



BVT. MAJOR-GENERAL JOSEPH GILBERT TOTTEN was born in New Haven, Conn., Aug. 23, 1788. His schoolmate, Ralph Ingersoll, describes him as a bright, noble youth, of fine mind, fond of study, and always at the head of his class, gentlemanly in his deportment, and greatly beloved. He entered the Military Academy Nov. 4, 1802, under the auspices of his uncle, Captain Jared Mansfield, then Acting Professor of Mathematics at West Point; was graduated from that institution July 1, 1805, when he was promoted to be a Second Lieutenant of Engineers; and resigned from the Army March 31, 1806, to accept, as Secretary, his uncle, Captain Mansfield, who had been appointed, by President Jefferson, Surveyor-General of Ohio and the Northwest Territory. Young Totten, Feb. 23, 1808, re-entered the Corps of Engineers; was promoted to be a First Lieutenant July 23, 1810, and Captain July 31, 1812, and served, till the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain, at Castles Williams and

Clinton, then under construction, for the defense of New York. At the early age of twenty-four he became the Chief Engineer, in the Campaign of 1812 on the Niagara frontier, of the "Army of the Centre," under General Van Rensselaer, being engaged in the Battle of Queenstown, where our small force, which had crossed the Niagara, after a heroic resistance, was compelled to capitulate to a greatly superior foe. The bearers of two flags of truce having been shot down by the Indians, Colonel Scott himself, fixing a white cravat on the point of his sword, and accompanied by Captains Gibson and Totten (from whose neck the improvised signal of submission was taken), marched through a shower of Indian bullets, and barely escaped the knives and tomahawks of two savages, who leaped like tigers upon them from the road. Unhurt, as by a miracle, they finally reached General Sheaffe, to whom was surrendered our whole force on the Canada side of the river, consisting of 293 survivors of the fierce battles, and some 600 skulkers, who had done no more fighting than spectators in a balloon might have claimed. Upon the resignation of General Van Rensselaer, Totten was transferred, as Chief Engineer, to the Army of the North, under General Dearborn, being in it engaged in the capture of Fort George, and the repulse of the British Flotilla on Lake Ontario, near Forty-mile Creek, his "meritorious services" being rewarded with the brevet of Major.

After a short service with Wilkinson's army in the descent of the St. Lawrence River, Totten, in 1814, became the Chief Engineer of the forces on the Champlain line of operations, being engaged in the defense of Plattsburg, which he had fortified. In his official dispatch to the War Department giving an account of this signal victory, the commanding general "recommends to the particular notice of the government" eleven officers who had "distinguished themselves by their uncommon zeal and activity, and had been greatly instrumental in producing the happy and glorious results of the siege." Of these eleven, *three* were the officers of engineers, — Totten the

chief, and [DeRussy](#) and Trescot his assistants, — all of whom were brevetted for their "gallant conduct at the battle of Plattsburg." After his skill and labors had given such eminent results to his country, Bvt. Lieut.-Colonel Totten joined General Izard on the Niagara, soon after the successful sortie from Ft. Erie. This fort being of no further use to us, Totten, with the sanction of the General, mined it, and Nov. 5th laid it in ruins, — one of the last acts of this war against Canada. Totten's military experience, with his mathematical training at West Point, admirably fitted one of his acute intellect for what was destined to be the great labor of his life, — planning and constructing seacoast fortifications.

During the Revolution some of our more important harbors had been fortified with feeble earthen works, and from that time till the close of the second war with Great Britain, many small, weak, and ill-designed forts and batteries were built by foreign engineers in our service, of cheap and perishable materials. The only large casemated work was Castle Williams, on the Montalembert system, built in 1807-10, in New York harbor.

A permanent Board of Engineers was created Nov. 16, 1816, General Bernard, the great constructor of the citadel of Antwerp under Napoleon, being at its head, with Colonel [McRee](#) and Lieut.-Colonel Totten members, to which was confided the labor of working out the fundamental principles and elaborating the projects for durable works to defend our entire seacoast. The masterly reports of this board, most of them written by Totten, laid down the great principles of national defense so forcibly and incontestably that they have ever since been the safe guides to all succeeding boards; and, though often ably attacked, have stood firm against all assaults. Till 1838, when Totten became Chief Engineer of the Army, he continued most of his time on the Board of Engineers, though after 1825 he was also the constructor of Ft. Adams, Newport harbor, R. I., the second work in area in the United States, and the first in its combination of the principles and details of the art of fortification. When this fort was commenced, little was known of building great structures in this country; hence he had to make numerous experiments to test the qualities and adaptabilities of almost every kind of material.

Besides these military works, he was often called upon to devise and direct harbor and river improvements, and other important civil constructions for the government, states, cities, and corporations; and, as Chief Engineer, was *ex-officio* Inspector of the Military Academy, having charge of the general direction of the institution.

For twenty-six years he continued at the head of the Engineer Department, administering with untiring devotion, spotless integrity, and signal ability the varied details, the financial responsibilities, and the professional labors of that arm of service so essential to our national defense and internal development.

