

“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

The history and importance of Michigan’s Civil War Battle Flags

Resources:

Michigan’s Civil War Governor: A Biography of Austin Blair

Austin Blair was born on February 8, 1818, in New York. After graduating from college in 1837, he moved to Jackson, Michigan, where he began to practice law. He was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1845, he did so as a Whig. Blair’s strong stand on social issues, such as slavery, women’s rights, and equal suffrage, made him the civil rights radical of his day. Even by today’s standards, scholars have noted that he “outshines modern liberals.”

In March 1846, not long after his election to the House, Blair, who was serving on the Judiciary Committee, attended a speech in the House Chamber. Ernestine L. Rose of New York, an early proponent of rights for married women and one of the first women to take up a public speaking career, addressed the issue of allowing women to vote. Blair took the opportunity to speak out in favor of women’s suffrage—one of the first Michigan leaders to publicly state his support.

Blair was busy in 1846. He tried to have the word “white” removed from the state constitution as a voting qualification. He was opposed—in his own words—to “all color and race distinctions in the franchise.” And he led the state’s successful 1846 effort to ban capital punishment after a man was hanged for a crime he did not commit. Michigan became the first state in the Union to do so.

In 1854, “under the oaks” in Jackson, Blair participated in the creation of the Republican Party. When he was elected to the state Senate in the same year, it was as a member of the new party. In 1860, he ran for governor as a Republican and won. He served two terms, from 1861 to 1864, among the most difficult and turbulent years in Michigan’s—and the nation’s—history.

Blair was passionately anti-slavery and pro-Union, and is considered today one of the nation’s foremost Civil War governors. He was impatient with Lincoln, who did not, in his view, take a strong enough stand against slavery. He worried that Lincoln might allow slavery to spread into the territories. Blair felt that the Union must be preserved, whatever the cost, and that the president was bound by oath to prevent secession—even if it meant war.

In these issues, Blair both mirrored Michigan’s popular sentiment and helped to mold it. Michigan had long been opposed to slavery as an institution and viewed secession as treason. When war broke out only a few months after Blair became governor, the state responded with tremendous speed and strength, especially considering its small population, meager state budget, and distance from the hostilities. Michigan was the first “western” state to answer Lincoln’s call for volunteers. Before the war was over, approximately one out of four Michigan males had fought as a volunteer, one of the highest per capita rate of any state.

One of the interesting puzzles about Austin Blair is why he left office before the war was over. The question is all the more puzzling considering his devotion to the troops still in the field, his concern for the wounded and their welfare after returning home, and the fact that the outcome of the war was still far from decided. The reasons appear to have been primarily political: Blair left office as Governor in order to run for the United States Senate. Blair objected to the fact that both Michigan U.S. Senators, Zachariah Chandler and

Jacob Howard, although Republicans like himself, were from Detroit. Blair was an outstater from Jackson, a lawyer of modest means. Chandler, a wealthy self-made businessman, was one of the most powerful members of the United States Senate, and largely controlled Michigan politics for years. Essentially, Blair took on Chandler's Detroit-based political machine—and lost. This may seem surprising considering Blair's great popularity, but United States senators were not elected by popular vote in Michigan until 1916. Instead, they were elected by the legislature, which, in turn, was dominated by Chandler and his supporters.

Blair did serve three times in the U.S. Congress, but continued opposition from Chandler meant that his political career was virtually over. In addition, Blair's unceasing efforts to provide support for Michigan's troops during the Civil War meant that he had little time to devote to his law practice. In those days, being governor was not necessarily viewed as a full-time job, and governors were expected to maintain their careers to some extent while in office. This allowed them to argue their none-too-generous pay.

When Blair left office in 1864, he was almost destitute. In 1879, when he came to Lansing to speak at the dedication of Michigan's new Capitol, Blair used the opportunity to plead for better pay for governors, asking for "about half as good a salary as they pay to a common dry-goods clerk." Nothing came of his request. In 1892, his friends raised four thousand dollars, which, according to Dunbar and May in Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State, "they presented to the former governor at Christmas, 'not as charity, but as a token of affection.'" He died on August 6, 1894, in Jackson, where he is buried.

Although denied compensation in life, Michigan tried to make amends in death. In 1895, the Michigan legislature appropriated \$10,000 for a statue in Blair's memory. It was to be placed on Capitol Square, the first—and only—time that an actual person has been honored by a stature on the Capitol's grounds. It was a controversial proposal. It is a testament to Blair's great popularity, especially among war veterans, that the statue was not only placed on the Square, but was given great prominence by placing it directly in front of the Capitol itself. The unveiling of the statue, on October 12, 1898, was witnessed by throngs of people who crowded Capitol Square for the occasion.

The statue commemorates Blair's commitment to the goals of the war and his great devotion and personal concern for the Michigan men and boys who volunteered so much to achieve them. The base of the statue is inscribed: "Gave the best years of his life to Michigan, and his fame is inseparably linked with the glorious achievements of her citizen soldiers."

Other inscriptions include excerpts from his messages to the legislature:

- "The true glory of the Republic must consist, not only in the beneficence and freedom of our institutions, but also in our ability and courage to defend and protect them (1863)."
- "All the blood and carnage of this terrible war, all the heart-rending casualties of battle and the sad bereavements occasioned by them, have the same cause—slavery. The greatest, vilest criminal of the world: it must perish (1863)."
- "Again and for the last time I commend the Michigan troops to your continued care and support. They have never failed in their duty to the country or to the state. Upon every battlefield of the war their shouts have been heard and their sturdy blows have been delivered for the Union and victory. It is my sole regret at quitting office that I part with them (last message to legislature, January 4, 1865)."

Today, Blair's bronze statue stands in front of the Capitol, gazing down Michigan Avenue toward the east. One hand rests lightly on a draped column. Only a careful eye would note that the drape is actually a battle flag, carried by a Michigan volunteer regiment during the Civil War.