

Henry E. Alvord

Alvord, the first Northern-born Maryland Agricultural College president after the war, initially served as a volunteer soldier while still a college student, then held several military posts that highlighted his progressive views.

Henry Elijah Alvord was born in 1844 in Greenfield, Massachusetts, the oldest child of a prominent lawyer and state legislator. At 16, he enrolled in Norwich University, a Vermont institution specializing in practical education in agriculture, engineering, and military science.

Swept up by excitement when the Civil War erupted, he wrote to his father that one of his tutors left to join the Massachusetts regiment recently attacked in Baltimore: "we bid him farewell with tears in our eyes and fists doubled up." He eagerly sought and received parental permission to enlist in the Rhode Island "College Cavaliers," comprised of members of the Norwich and Dartmouth junior classes. The unit served a 90-day enlistment to relieve troops and provide a taste of cavalry training and camp life near Washington, D.C.

On November 21, 1862, after a few months back at college, he accepted a commission as a lieutenant in the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. He served in the Peninsular Campaigns as an adjutant but, in 1863, sought to become involved in colored troops recruitment. He offered his administrative skills to Major George Luther Stearns, a fellow Massachusetts native, noted abolitionist, and major force behind the first official black units, writing to Stearns "I should like exceedingly too to be connected in the great work in which you are engaged. As to the interest I naturally take in the subject I need only say I am my father's son. You know the political school in which I have grown up."

He was detailed to the Freedman's Bureau for a year, where he found his niche in efforts to implement agricultural education programs for newly freed African-Americans, and he delayed his muster-out date to continue in that work. By then, he held the rank of major.

Accepting a commission in the Regular Army in 1866, Alvord did garrison duty in what is now western Kansas, Oklahoma, and Northern Texas. He published his first major work on the cattle industry as a result of his field research. He also developed an interest in Native American affairs that led to a post-service commission to escort tribal chiefs to meet with President Ulysses S. Grant in 1872. His last Army assignment was to the Massachusetts Agricultural College as a military instructor. During the next fifteen years, he engaged in dairy farming in Virginia, taught at several Massachusetts schools, and was general manager of an experimental farm in New York.

By the time Alvord was selected by MAC to establish its Experiment Station and to serve as its president in 1888, he was a nationally recognized expert on animal husbandry and dairy farming and had helped organize the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations. He remained at MAC until 1893 and went on to hold similar positions at agricultural colleges in Oklahoma and New Hampshire. He died in 1904 while holding the position of Chief of the Dairy Division at the United States Department of Agriculture. He was buried in his hometown of Greenfield, Massachusetts, and his epitaph reads, "Soldier, Farmer, Teacher."

