

Benjamin Albertson Willis

Major
119th Infantry (NY)
Company H



Born:	3/24/1840
Where:	New York
Town Affiliation:	Roslyn
Occupation:	Lawyer, Politician
Spouse:	Lillie Evelyn Macauley
Children:	Kate T. Willis, Portia Willis & Benjamin A. Willis Jr.
Enlistment Date:	12/2/1861
Enlistment Location:	New York City

Rank on Enlistment:	1 st Lieutenant
Promotions:	Major (03/07/1862) Lieutenant Colonel (12/29/1862)
Result of Service:	Discharge
Date:	12/16/1884
Died:	10/14/1886

Notes:

Born in Roslyn, New York, the eldest son of Charles Willis and Abigail Albertson, Willis graduated from Union College in 1861. He studied law, was admitted to the bar in 1862 and commenced practice in New York City.

In August 1862, Willis began recruiting and enlisting men from North Hempstead and Hempstead, Long Island into a company of the 119th Infantry Regiment of New York State Volunteers. The 119th's leader was Colonel Elias Peissner, a former instructor of Willis' at Union College. Willis raised over one-hundred men into Company H, ("The Willis Company") with himself as Captain.

After encampment in Harrisburg PA, Washington DC, and various posts in Northern Virginia, the 119th participated in the infamous "Mud March" of January 1863, which involved three days of marching the Union army through knee-deep mud to attack a Rebel army, to no avail.

The 119th served in the 11th Corp under General Joseph Hooker at the Battle of Chancellorsville, VA. While attempting to flank the Confederate Army, the 11th Corp was attacked by General "Stonewall" Jackson. Although considered a military debacle, and

despite the death of the Regiment's commander, Colonel Peissner, Captain Willis reported that Company H of the 119th did not turn and run, as did many others. After Chancellorsville, the 119th marched back to Acquia Creek Landing in Northern Virginia.

In July 1863, the Willis Company fought at Gettysburg under General George Meade. The 119th fought valiantly defending Cemetery Ridge throughout the three days. Willis was promoted to Major at Gettysburg. On the second day, the 119th repelled a massive Confederate attack despite heavy cannon fire and repeated advances.

After Gettysburg, the 119th traveled throughout the Southern theater, fighting in Tennessee, at Missionary Ridge, Kennesaw Mountain, Marietta, Atlanta, Savannah, and Bentonville, NC. After General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, VA, the 119th participated in the Grand Review in Washington, DC of May 24th, 1865. The remaining fifty-seven men of the Willis Company mustered out of service at Bladensburg, MD, and discharged at Harts Island, NY on June 21st, and returned to Long Island that night.

Willis also served as Colonel of the 12th Regiment, New York State Volunteers, and was honorably discharged in 1864. After the war, Willis resumed the practice of law, and was elected to the State assembly in 1872. He ran as a Democrat and won a Congressional seat to the Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth Congresses (March 4, 1875-March 3, 1879) where he served as chairman, Committee on Expenditures in the Department of the Navy. (Forty-fifth Congress) He ran unsuccessfully for reelection in 1878 to the Forty-sixth Congress. He returned again to law also took up the real estate business. Willis died in New York City on October 14, 1886. He was initially buried at the Friends Cemetery in Westbury, and then was re-interred in Woodlawn Cemetery.

Excerpts of a letter printed in the *Hempstead Inquirer*, 2/7/1863, from Captain Willis at Berea Church, VA:

“It is quite time the character of our soldier was understood, because we have suffered disasters traceable to the mis-generalships of our chieftains-let it not be said we lack in bravery-in determinations-in any attribute that constitutes the true soldier. Every battlefield almost attests our superiority. Remember that pure courage, like a lamp, shines brighter in the hours of darkness, than in the periods illumined by the splendors of the noon day sun.

Our army possessed of a divine courage that defies a world in arms-defeats do not dishearten its proud spirit nor misfortune weigh it down with grief. Trusting in the righteousness of our case-looking through the telescope of justice, we discern a future, that will bring on its wings our certain victory-and see written on the pages of God’s works, ‘be patient, the day of your rejoicing is nigh.’

We have great faith in Hooker, and we are ready to move against the enemy as soon as the roads will admit, and when we meet him we will whip him. Hooker is a General. All the army wants is a leader that will conquer and take advantage of victory. He is the man-the soldiers love him. I will write more respecting him in future.”

Hempstead Inquirer, August 29th 1863, from Major Willis, at Brentsville, VA:

“Tiresome marches, the countless fatigues of an almost unparalleled campaign. The excitement that attends the immanency of conflict, the heart-rending scenes of carnage, shattered and mutilated victims of unholy war, the sighs and groans of departing spirits as they make their flights from an unhallowed earth, the artillery’s fierce crash and musketry’s inharmonious rattle, the cheers of the heroes as by impetuous passion they are borne irresistibly onward to the foe, pressed a it were into the very gulf of death; all these experiences,

scenes and noises are buried in the sepulcher of the past, and instead we are here in this beautiful, ancient village of Brentsville, the capitol of Prince William County, enjoying a repose disturbed only by the unvarying routing of picket and fatigue, tattoo and reveille, drill and inspection.

The weather here is extremely hot. We cannot, like Long Islanders, breathe freshness from the Atlantic waves, refresh ourselves by taking a sail in some beautiful bay, nor yet get relief from delicate ice creams and cooling drinks, we cannot even wear linen and straw hats, but bundled in uniform prescribed by army regulations we have to reconcile ourselves to the torrid heat, drown our complaints or curses, and patiently endure, with an endurance rendered tolerable only by the happy consciousness that we are here doing duty's bidding.”