

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

# The governor and the belle

## Wartime marriage ended in conflict for William Sprague IV

One hundred and fifty-one years ago this month, William Sprague IV, the “boy governor” of Rhode Island and



FRED ZILIAN

recently elected senator, married Kate Chase, the “belle of Washington” and daughter of Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase. It was a major social event in the nation’s capital as the Civil War raged on.

For a wedding

gift, the prosperous Sprague, heir to a wealthy textile company, gave his wife a tiara of pearls and diamonds costing \$50,000. Their marriage proved fruitful. Within 10 years, they had four children: William (Willie), Ethel, Catherine (with special needs) and Portia. Regrettably, the marriage would not remain fruitful but rather ended in sadness and tragedy.

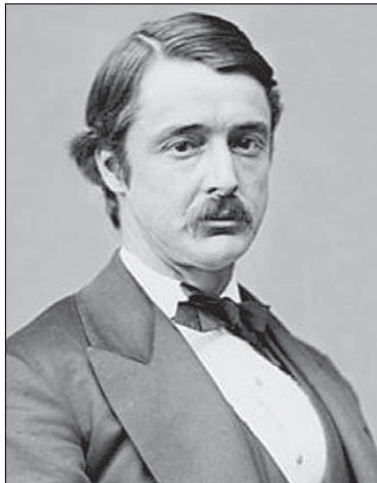
William Sprague was born in 1830 in Cranston into a family which reportedly had the largest calico printing company in the world. While William was attending the Irving Institute in Tarrytown, N.Y., his father, Amasa Sprague, was murdered on New Year’s Eve, 1843. Rather than returning to the school, young Sprague remained in Rhode Island and helped his uncle with the family business, learning it from the bottom up. With the death of his uncle in 1856, he eventually took control of the A & W Sprague Manufacturing Co. and proved to be an ambitious and effective businessman.

Sprague’s interest in military affairs began early and led him at the age of 18 to join the Providence Marine Corps Artillery. He began as a private and worked his way up to colonel.

In 1860, he was elected governor of Rhode Island, the youngest governor of any state at the time.

As the Civil War approached, Sprague’s patriotism and loyalty to the Union manifested itself. He traveled to Washington, D.C., to assure Gen. Winfield Scott and President Abraham Lincoln of Rhode Island’s readiness to provide forces to protect the nation’s capital. He also offered \$100,000 of his company’s money to the Rhode Island state government to equip soldiers.

After the Southern attack on Fort Sumter, April 12, 1861, it was only days before Rhode Island units departed for Washington, organizing “Camp Sprague” upon arrival. Gov. Sprague accompanied them. Around the campfires, the men would sing:



Library of Congress photos

William Sprague IV, above, of Cranston married Kate Chase, right, daughter of the U.S. Treasury secretary, in 1863.

*Of all the hosts that New England can boast*

*From down by the sea unto highland  
No state is more true or willing to do  
Than dear little Yankee Rhode Island.  
Loyal and true, Little Rhody.*

*Bully for you, Little Rhody.*

*Governor Sprague was not very vague  
When he said, “Shoulder arms, Little Rhody.”*

On July 21, Rhode Island infantry regiments and an artillery battery took part in the First Battle of Bull Run, a stunning defeat. During the battle, Sprague’s horse was shot from under him. Undaunted, Sprague mounted a second horse, which was also shot from under him. Though he was offered a commission as a brigadier general of the volunteers, he declined and returned to Rhode Island to raise more units for the war effort and to manage his company.

Sprague was elected to the U.S. Senate and took office on March 4, 1863. He served two six-year terms, ending in 1875.

The Panic of 1873 and the subsequent economic recession hurt the family business. The death of his father-in-law, Chief Justice Salmon Chase, further disturbed the family’s stability. The strains on their marriage continued to grow. Sprague began to drink more, behaved violently, and fought with Kate over her spending habits. Kate allegedly had an affair with New York Sen. Roscoe Conkling. Supposedly, Sprague caught the two together at



the Sprague Narragansett homestead and chased Conkling from the estate. Three years later, the couple divorced.

Sprague went on to marry Dora Inez Calvert of West Virginia in 1883. In 1909, the family estate was destroyed by fire, including all his personal possessions. The couple decided to move to Paris, where Sprague died of meningitis on Sept. 11, 1915, as World War I raged.

Kate dropped her married name and returned to Washington to live with her daughters. Tragically, their son Willie took his life at the age of 25. With few financial resources, Kate tried chicken farming. In 1899, she died in poverty of liver and kidney failure at the age of 58.

The family homestead in Cranston was constructed in the late 18th century and has been added to over the centuries. It is now open as a museum ([www.cranstonhistoricalsociety.org/](http://www.cranstonhistoricalsociety.org/)).

*A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history, ethics and political science at Portsmouth Abbey School and Salve Regina University and is a member of the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission Advisory Council. He is writing an occasional series of columns for The Daily News highlighting various aspects of the Civil War and their impact on Newport County and Rhode Island. Send him email at [zilianf@aol.com](mailto:zilianf@aol.com) or check out his blog at [www.zilianblog.com](http://www.zilianblog.com) and his Abe Lincoln website at [www.honestaberi.com](http://www.honestaberi.com).*