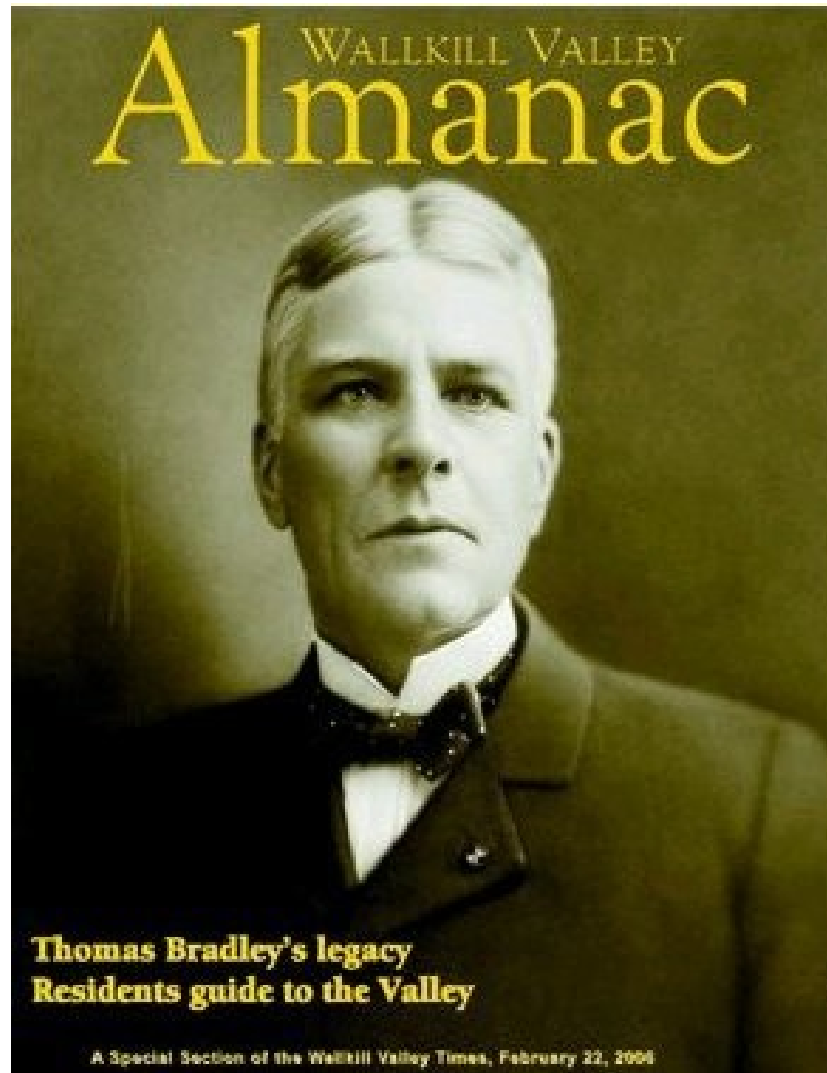


The man who made the whole town proud

By Adam Bosch



Originally Published on February 22, 2006 in the Wallkill Valley Almanac

which is a special section of the Wallkill Valley Times newspaper.

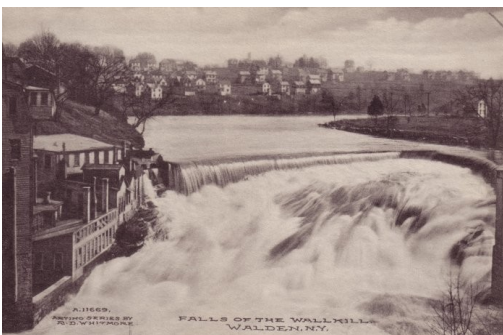
If you call Walden home or sojourn to the village every now and again, it is likely that Colonel Thomas Wilson Bradley has influenced your stay.

He bequeathed the land where your son or daughter played a ball game. You might have sent a letter in the post office he bargained for. He funded half of the municipal building where you pay your taxes and conduct your government business. Your checking account might be at the bank he helped establish. You are holding a piece of his legacy every time you borrow a book from the library.

