On August 25, 1864, Confederate scout Jacob W. Cobb, Jr. (Company K, 9th Georgia Infantry) captured future superintendent of the census Colonel Francis Amasa Walker during the Second Battle of Ream’s Station.

Born July 2, 1840, in Boston, MA, Francis Amasa Walker was the youngest son of economist and Massachusetts state representative Amasa Walker and his wife, Hannah. At age 15, Francis enrolled at Amherst College and graduated in 1860 with a degree in law.

When the Civil War began in April 1861, Walker was studying law at the office of Charles Devens and George Frisbie Hoar in Worcester, MA. Soon-to-be General Devens organized volunteers for the 15th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and Walker lobbied Massachusetts Adjutant General William Schouler and Governor John Andrew for a commission in the regiment. He settled for an appointment as sergeant-major on August 1. The regiment arrived at Washington, DC, in mid-August, and bivouacked at Camp Kalorama (in the present-day Georgetown Heights neighborhood) from August 12–25. On August 25–27, the regiment marched to Poolesville, MD. While there, Walker participated in picket and outpost duty along the upper Potomac River (between Conrad’s Ferry and Harrison’s Island) until mid-September 1861.

Promoted to captain on September 14, 1861, Walker became assistant adjutant general to Brigadier General Darius N. Couch. During the first half of 1862, he saw action during the Peninsula Campaign’s siege of Yorktown and battles of Williamsburg, Fair Oaks, and Seven Days. During the Union’s withdrawal during the Peninsula Campaign, Walker hired David Porter Allen, an escaped slave from the nearby William Cole plantation. Allen accompanied Walker in battle and on leave until August 1864. Following his promotion to major on August
11, 1862, Walker took part in the Second Battle of Bull Run (August 1862) and Antietam (September 1862)—the war’s bloodiest battle. vi

Walker fought at Fredericksburg (December 1862) and earned a promotion to lieutenant colonel on January 1, 1863. Four months later, during the Battle of Chancellorsville (May 1863), a nearby artillery burst nearly killed Walker. Suffering from hand, arm, and neck injuries, the Union surgeon treating Walker provided copious amounts of whiskey, which (along with the blood loss) left him mostly unconscious during his evacuation from the field and move to the army hospital at Potomac Creek, VA. vii Major General Winfield Scott Hancock replaced General Couch soon after Walker’s injury. Walker’s recovery in Massachusetts forced him to miss the July 1863 Battle of Gettysburg, viii during which a gunshot severely wounded Hancock as he rallied his troops during Pickett’s Charge. ix

Walker returned to duty at II Corps’ headquarters in August 1863 as assistant adjutant general to Hancock’s replacements, Generals Gouverneur K. Warren, John C. Caldwell, and David B. Birney. During this time, he participated in the battles of Bristoe Station (October 14, 1863); Mine Run (November 27–December 2, 1863); the Wilderness (May 5–7, 1864); Spotsylvania Court House (May 8–21, 1864); and North Anna (May 23–26, 1864). On June 12, Walker injured his knee at the Battle of Cold Harbor (May 31–June 12, 1864) after which he received an appointment to brevet colonel. x

On August 22, 1864, as the Armies of the Potomac and the James lay siege to Petersburg, VA, xi II Corps and two cavalry divisions moved south of Petersburg to destroy the Weldon Railroad’s tracks in Dinwiddie County, VA. xii Loss of the line would cripple Robert E. Lee’s ability to supply the besieged city of Petersburg and the Confederate capital of Richmond, VA. In response, Lee sent Lieutenant General A. P. Hill’s III Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, and Major General Wade Hampton’s cavalry to recapture the railway. Learning of the Confederates approach, Hancock recalled his men to the earthworks on the outskirts of Ream’s Station.

Hancock’s troops repulsed two attacks on August 25, after which Confederate artillery pounded the Union defenses. That evening, a third attack by...
Confederate reinforcements broke through the lines, leaving many Union soldiers paralyzed with fear, while others panicked and ran to the rear. Worried that his troops would be flanked and routed, Hancock ordered Walker to set out by horse in search of Generals John Gibbon and Nelson A. Miles with instructions to organize a counterattack that would buy time for an orderly Union withdrawal. xiii

