although an 1865 stroke left him partially paralyzed, Morton served in the U.S. Senate until his death in 1877

ed his findings to Lincoln and Stanton. When Morton learned that Carrington was scheduled to be sent to the field to command his regiment, the governor intervened to keep him in Indianapolis, wiring that Carrington "is the man for the emergency."

Since early in the war, Morton had tried but failed to get a handle on the rise of subversive organizations that threatened mischief. Starting in the winter of 1862–63, Morton employed Carrington's hard work and military resources to try to gain the upper hand over them. During that time, armed groups attacked small details of troops sent to round up deserters. Carrington dispatched soldiers to capture

the groups and brought hundreds of men before the federal district court in Indianapolis for civil trials, leading to numerous convictions. During the fractious 1863 session of the general assembly, majority Democrats attempted to strip Morton of his authority over state military affairs. On a night when it looked like Democratic legislators were going to seize the state arsenal, the governor administratively signed over authority for state arms to Carrington. On one occasion in March 1863, acting under War Department orders, Carrington led nearly two hundred cavalry and infantry into Illinois to arrest in his courtroom a circuit judge who had interfered in the arrest of deserters.



In early spring 1863, Carrington produced the first of several confidential reports for superior officers and the War Department on the secret organizations that plagued Indiana and other midwestern states. At the root of the problems was a secret society formed in the 1850s called the Knights of the Golden Circle, organized to support filibustering in Latin America and the Caribbean to spread Southern-style slavery. Prominent in the South, early in the rebellion the group spread into the North among persons who

opposed the federal government's war effort to force the rebel states back into the Union. The organization was shipping thousands of firearms into the Midwest to arm its members, directing them to encourage desertion and resist the draft in an effort to weaken the Union army.

The organization was active in nearly every Indiana county and threatened to wrest control of the Democratic Party from its regular leadership. Carrington's sources, he reported, were citizens, captured deserters, and other informers. He teamed with Morton to announce through the state Republican Party's chief newspaper that the existence of the secret organization was known and that persons who broke the law would be punished—soldiers in courts martial and civilians by civil courts. Later, Carrington credited this exposé and the convictions in federal court in 1863 as demoralizing the KGC before Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's raid into Indiana and Ohio, which aimed to foment its rising in arms against the government. (The KGC soon thereafter reorganized as the Order of American Knights, and in 1864 renamed itself the Sons of Liberty.) Carrington's services were valued sufficiently that in March 1863 he received promotion to brigadier general of volunteers and was given command of the military District of Indiana.

Shortly thereafter, however, the new general fell from grace. U.S. Army General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck resented that Carrington had risen to high rank without having seen battle. In April the new commander in the Midwest, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, acted on Halleck's suggestions and removed Carrington from his Indiana command. Sent to Cleveland, Ohio, to organize new troops, Carrington fell sick with diphtheria and languished in an idle funk. In July, however, Morton obtained orders to bring him back to Indiana just in time to organize the effort to repel Morgan's invasion



Top: As a pro-war Democrat, former congressman William H. English of Indiana supplied Carrington with information on the August 1864 plot to release Confederate prisoners from Camp Morton. Above: General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck was a cautious battlefield commander, but excelled at administrative work. President Lincoln once described him as "little more than a first rate clerk."

force. Carrington labored for days without sleep, organizing tens of thousands of volunteers to fight the rebel raiders. Still sick and now sleep deprived, he obtained orders to command a brigade waiting in boxcars at Indianapolis's train depot to cut off Morgan near Hamilton, Ohio. Carrington collapsed at the depot, weak from overwork and lingering ill-health. Detractors immediately claimed he succumbed to a drunken stupor. But Carrington was a lifelong teetotaler and temperance-movement organizer who abhorred alcohol. The incident would be used to brand him a cowardly drunkard. Worse, he lost an opportunity to lead troops in battle.