In the War with Mexico, General Scott summoned his early companion-in-arms, in whose judgment he had the most unbounded confidence, to aid him with his professional skill in the siege of Vera Cruz, which he directed with such signal ability that he was not only appointed one of the commissioners for arranging the terms of its capitulation, but also was brevetted, March 29, 1847, a Brigadier-General, for his "gallant and meritorious conduct."

In addition to General Totten's multiplied military avocations, he was an active and most useful member of the Light House Board, from its organization in 1852; a Regent of the Smithsonian Institution from its establishment in 1846; a corporator of the National Academy of Sciences, created in 1863; one of the Harbor Commissioners for the cities of New York and Boston; and a member of many scientific associations, to some of which he made valuable contributions.

He rose from the lowest to the highest grade in his branch of the Army; was five times complimented by advance rank for meritorious and distinguished service; became a Brigadier-General by a special act of Congress in 1863, when the Topographical Corps was merged into the Corps of Engineers; after near threescore years of "long, faithful, and eminent services, was brevetted a Major-General in the Army; and the next day, April 22, 1864, breathed his last in the city of Washington, terminating his illustrious career at the advanced age of seventy-five.

General Totten, physically, mentally, and morally, was a remarkable man. Compactly built, with a strong, robust frame, a vigorous constitution exempt from most ailments of life, and with temperate and regular habits, his powers of endurance were astonishing. No elemental changes, no bodily privations, nor any amount of labor seemed sensibly to affect him; and his equable disposition and serenity of thought prevented the disturbance of his even balance and protected him from polemic excitation. His intellect was thoroughly disciplined, system pervaded his daily life, and his perseverance never flagged till the goal of his efforts was attained. The constitution of his mind was remarkably sound, muscular, and of the Baconian order, following more the inductive than syllogistic methods. All his great and varied powers received their direction from common sense, for he was eminently practical, — a thorough man of the world. From the highest he disdained not to descend to the lowest, and the next moment could pass from the microscopic to that which required the greatest amplitude of comprehension. Often would he leave the elaboration of the minutest contrivance at his drawing-table, perhaps to prepare a masterly report on national defense. He devoured books, literary, scientific, and professional, though he "read not to contradict, nor to believe, but to weigh and consider;" hence he was accurately informed, an instructive talker, and a terse, vigorous, and masculine writer, never sacrificing strength to polish. It was because he dug deep that he was able to pile high. Conservative in all his views, he was slow to adopt innovations; yet he was ever foremost to embrace all great professional improvements. With no controversial tendencies and few prejudices, he could weigh deliberately and receive truths as guests, not as enemies. His perceptive were equal to his reflective qualities, nothing, however minute, escaping his eagle eye. His judgment was as sound as his reason, and his almost Draconian sense of justice required of others the measure of right practiced by himself. His self-control was amazing, no murmur escaping him under the severest trials of bereavement or injustice. Thoroughly subjugating his feelings, and disciplined to obedience, not even the persecutions of a corrupt superior, like Secretary Floyd, shook his immutable integrity, which no sophistry could swerve, no power bend, no blandishments veer, and no influence warp, for it was the polestar of all his actions. But with all his sterner virtues, he possessed in an eminent degree the graces of life. He had a delicate appreciation of music, was a connoisseur of the fine arts, could design and draw beautifully, was distinguished for urbanity of manner and genial social qualities, had the keenest sense of wit and humor, and, above all, possessed that great moral excellence which adorns the Christian soldier and gentleman. In fine, he was a polished, true, and great man; a patriot in its broadest sense; and in an age of soldiers, like that of Louis XIV or Napoleon, he would have been awarded the highest military honors.

General Barnard, in his elaborate eulogy of General Totten, delivered before the National Academy of Sciences, says of him: "He was no trifler with the realities of life, who dallied with them for his pleasure, or who wielded them as instruments of ambition or self-interest. To him, as to all true men, the meaning of life was concentrated in one single word, DUTY. This 'chief end of man,' which is to glorify God by obedience to His laws in the use of the faculties He has bestowed, was his ruling principle, — the celestial cynosure to which his eyes were ever directed, and from which no allurements of lower motives could divert it. Nor was his sense of duty of that frigid, repulsive nature which reduces the conduct of life to a formula, and, substituting rules for emotions, seems but a refined selfishness. He was warm and sympathetic, finding his chief happiness in the pleasures of domestic and social intercourse, but singularly susceptible to everything that ministers to innocent enjoyment. . . . Gentle, kind, and good; mild, modest, and tolerant; wise, sagacious, shrewd, and learned; yet simple and unpretending as a child, he died as he had lived, surrounded by hearts gushing with affection, and the object of respect and love of all with whom he had ever been associated."

the light house board, in one of its resolutions upon his death, says, "that the high scientific attainments, the admirable qualities, the perfect knowledge of general principles, the attention to every minute detail of the system, impressed the mental and moral qualities of general Totten upon his associates in a way to make his mind eminently a leading one of the board, while his sincerity, patience, perfect amiability, and retiring modesty rendered him one of the most charming of associates in executing work to which he was so much more than sufficient."

[Bill Thayer Webpage](#)