Nelson Appleton Miles Biography

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Biography

Nelson Appleton Miles (1839-1925), American soldier, participated in many of the campaigns against the western Indian tribes.

Nelson A. Miles was born on Aug. 8, 1839, at Westminster, Mass. After completing his schooling at the age of 17, he moved to Boston, where he became a clerk and studied military tactics at night. At the outbreak of the Civil War he used his savings and borrowed money to raise a company of volunteers and was commissioned a lieutenant. He was able to transfer to the 61st New York Volunteers as a lieutenant colonel in September 1862. His rise to prominence was then meteoric, and he emerged from the war a major general of volunteers and recipient of the Medal of Honor. He married Mary Hoyt Sherman in 1868 (a niece of Gen. William T. Sherman and of Senator John Sherman of Ohio). Family influence brought him a colonelcy in the Army and command of the 40th Infantry Regiment.

After the Civil War, Miles served extensively in the Indian wars of the American West. In 1875 he helped defeat the Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne on the South Plains. Transferred north, he aided in driving Sitting Bull and the Sioux into Canada in 1876, and the following year he received the surrender of Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé after marching his troops 160 miles through wintry cold. In 1880 he was promoted to brigadier general and given command of the Department of the Columbia. In 1885 he was given command of the Department of the Missouri but was transferred to the Department of Arizona in April 1886. There he secured Geronimo's surrender.

In 1890, after his promotion to major general, Miles suppressed the "ghost dance" craze (prompted by a messianic cult) of the Sioux Indians. Four years later, following orders from President Grover Cleveland, he quelled the Pullman strike in Chicago. For these feats he was made commanding general of the Army in 1895, a post he held until his retirement in 1903. His record during the Spanish-American War was not brilliant, but in 1901 he was given the coveted promotion to lieutenant general. He had not, however, achieved the goal he most desired. In every election following 1888, he had expected a presidential nomination. Following his retirement, he lived in Washington, D.C., where he died on May 15, 1925. He was buried with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.