Retained by Morton to organize the Indiana Legion (state militia) and drill new volunteers, Carrington resumed his intelligence efforts for the next several months. After the raid, he investigated evidence of Morgan's links to Indiana conspirators. He traveled the state to organize Legion units, taking opportunities to speak out against use of insulting partisan epithets such as "copperhead" or "butternut" that inflamed antiwar Democrats' anger. Such speeches were part of Morton's conciliatory effort not to provoke a dangerously restive

Samuel P. Heintzelman, the new military commander in the Midwest. Gravely concerned about signs of growing restiveness and threats to the region's prisoner-of-war camps holding Confederate troops, Heintzelman recognized Carrington's skill and promptly made him his chief of intelligence. Carrington redoubled his efforts and supplied Heintzelman with important information about the secret organizations. Heintzelman soon restored him to the command of the District of Indiana, which afforded Carrington greater freedom to conduct investigations. During the summer of 1864, Carrington and Heintzelman worked closely together to combat the rising threat of insurrection in the Midwest. Later, Heintzelman credited Carrington with preserving the region "from the horrors of civil war."

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population to violence at a time when the slightest spark could start a revolutionary inferno.

Early in 1864 Carrington's efforts as an intelligence officer working for Morton came to the attention of Major General

surveillance on citizens. As well, during the war the U.S. Army in the Midwest regularly intercepted and opened private mail between persons suspected of disloyalty. In these ways, the army amassed significant information on the conspirators. Probably



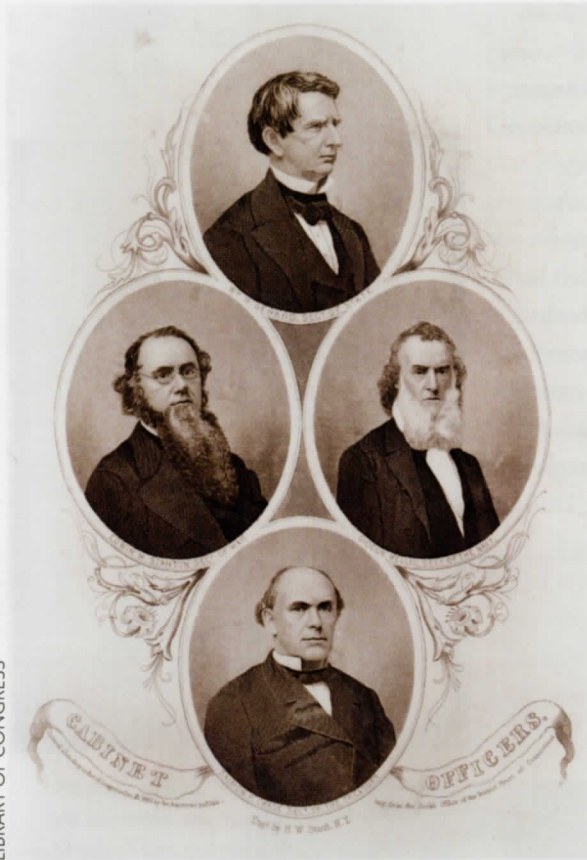
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Above: Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman saw action on the western frontiers and in the Mexican-American War before the Civil War. He retired from the U.S. Army in 1869. Left: Carrington's master spy, Felix G. Stidger.

the most important means of gathering information was to infiltrate the secret organizations, which several spies managed to do and reported significant developments. The most successful and important spy to work for Carrington was a young Kentuckian named Felix G. Stidger, who infiltrated both the Indiana and Kentucky branches of the Sons of Liberty and supplied information on its strength and plans. In early June 1864, Stidger achieved his first major coup by smuggling records detailing secret plans to Carrington.

Stidger's successful efforts at obtaining insider information prompted a major policy dispute between Carrington and Heintzelman on one hand, and Morton on the other. When apprised of Stidger's cache



Head-and-shoulders portraits of President Lincoln's cabinet (clockwise from top): William H. Seward, Secretary of State; Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy; Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury; and Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War.

of records, Morton immediately wanted to publicize it for political purposes. Embroiled in a tough election fight, he wanted quick exposure of anything that would embarrass his Democratic opponents. The generals, however, wished to keep their intelligence under wraps in order to be able to protect sources and to obtain additional information. Morton went to Washington and by late July, after weeks of lobbying, obtained Stanton's approval to publish the records. The exposé created a sensation in the state and throughout the Midwest. For his own part, Stidger feared for his life and later asked that information that might be

traced to him not be splashed across the pages of the *Indianapolis Daily Journal*.