Upon his death in 1920, the execution of Bradley's will essentially built the landmark institutions in Walden as we know them. One New York City newspaperman quipped that Bradley's will was "the will that made the whole town happy."

Who was Colonel Thomas W. Bradley and why is his fingerprint set so deeply in Walden?

Bradley was born in Yorkshire, England in 1844. He arrived in Walden 12 years later, the son of a knife factory president. Young Bradley "worked the bench" at the factory, shining and grinding knives on large wheels that were powered by the flow of the Wallkill River. The New York Knife Factory sat on the bank of



the river from the current-day Veterans' Memorial Bridge to the falls. The six-story building was formerly a cotton factory and was the largest producer of cutlery in the world.

While knife-shaping was hard work, life in Walden was prosperous and easy compared to the rough current of national politics. Bradley was 17 years old when the



South seceded from the Union and the first shots of the Civil War were fired in Virginia. In 1862 he enlisted in the Orange Blossoms as a private in the 124th regiment of the Union Army.

Bradley was promoted quickly during his Army tenure, rising from private to major in three short years. These years would shape his character and define him as a fearless patriot.

His most celebrated act of heroism occurred during the battle at Chancellorsville in May 1863. Half of Bradley's regiment was killed or wounded during the battle, but the dwindling stock of ammunition might have been worse news. Confederate fire was ceaseless and daunting. Shells exploded nearby and rifle shots whispered danger as they whizzed by the ears of those left standing. The Union Army needed ammunition to survive the pressing Confederates, but the only stock lay 500 yards away between the lines and beyond a heap of dead mules.

Someone had to run and retrieve it amidst shots, shell and canister.

Bradley volunteered. He darted across the field and fetched all the ammunition he could carry in his young arms. Thomas Hart, a lieutenant in his regiment described the scene as Bradley returned with the stock.

“At the hottest part of the return, Bradley was seen to turn, and, facing the enemy’s line, rapidly walked backward. Being questioned later in regard to this, he replied, ‘I felt sure of getting hit, and wanted the stroke in front instead of in my back.’” He would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award given in the United States, for his bravery at Chancellorsville. After that battle, Bradley was wounded in the battles of Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Boydton Plank Road.

Bradley returned to Walden on June 3, 1865, and settled into a community-involved life that would become his Walden legacy as we know it. He went back to work at the knife company as a salesman and soon married Josephine Denniston. The couple, along with their adopted daughter Louise, lived in a house that still stands on Ulster Avenue.

Bradley assumed greater responsibility at the New York Knife Company when his father died a few years after his return from war. Under Bradley’s leadership, the knife company expanded and prospered for a while. It was called the “Sheffield of America,” a reference to a steel town famous for its knives in England where Bradley lived as a boy. The knife company drove the village—if the knife company prospered, Walden prospered.

Bradley’s responsibilities at the factory were matched by his increasing contributions to public life. The Walden Savings Bank opened in 1872 and Bradley was its first vice president. During that time he was also president of the Walden National

Bank and an original trustee of the Columbus Trust Company in Newburgh. Bradley also delved into politics as a member of the New York State Assembly in 1875 and 1876.

It was around this time that life became a bit tougher in Walden. The import of German knives affected the American market. German knives were cheaper and they undercut the success of Walden's knife company. Bradley maneuvered the company through the tough times. While he lost all of his money vested in the knife company, Bradley struggled to keep the business viable. He shortened the work week to four days and took out a \$100,000 loan to continue paying the wages of his workers.

Luckily for Walden, there was a saving grace on the national scene. In 1897 William McKinley defeated William Jennings Bryant to become the 25th president of the United States. It was said that McKinley established America as a world power and the media as an important entity in the country. His was the first inaugural address to be captured on a movie camera, he annexed Hawaii, which would later become the 50th state, and created the White House pressroom.

McKinley also knew how to take care of his friends, as he offered Bradley a job at the White House as commissioner of pensions. McKinley and Bradley had met during the Civil War and became fast friends. McKinley was a commissary sergeant in a nearby regiment.

Bradley turned down the offer to work in Washington, opting to stay in Walden where the knife company and his workers need him. Bradley explained the dire economic situation to McKinley.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" McKinley asked.

"Raise the tariffs on German knives," Bradley said.

