

## GEN. BURNSIDE: A MUCH MALIGNED RHODE ISLAND HERO

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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There is an urban legend that you can tell if a soldier died in battle by looking at his statue. If the horse has reared up on two legs, he died in battle, but if all four hooves are planted, then he survived the war. In the case of the statue of Ambrose Burnside in Providence, all four legs are firmly planted. General Burnside did in fact survive the war, but his reputation did not.

Burnside was an unknown colonel of Rhode Island militia when the Civil War began and quickly rose to command the largest army of its time, the 150,000-man Army of the Potomac. He lasted a little more than 11 weeks and even those knowledgeable about the Civil War know him primarily for his epic failures at the battles of Fredericksburg, Antietam and Petersburg.

Burnside was a much more complex and interesting leader than his reputation would suggest.

"He was one of the most maligned and misunderstood generals during the war," according to Gregory Payne, a past camp commander of the Sons of Union Veterans, Post 7.

"He commanded his corps brilliantly through Kentucky and Tennessee and his brigade of Rhode Islanders was the first one on the field at Bull Run and the last one off.

Rhode Island soldiers loved him. They would do anything for Burnside."

Payne said that Burnside was badmouthed during the war by other generals, especially Joseph Hooker, the general who replaced Burnside after his defeat at Fredericksburg.

President Abraham Lincoln expressed that opinion in a letter in which he scolded Hooker even as he gave him command of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln called Hooker "ambitious" in the letter written on January 26, 1863 and went on to scold him for "taking counsel of your ambition; thwarting General Burnside." He went on to state that Hooker had done "a great wrong to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer."

Burnside wasn't a native Rhode Islander. Originally from Indiana, he was appointed commander of Fort Adams in Newport following the Mexican War. He invented a breech-loading carbine and left the army to found the Burnside Arms Company in Providence. He also created a distinct uniform for the Rhode Island Militia that was more practical than the more popular gaudy uniforms of the day.

"He was ahead of his time," Payne explained. "His experience in the Mexican War taught him it was better to get his troops ready for business [than to be showy]. The Burnside Blouse (a red poncho that doubled as a blanket) was in use well after the war."

The least political of Lincoln's generals, political controversy followed Burnside almost as closely as military controversy.

As head of the Military District of Ohio in early 1863, Burnside had an outspoken critic of the war, Congressman Clement Vallandigham, arrested, convicted of treason in a military court and sent into exile. The issue would eventually be settled in favor of Burnside in the Supreme Court, but the incident was a great embarrassment to the Lincoln administration.

Burnside went on to become governor of his adopted state after the war and was serving as a senator when he died in 1881.

The statue of Burnside stands in Kennedy Plaza in need of restoration, much like the reputation of one of Rhode Island's most meritorious and most maligned heroes. The Rhode Island Sesquicentennial Commission has discussed providing support to local preservation efforts, including restoring the statue of Burnside, but the group is currently unfunded. Restoration of Burnside's statue would be a fitting way to remember the contribution of a great Rhode Islander and with it the history of Rhode Island's critical role in preserving the United States.

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