Leaving Hancock’s headquarters, Walker rode past dazed and wounded Union and Confederate soldiers. In the dimming light and haze, he approached Georgia infantryman Jacob W. Cobb, Jr., who had disguised himself in a Union soldier’s coat in order to infiltrate Hancock’s lines. Sensing an opportunity to capture an enemy officer, Cobb yelled that the colonel was riding in the wrong direction. Walker halted, allowed Cobb to approach, and discovered the ruse as he stared down the barrel of Cobb’s rifle. After admonishing the private for his foul language, Walker surrendered his pistol and sword. Cobb delivered his prisoner to General George T. Anderson’s headquarters (“Anderson’s Brigade” consisted of the 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, and 59th Georgia Infantry) and rode away on Walker’s horse. xiv

The next day, Cobb encountered Walker among a group of Union prisoners as they marched to Petersburg—one of more than 2,000 Union soldiers reported missing or captured during the battle. Still riding Walker’s horse, Cobb asked if he recognized him as the Confederate soldier who captured him. Walker sardonically replied that Cobb’s face was not as familiar as that of the mare he rode. After the war, Cobb noted that despite the harsh language used during his capture and pilfering of his valuables, the colonel was a “perfect gentleman.”
On August 27, Walker and Captain James G. Tripp escaped from the column of Union prisoners through undergrowth so dense that Walker lost his shoes. Owing to Tripp’s inability to swim, the pair parted company at the bank of the Appomattox River. Walker, admittedly a poor swimmer, battled the current as he attempted to swim upriver to rejoin the II Corps. Walker later claimed that had soldiers from the 51st North Carolina Infantry not dragged him from the river, he would have drowned. xv

Initially imprisoned at the jail in Petersburg, Walker transferred to Richmond’s notorious Libby Prison. Upon arriving, Walker reunited with his older brother Robert (Lieutenant, 34th Massachusetts) who was recovering in the prison hospital after being shot in the groin and captured at the May 1864 Battle of New Market. Due to the deplorable conditions within the prison, Francis soon joined his brother in the infirmary. Declining health led to their parole to Annapolis, MD, and eventual release as part of a prisoner exchange in October 1864. Walker returned to his family’s home in North Brookfield, MA, to convalesce. xvi

Regarding his stay at Libby Prison, Walker wrote that he suffered, “a period of nervous horror such as I had never before and have never since experienced, and memories of which have always made it perfectly clear how one can be driven on, unwilling and vainly resisting, to suicide.” xvii

Battle injuries, particularly the compound hand fracture suffered at Chancellorsville in 1863, and poor health following his confinement forced Walker to resign his commission in January 1865. General Hancock recommended that in recognition of his gallant battlefield conduct, Walker be brevetted as a brigadier general in the U.S. Volunteers. President Andrew Johnson seconded the nomination and the U.S. Senate confirmed the honor on July 23, 1866. xviii

In the years that followed, Walker served in a number of government and academic positions, including superintendent of Indian Affairs, professor at Yale University, and superintendent of the 1870 and 1880 censuses. In August 1880, several newspapers published Jacob W. Cobb, Jr.’s account of Walker’s capture at Ream’s Station and subsequent interview with General Anderson. Anderson recalled the engagement and offered to return Walker’s sword. Should he need the sword again, Anderson presumed, “Walker would lend it to me.” xix
On September 7, 1880, Anderson returned the sword Walker surrendered 16 years earlier. In his letter to the census superintendent, Anderson wrote, “Your sword came into my possession, and I wore it from that time until the surrender at Appomattox. I prized it highly as a momento of a severe engagement, but its value was doubly enhanced as coming from a corps from which we received more hard knocks than trophies.”

* * *

Following the 1880 election, Republicans anticipated President James Garfield would nominate Walker as his Secretary of the Interior. xx Instead, Walker resigned the census superintendent’s position in 1881 to assume the presidency of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology instead. xxi Walker also served as president of the American Statistical Association (1882–1897), first president of the American Economics Association (1885–1892), and vice-president of the Academy of Sciences (1891–1897). xxii

Walker died of “apoplexy” on January 5, 1897. xxiii He is buried alongside his wife (Exene Stoughton Walker), parents, brother, and a sister at Walnut Grove Cemetery, North Brookfield, MA.