The favor was done. The tariff rose and so did the New York Knife Company's



profits. Bradley regained the money he had lost during the reign of cheap German knives and even made a profit. The McKinley monument was erected on the corner of East Main Street and Ulster Avenue in the village as a way to pay homage to the president. Its inscription reads: “McKINLEY ERECTED BY THE WORKINGMEN OF WALDEN.”

The statue was made by Henry H. Kitson, an artisan from Massachusetts. Letters between Bradley and Kitson reveal an elaborate unveiling ceremony that included parades. The date of the ceremony was changed several times according to their correspondence, within which we learn that Bradley was a jovial man who cared about his friends and fellow villagers. During one of Kitson's troubling times, Bradley reaches to his English heritage for a pep talk.

“Cheer up!” he writes in a looping hand. “I like that old English expression ‘Cheer up!’”

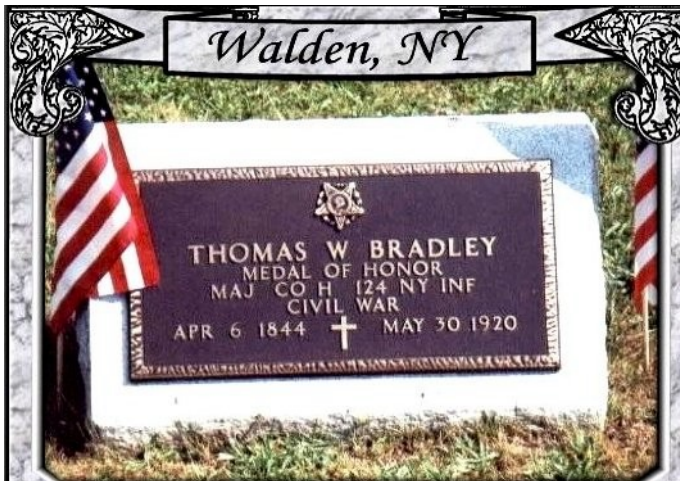
Bradley sold his interest in the knife factory in 1903, but continued his service to Walden and to the United States. He was elected to Congress and served from 1903 to 1913. He fought for the rights of American workers, serving on the board of pensions and arguing for a fair wage scale.

Even when considering national issues, he never forgot Walden. While in Congress, Bradley bargained a deal that established money to build the post office in Walden. We still drop our mail at it today.

The early 1900s were packed with projects in Walden that were orchestrated by Bradley. In 1902 he established the Rock Hill Fire Company on the west side of the village, which would later be renamed in his memory. The government building in Municipal Square was built in 1915 and designed, after he died, to the specifications in his will. Bradley matched every dollar contributed by the public with money of his own to build the three-story brick building.

The library moved there in 1916 and was affectionately named for his wife and daughter. His daughter, Louise, began a library club with Willis C. Stevens in 1896. Each member contributed money to buy books and exchanged them among the others in the group. By 1901 the club had accumulated 500 volumes. Bradley donated 500 more when he died. The Josephine-Louise Public Library boasts more than 32,000 books and other reference materials today.

Bradley Park lies on land that was given by Bradley to the village for the purpose of building a park.



Bradley erected two additional monuments—"The Standard Bearer" in Goshen and "The Volunteer" in the Wallkill Valley Cemetery, which honors the memory of Company H of the

124th New York Volunteer Regiment. Bradley, his wife and daughter, are buried near the monument at the peak of the highest hill in the cemetery.



Walden carried great affection for its favorite son, who was called “Colonel Tom” by men and women of the village. When he died—fittingly on Memorial Day 1920—hundreds of villagers watched and cried as he was buried in the Wallkill Valley Cemetery.

His legacy lives in Walden because of the will that made the whole town happy. But on that late spring day in 1920, hundreds mourned the man who made the whole town proud.

This brief biography of Col. Thomas Bradley was written by Adam Bosch, a reporter for the Wallkill Valley Times newspaper. It originally appeared in the Wallkill Valley Almanac, a special section to the paper that is published yearly. It was researched with the help of historians Marcus Millspaugh and Joe Devine, publications from the Josephine-Louise Public Library, and reference archives at the New York Historical Society.