Another difference of views arose between Carrington and Morton as the general's investigations produced more details of the conspirators' plans for violence and upheaval. As it became clear to the army and the Republican governors with whom they shared their intelligence (Morton, Richard Yates of Illinois, and John Brough of Ohio) who the leaders of the secret organizations were and what they plotted, they debated what to do. Some of the generals and governors advocated arresting leading conspirators and trying them by military commissions, a type of military court. Others feared overwhelming violence from the organizations' membership should leaders be seized by the army. The key problem facing them was that the War Department had scoured the

landscape to reinforce federal forces fighting in the South—Ulysses S. Grant's army in Virginia and William T. Sherman's army near Atlanta, Georgia. Few troops remained in the Midwest to put down a potential insurrection. For his part, Carrington advocated trying the conspirators in federal civil courts and not by military commissions, putting him at odds with Morton.

During the summer, the generals and governors attempted to get the attention of national leaders in Washington. But Lincoln was preoccupied with the stalled war effort in the South and dismissed the possibility of insurrection. Stanton, too,

was lukewarm, but sent Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt west to confer with midwestern leaders and report back. Holt's reports that the conspiracies were real, significant, and posed an imminent threat convinced federal officials of the severity of the problem. Starting in early August, support from the War Department began to flow to the Midwest in the form of arms, money, and, most important, troops.

While this debate raged in private communications between the generals, governors, and Washington leaders, Stidger reported that in mid-August the conspirators in Indiana planned an attack on Camp Morton, the POW camp then about a mile north of Indianapolis. Plotters planned to free thousands of rebel soldiers, arm them, and lead them in insurrection. In addition to the garrison that guarded the camp, hardly any other troops were available to stop the attempt. On the eve of the appointed day, with his meager forces deployed to resist as well as possible, Carrington watched as Indianapolis filled up with armed men arriving from around the state. Quite by chance, however, two depleted veteran regiments unexpectedly returned from the front to muster out. What's more, the promised reinforcements from the War Department arrived from Massachusetts. Carrington used these new troops to make a successful show of force in the city. As he reported to Heintzelman, prominent Democrats whom Carrington described as "property holders" who were aware of the plots became alarmed at the imminent prospect of revolutionary violence by the party masses; they talked the radicals out of an uprising. Indeed, Carrington reported that one of the party establishment, banker and former Democratic congressman William English, suggested that "the arrest of a few of the lead-

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ers would soon quiet the whole matter.”

Federal officials agreed with English. Evidence shows that by early August Stanton and, tacitly, Lincoln, agreed on a course of surveillance and arrests of leading conspirators throughout the country. In August the Union effort in Virginia and Georgia was bogged down in trench warfare and going nowhere. Lincoln's election prospects rode on the success of the war effort, which looked dire. The president himself believed that he would lose the November election. Though there is no record yet found directly linking Lincoln to the move, in early September his War

Department gave orders to the commander of the District of Indiana to use military commissions to try conspirators.

Days before, Carrington had been

replaced as commander of the District of Indiana by Brevet Major General Alvin P. Hovey. The policy disputes between Carrington and Morton had boiled over. Like Lincoln, Morton feared he would lose the election, and saw the prospect of military trials of conspiracy leaders—all of whom were Democrats, most of them prominent—a tempting one. It had the potential to win him (and Lincoln) another term in office. Morton used his influence in the War Department to depose Carrington from the Indiana command because the general opposed military trials. Hovey



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Left: Born in Mount Vernon, Indiana, Alvin P. Hovey had a distinguished political career after the Civil War, serving in Congress, as U.S. minister to Peru, and as Indiana's governor from 1889 to 1891. Above: Henry L. Burnett was one of three judge advocates who prosecuted those accused of murdering President Lincoln in the military commission trial shortly after the war.

favored them; indeed, he advocated declaring martial law to afford legal cover to call military trials.

The issue of publicizing information arose again in August when an informer alerted authorities to the secret shipment of thousands of arms to Indianapolis, some of them being held at Sons of Liberty leader (and prominent local Democrat)

on Governor's Circle (present-day Monument Circle). The captured records were printed in the *Journal*, again causing a sensation. During this time, Carrington was in Columbus, Ohio, burying his infant son, Morton, who had been named after the governor. Carrington's opinion against publicity was ignored. Shortly after he returned to Indianapolis, he was removed from his command. Personal friendship did not deter Morton from eliminating obstacles to achieving his ends, especially when the survival of the Union was at stake.

