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William A. Buckingham: Civil War Governor

William A. Buckingham plays a significant role in Norwich town history as a descendant of a founding family of New Haven Colony who established a legacy of political service, particularly during the Civil War (“William Alfred” par. 3). Born in Lebanon in 1804 to Samuel Buckingham and Joanna Maston, William belonged to a prominent family noted for their grand house on Main Street, which was “among the best in the town, standing under lofty shade trees, with plenty of fruit trees about it, and a good farm attached” (“Life” p. 7). After studying land surveying at Bacon Academy, Buckingham worked at a wholesale store in New York City, then returned to Norwich in 1826 to establish his own business of selling dry goods (“William Alfred” par. 2). Next, Buckingham moved on to work for the Hayward Rubber Company in 1838, becoming the manager and treasurer (Staley, “Gilded Age” p. 45). Buckingham also found success in his personal life, marrying Eliza Ripley of Norwich and bearing two children, William — who died as an infant — and Eliza Coit (“William Alfred” par. 3).

Beginning his political career, Buckingham ran for mayor of Norwich. He won the elections of 1849, 1850, 1856, and 1857 as a member of the Whig Party (“William Alfred” par. 4). Subsequently, in the election of 1858 for governor, Buckingham was nominated as a compromise candidate between the American and Republican Parties. Buckingham defeated Democrat James T. Pratt and became governor. These elections exhibited Connecticut’s political

views during the Civil War era. For example, the election of 1860 was narrowly won against Democrat Thomas H. Seymour — former governor and proponent of slavery (Staley, “Civil War” p. 16). Seymour sympathized with the South, whereas Buckingham vehemently supported the Union and opposed the expansion of slavery (“William Alfred” par. 6), openly declaring that compromise with the South was impossible (Staley, “Civil War” p. 20). The majority of citizens of Connecticut supported the Union as seen through their support of Governor Buckingham, who was reelected annually for seven more years (“William Alfred” par. 6).

As the “War Governor” during the Civil War — similar to Governor Jonathan Trumbull Sr. during the American Revolution — Buckingham gained unprecedented power from the Connecticut General Assembly. He was the first governor to pledge his state’s support of the Civil War and President Lincoln (Staley, “Civil War” p. 20). The men befriended each other on Buckingham’s campaign trail for governor; Lincoln gave a speech at the Norwich Town Hall and was entertained at both Buckingham’s home on Main Street and at the Wauregan House Hotel (Staley, “Civil War” p. 17).

Upon the declaration of Civil War, Buckingham was quick to take action. He first took out a loan from Norwich’s Thames Bank to meet the expenses of equipment and pledged his fortune against the loan. Furthermore, the governor called for volunteers for the state militia, filling up the First Regiment in four days and authorizing a Second and Third Regiment. The regiments marched to Washington within three weeks, and General Winfield Scott lauded them as the “best-equipped and best-trained troops” (Staley, “Civil War” p. 20). In addition, President Lincoln stated that “Governor Buckingham always sends them fully equipped for any emergency” (Lucian par. 3). Moreover, upon the passing of the Militia Act of 1862 —

permittance of colored soldiers in the war effort — Buckingham persuaded the General Assembly to create a division of African American soldiers, which became the Twenty-Ninth Regiment (“William Alfred” par. 6).

The governor worked tirelessly on state and federal government affairs during his governance (Staley, “Civil War” p. 21). As a testament to Buckingham’s commitment to the war and his soldiers, he invested his own capital to fund the war, visited camps, and declined his salary. Buckingham even paid soldiers for their service out of his own pocket (Staley, “Gilded Age” p. 45). For example, while he was visiting a camp, a soldier asked the governor to remind the pay master that he was late; Governor Buckingham exceeded his duties and left a personal check for his troops, covering all of their salaries (Lucian par. 3).

Notably, Buckingham was one of only four Union governors to serve throughout the entire Civil War (Staley, “Gilded Age” p. 45). Ending in 1866, the Civil War also marked the end of Buckingham’s governance. Instead, he maintained his business interests in Norwich. The death of his wife Eliza two years later left Buckingham despondent; “She was the light and life of my dwelling” (Buckingham, par. 1), he said in a letter to friend O.H. Perry, evidently devastated by the loss.

Following his wife’s death, Buckingham completed one last political service to the country and was elected to the Senate in 1869 (“William Alfred” par. 10). Among his duties, he was the chairman of Indian Affairs Committee, which investigated custom house fraud (Staley, “Gilded Age” p. 45).

Alongside political achievements, William A. Buckingham left a legacy of philanthropy in his community. He was involved in the organization of the Broadway Congregational Church

in 1840. William and Eliza purchased an organ for the church and also funded construction of a mission chapel (Staley, "Gilded Age" p. 45). Moreover, Buckingham was a deacon and taught Sunday school for forty years (Whatley p. 94). He was also an original incorporator of the Norwich Free Academy and benefactor of Yale College and its divinity school. Furthermore, Buckingham was the President of the State Temperance Union (Staley, "Gilded Age" p. 45).

Buckingham died in 1875 (Staley, "Gilded Age" p. 43). He is buried next to his wife Eliza in the Yantic Cemetery in Norwich ("The Dead Senator" par. 2). His home in Norwich at 307 Main Street is now the Buckingham Memorial and a member of the National Register of Historic Places (Staley, "Gilded Age" p. 44). The governor has a street and school bearing his name in Norwich, as well as a statue of him in the State Capitol Building in Hartford (Lucian par. 4).

Upon hearing the news of his passing, Governor Ingersoll passed an executive order to honor the late governor ("William Alfred" par. 10). Connecticut dedicated June 18, 1884 as "Buckingham Day," full of celebrations in recognition of his contributions to the state (Lucian par. 5). Congress also held a service of mourning and addresses for the Senator (United States p. 9). William A. Buckingham left a legacy of noble service and philanthropy to his town, state, and country.

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