

## John F. Hartranft: Pennsylvania General and Governor



John Frederick Hartranft was born on December 16, 1830, near Pottstown, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. He was the only child of Samuel and Lydia (Bucher) Hartranft. In 1844, the family moved to Norristown, about sixteen miles from Philadelphia. His father was a prosperous innkeeper, ran a stage line, speculated in real estate and was a captain in the local militia.

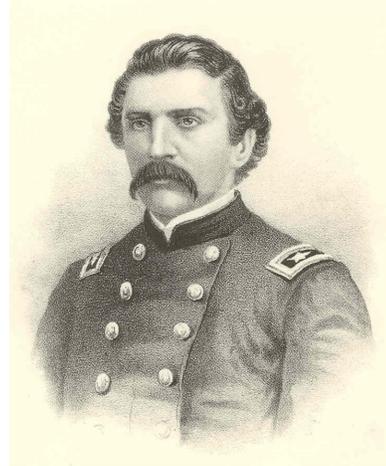
Young Hartranft attended Treemont Seminary (Norristown) and Marshall College (Mercersburg, Pa.). He graduated from Union College (Schenectady, N.Y.) in 1853 with a degree in civil engineering. After working for the Water Gap Railroad, Hartranft became active in Democratic Party politics and was appointed a deputy sheriff of Montgomery County. He married Sallie Sebring in 1854 and they had seven children but three would die in infancy. During the later 1850s, Hartranft began studying law and was admitted to the bar in 1860. He was also active in the local militia, fire company, and Masons. As the Civil War approached, Hartranft was one of those up and coming young men who would find themselves leading their neighbors into battle.

With the call came for volunteers in April 1861, Hartranft offered his services to Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin, who authorized him to raise a regiment. Within four days, Hartranft reported to Camp Curtin in Harrisburg with men from Montgomery County and he was commissioned Colonel of the 4th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. The regiment was to serve for 90 days, not because it was thought the war would be short but because that was the maximum time period the president could federalize the state militias. Congress was not in session during the spring of 1861 and a law allowing regiments to be raised for three-year enlistments would not be passed until later in the summer.

The 4th Pennsylvania was moved to Washington and became part of Gen. Irvin McDowell's army that marched out to meet the Confederate Army in the nearby Virginia countryside. On the eve of the Battle of First Manassas (Bull Run), the Regiment's ninety-day enlistment was about to expire. Despite Hartranft's pleas, the entire 4th Pennsylvania literally walked off the battlefield as the first shots were being fired. Hartranft was devastated and embarrassed. Rather than leave the fight, he volunteered his services to Gen. William Franklin and served with

distinction. Hartranft always considered the actions of his men to be a stain on his honor and he was extremely pleased in 1886 when he received the Medal of Honor for his actions at Bull Run.

When Hartranft returned to Pennsylvania, he was authorized to raise the 51st Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, a three-year regiment. The new unit was initially assigned to Gen. Ambrose Burnside's operations along the North Carolina coast in the spring of 1862. The 51st Pennsylvania was sent to Virginia in the summer to join Gen. John Pope's Army and fought at the Battle of Second Bull Run in August 1862. On April 17, 1862, Colonel Hartranft led the 51st Pennsylvania in a gallant charge across "Burnside's Bridge" at the Battle of Antietam. This charge is depicted in a miniature diorama at The National Civil War Museum.



The 51st was then assigned to the western theatre of operations and fought at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Knoxville, Tennessee, one of the few regiments to serve in both the east and the west. Returning to the east, Hartranft led his regiment at the Battle of Spotsylvania, Virginia, and was promoted to Brigadier General for his outstanding service. During the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia, he commanded a brigade and later a division. Hartranft foiled Gen. Robert E. Lee's attack on Fort Stedman, the last major Confederate offensive of the war. Lee's failure to hold Fort Stedman led to the evacuation of the Petersburg defenses and the ultimate fall of Richmond. Hartranft was promoted to major general for the Battle of Fort Stedman.

At the end of the war, Hartranft was appointed special provost marshal for the trial of the Lincoln assassination conspirators. As such he had responsibility for the custody of the prisoners and for eventually supervising the execution of four of those convicted. Hartranft was especially noted for his kind treatment toward Mary Surratt, the first woman ever executed by the federal government.

After the war, Hartranft returned to his hometown and entered politics as a member of the growing Republican Party. He served as Auditor General of Pennsylvania from 1867 to 1873. From 1873 to 1879, Hartranft was Governor of Pennsylvania. As governor, he supported votes for Blacks, fought the corrupt Simon Cameron political machine for fiscal responsibility in government, and was sympathetic towards the rights for the workingman.

This latter inclination caused him problems not only with business owners but also with part of the growing labor movement. Depending upon one's personal views, the Molly Maguires were either a band of lawless hoodlums or a group of legitimate defenders of Irish workers. When violence in the coalfields of northeast Pennsylvania led to several deaths, Hartranft was caught in the middle. Eventually 20 members of the "Mollies" were hanged, despite pleas to Hartranft for pardons.

During the summer of 1877, the nation was faced with a series of railroad strikes that often turned into riots. Pennsylvania was hard hit and although Hartranft had considerable sympathy for the plight of the workers, he would not allow mob rule to challenge of rule of law and he used the state militia to restore order in several cities. One result of this action was the recognition that the militia system was in a terribly disorganized state of affairs. As an “old soldier”, Hartranft saw the need for a well-organized and trained body of troops and his recommendations led to the formation of the modern Pennsylvania National Guard.

After serving two terms as Governor of Pennsylvania, Hartranft was appointed Postmaster of Philadelphia and later Collector for the Port of Philadelphia. He also served as commander of the Pennsylvania National Guard and was commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans’ organization.



**This old post card shows the original placement of Hartranft Statue in front of the main entrance to the Capitol Building, flanked by two fountains. It was subsequently moved to the front of the State Museum (now the Speaker Matthew Ryan Office Building). The medal is a souvenir from the unveiling of the statue in 1899.**

Hartranft died in Norristown on October 17, 1889, and is buried in the local cemetery. The Pennsylvania National Guard provided an obelisk for his grave, monuments at Petersburg and Vicksburg honor his battlefield exploits, Camp No. 15 of the Sons of Union Veterans in Harrisburg is named in his honor, and an equestrian statue of General Hartranft stands next to the Pennsylvania Capitol Building in Harrisburg.

For more information see *Major-General John Frederick Hartranft: Citizen Soldier and Pennsylvania Statesman* by Albert M. Gambone (Butternut and Blue, Baltimore, 1995) and *History of the 51st Regiment of P.V. and V.V.* by Thomas H. Parker (originally published by King and Baird, Philadelphia, 1868, reprinted by Butternut and Blue, Baltimore, 1998).