Although Carrington was stripped of overall military command in Indianapolis, Morton made sure the War Department kept Carrington in the city in a lesser command as cover for his essential spymaster work. In early September Hovey arrested Dodd and started his military commission trial. Carrington worked closely with the judge advocate trying Dodd, Major Henry L. Burnett, by organizing and feeding him the evidence supplied by his many spies and informers. Stidger was the first witness and occupied the stand for several days, outlining in devastating detail the information he learned while inside the secret organization. The trial occurred in open court, and its extensive proceedings appeared verbatim in newspapers throughout a fascinated North.

In October Hovey arrested other prominent Indiana leaders of the Sons of Liberty, including Lambdin P. Milligan, and commenced their trials for disloyalty. While opinion polls did not exist then, there can be little doubt that the shocking exposures provided by the trials greatly assisted Lincoln and Morton's return to office.

In late December the commission found all the defendants guilty and sentenced all but one to death. Lincoln upheld their sentences. After the war, President Andrew Johnson commuted the death orders to life in prison at hard labor. Later, in the significant *Ex parte Milligan* case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the use of military courts to try civilians when and where civil courts were still functioning. Carrington's intelligence handiwork provided nearly all the prosecution evidence presented in the trials. The success of the "treason trials" in Indianapolis was owing to Carrington and his spy network.

As the war wound down and the Union was preserved, Carrington remained in Indianapolis. After the war, he returned to the command of the Eighteenth Infantry Regiment in the regular army and was sent west to secure the overland trail through Wyoming Territory to Fort Philip Kearny. There he fought a running guerrilla battle against Native American raiding parties that sapped his force's strength. Carrington's western campaign ended disastrously in December 1866, when one of his captains disobeyed orders and attacked Indian warriors, leading to the deaths of his entire force. Carrington took the blame for the Fetterman Massacre, which ended his military career. He turned to new outlets for his talents. Starting in 1870 and until 1878, he was in Indiana to teach military science at Wabash College. While there he began to research and write the histories of General George Washington's campaigns. Carrington took the then unusual step of conducting extensive archival research, traveling to Great Britain and France to consult original records. His *Battles of the American Revolution* first appeared in 1877 to critical acclaim, marking him as a notable American historian.

In later years, Carrington used his significant study of Native American culture to serve as a mediator in land disputes. He



Engraving listing eminent loyal governors of the Civil War (from top clockwise): Edwin D. Morgan, New York; William A. Buckingham, Connecticut; John Brough, Ohio; Austin Blair, Michigan; A. W. Randall, Wisconsin; Charles S. Olden, New Jersey; Thomas C. Fletcher, Maryland; Richard Yates, Illinois; William Sprague, Rhode Island; Morton, Indiana; Andrew C. Curtin, Pennsylvania; Samuel Cony, Maine; and John S. Andrew, Massachusetts.

Harrison H. Dodd's business warehouse; thousands more arms were said to be coming. Troops seized the guns in Dodd's building along with many records and arrested several of his employees. Morton immediately took the opportunity to make political hay from it in speeches

encouraged his wife, Margaret Sullivant, to write and publish her notable western memoir, *Ab-sa-ra-ka, Home of the Crows: Being the Experience of an Officer's Wife on*

plains. Carrington died in 1912, having survived longer than his tuberculosis and other infirmities typically allowed and after a productive life.

Carrington successfully collected information on armed conspirators who collaborated with Confederates. He helped stop their plots and furnished the evidence in the military trials that showed their reach and ambitions.

the Plains (1868). After his wife's death, Carrington married the widow of one of the officers killed in the Fetterman disaster and helped her publish her own account of the western war. Both books are significant sources about the conflict on the western

Carrington's greatest service occurred in Indiana during the Civil War. Like the war-torn Southern landscape, the North saw violence and division as it was undermined by organized and armed groups guided by ideology and fear of government

power used to suppress Southern rebellion and Northern dissent. Carrington successfully collected information on armed conspirators who collaborated with Confederates. He helped stop their plots and furnished the evidence in the military trials that showed their reach and ambitions. Unjustly accused of concocting that evidence, Carrington today stands as perhaps the most important spymaster of the Civil War.

*Stephen E. Towne is an associate university archivist at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. His book *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland*, was published by Ohio University Press as part of its Series on Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest in 2015. This is his first article for *Traces*. •*



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Engraving depicting the battle near Fort Philip Kearney, Dakota Territory, December 21, 1866, which became known as the Fetterman Massacre or the Battle of the Hundred Slain.

FOR FURTHER READING

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