* * *

Portrait of Francis Amasa Walker as president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
Following his humiliating defeat at Ream’s Station and the lingering effects from the wound received at Gettysburg, Winfield Scott Hancock resigned his field command in November 1864. He accepted largely administrative assignments, including commander of the 1st Army Veteran Reserve Corps and relieved Major General Philip Sheridan in the then-quiet Shenandoah Valley. xxiv

On July 7, 1865, Hancock supervised the execution of President Lincoln’s assassination conspirators—Mary Surrat, Lewis Powell, David Herold, and George Atzerodt. xxv

Over the next 10 years, his assignments included commands at Baltimore, MD; the Military Department of Missouri at Fort Leavenworth, KS; the Fifth Military District (covering Texas and Louisiana); the Department of Dakota; and the Military Division of the Atlantic (northeastern United States) in New York, NY. xxvi

Prior to the 1876 presidential election, Hancock contended for the Democratic nomination, but lost to New York governor Samuel J. Tilden. xxvii He won the Democratic nomination in 1880, but lost the election to Republican James A. Garfield. He returned to his command of the Military Division of the Atlantic, holding the position until his death from an infected carbuncle on February 9, 1886. xxviii

Despite their political rivalry, Francis Amasa Walker defended Hancock’s military and political leadership, writing two books that documented the general’s life and career—History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac (1886) and General Hancock (1894).

*   *   *
Jacob W. Cobb, Jr. returned to Americus, GA, after the war, working as a house painter into the 1910s.

Cobb’s first wife Georgia, mother of eight of his nine children, died in 1883. He married Alice Bruner, widow of one of his 9th Georgia Infantry comrades, in 1884. He died in Albany, GA, on January 5, 1920.

Wearing Francis Amasa Walker’s sword at his side, General George T. Anderson surrendered his brigade with Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. xxix

After the war, he worked as a railroad freight agent in Georgia. At the time of the 1880 newspaper interview about Walker’s capture, Anderson was chief of police in Atlanta, GA. He and second wife Linda Spiller Anderson moved to Anniston, AL, where he was a Calhoun County tax collector and Anniston’s police chief. He died in Anniston on April 4, 1901. xxx
Lieutenant Robert W. Walker (34th Massachusetts) survived his wounds and capture during the May 15, 1864, Battle of New Market. Hospitalized in Harrisonburg, VA, until July 24, he transferred to Richmond’s Libby Prison where he reunited with his younger brother Francis. Meager rations and inadequate wound care led to his parole (with Francis) to Annapolis, MD, in October 1864. The War Department discharged Robert for disability on November 4, 1864. xxxi

Robert returned to North Brookfield, MA, where he worked at the E. and A. H. Bacheller Company Shoe Factory. He married Isabel Tucker in 1869, had one son (Amasa), and died in North Brookfield on July 20, 1909. xxxii His grave lies alongside those of his parents, siblings, and son in the town’s Walnut Grove Cemetery.

* * *

Ex-slave David Porter Allen collected Francis Amasa Walker’s possessions after his capture at Ream’s Station and delivered them to his parents in North Brookfield, MA. Ardent abolitionists and deeply moved by Allen’s devotion to their son, the Walker’s taught him and a second former-slave (Robert Morse, who found refuge with North Brookfield native and 36th Massachusetts surgeon Dr. Warren Tyler) to read and write and enrolled him in the town’s public school. He remained in North Brookfield, working as a servant to a nearby family until about 1870, after which he disappeared from the historic record. xxxiii

Robert Morse worked as a laborer and later fireman at the E. and A. H. Bacheller Company Shoe Factory. Morse died on May 30, 1912. He is buried as an honorary member of the Ezra Bacheller Post (North Brookfield, MA, Post 51) of the Grand Army of the Republic.

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To learn more about the important role the U.S. Census Bureau, its data and employees played in our nation’s history, visit http://www.census.gov/history.


vii Ibid, pp. 64–65.


ix The Town of North Brookfield, *A historical record of the soldiers and sailors of North Brookfield, and others who counted upon the quota of the town, in the war for the preservation of the union, against the rebellion, 1861–1865: regimental histories, etc.* 1886, p. 40; Walker, 143–145.


xv Munroe, pp. 81–87.

xvi The Town of North Brookfield, p. 40.


xviii Munroe, pp. 101–102.

xix *Atlanta Constitution*, August 13, 1880.

xx Munroe, pp. 205–208.


xxvi Ibid, p. 239; Walker, p. 304–305.


xxix *The True Republican*, “A Week’s Record,” Sycamore, DeKalb County, IL, April 10, 1901, p. 2.


xxxi The Town of North Brookfield, p. 40.

xxs Greenwood, pp. 97–98.