Brevet Brigadier General Elias Wright
Teacher, Military Leader, Surveyor Extraordinaire
22 June 1830-2 January 1901

(Workshop highlights prepared by Elizabeth G. Carpenter for the 3/24/2012 Pinelands Short Course)

Absecon Island, later Atlantic City; today’s Wharton State Forest in Burlington County; and Stephen Colwell’s Weymouth Furnace in Atlantic County all benefited from the meticulous work of 19th century surveyor, Elias Wright, who, after the Civil War, was referred to by the complimentary title “General” Wright.

Probably nobody in his home town of Durham, Greene County at the foothills of New York’s Catskill Mountains would have guessed that the painfully shy yet strong-willed little boy, the seventh of Anson and Abigail Wright’s nine children, would years later distinguish himself as a Union officer during the Civil War, then serve as Joseph Wharton’s trusted land agent, surveyor extraordinaire, and friend. Family recollections noted that at age twelve the boy could barely read and was considered by many to be a dolt. (Cone, Mary Isabel Gibson, ed. One Line of the Wright Family. This undated document, catalog #P-220Wri, is housed in the Atlantic Heritage Center Library, Somers Point, N. J.)

Equally interesting are the contributions that five of Elias’s siblings made in developing Atlantic and Burlington Counties. Calvin, the eldest, settled in Smith’s Landing, later Pleasantville, and became Atlantic County’s first school superintendent. Mary Ann married William Ham and settled in Elwood where Elias had a farm. George became superintendent of Joseph Wharton’s property in 1881 and lived in house number 71 at Batsto. Willard, educated at Jefferson Medical College, became a druggist and practicing physician and served four terms as Atlantic City’s mayor. Ellen, who married Peter Tilton Frambes and later Captain John Huntley, taught school in Smith’s Landing and Port Republic.

Indirectly, a sixth sibling, Henrietta, and her husband, Lucius Henry Ingalls, made a significant contribution to the region when their daughter, Emma, married Frank Middleton who became a protégée of General Wright, and who did extensive surveying in southern New Jersey. Elias willed to Frank his surveying equipment, maps, and hand books plus some of his personal library holdings including a 30-volume set of the Encyclopedia Britannica and 10 volumes of Stoddard’s Lectures. At the time of Elias’ death, Frank was listed in the 1901 Atlantic City Directory as a “surveyor and real estate title examiner”.

“Paternal encouragement” (possible a visit to the proverbial woodshed) sparked Elias’s interest in education. During the winters of 1851 and 1852 he attended Calvin’s school in Williamstown, N.J. Having put a bit of polish on his educational performance, Elias, in the spring of 1852, assumed his first teaching post at Leedsville (now Linwood), N.J.

About this time, he very likely began courting Julia Ashley of Port Republic, N.J. The two were married on 17 September 1855. They settled in Port Republic (initially called Blackman’s Mills), a community where Julia traced her family’s lineage back to David S. Blackman, one of the founders of the local church, as well as David’s father, Nehemiah. Their first and only child, a daughter named Frances and nicknamed “Frank”, was born on 14 July 1858. The April 1861 outbreak of the Civil War interrupted the family’s life and Elias’ career that included employment as Stephen Colwell’s surveyor and land agent based at Weymouth Furnace in Atlantic County.

Wright began his Civil War service in 1861 by recruiting a state militia company from the Atlantic City area. After the first battle of Bull Run, he led these men to Camden, then Trenton, where he was mustered in as 2nd Lieutenant of Company G, 4th Regiment, New Jersey Volunteer Infantry, one of four regiments that were part of New Jersey’s First Brigade. These men saw action during the Peninsula Campaign and the Battle of
Gaines’ Mills, VA where Wright was captured and imprisoned in Richmond’s Libby Prison. About seven weeks later, on 27 August 1862, he was officially exchanged for “First Lieut. O. Edwards, Crescent City (Louisiana) Volunteers.” A foot injury during the battle of Crampton’s Gap, South Mountain, MD prevented him from active participation in the battle at Antietam; however, he saw action during the Battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Salem Heights. After the Fredericksburg struggle, he was promoted to Captain, Company A, 4th Regiment “for gallantry upon the field.” (The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (O.R.), 1880-1901.; National Archives & Records Administration, A1 Forms Reference Section, 8601 Adelphi RD, College Park, MD 20783); Stryker, William S. Record of Officers & Men of NJ in the Civil War, 1861-1865. Trenton, NJ: Steam Book & Job Printer, 1876.) Not long after this, Wright was tapped by General William Birney to raise and organize the first regiment of colored troops at Mason’s Island in the District of Columbia. Wright was promoted to Major, 1st USCT Infantry on 24 June 1863. This regiment saw duty at Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Yorktown and participated in the siege of Petersburg and Richmond. Wright was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel 29 April 1864. Four months later, he was promoted to Colonel of the 10th USCT, an infantry unit that became part of the 25th Army Corps assigned to the Army of the James. This massive Union force finally succeeded in defeating the defenders of Fort Fisher at the mouth of Cape Fear River, NC on 15 January 1865 ending Confederate blockade running to Wilmington. Colonel Wright, now brevetted to Brigadier General, led the Third Brigade, Third Division of this Corps in the Union’s advance and ultimate defeat of Wilmington. During the desperate battle up the peninsula to Wilmington, Wright was severely wounded in his right forearm by a musket ball, an injury that would plague him for the rest of his life. Bvt. Brig. General Wright was present at the surrender of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston at Bennett House near Durham Station, NC on 26 April 1865. Then, on 31 May 1865, he tendered his resignation from the Union Army writing “Having served nearly four years in the war my business as a civilian and pecuniary interests have been neglected for that length of time and now require my personal attention.” Brigadier General Charles Jackson Paine granted his approval of this request writing, in part, “He (Wright) is an eminently deserving officer, and now that the war is ended, is in my opinion entitled to claim consideration for his own interests.” (Gragg, Rod. Confederate Goliath, The Battle of Fort Fisher. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991.) His resignation dated 17 June 1865 and officially accepted, General Wright returned to Julia, little Frank, and renewed employment with Stephen Colwell on the Weymouth tract. Mr. Colwell (3/25/1800-1/16/1871) had undoubtedly followed the unfolding drama of this four year conflict with great concern due, in part, to his wife’s, Sarah Ball Richards (7/20/1805-2/21/1888), contributions as treasurer of Philadelphia’s Ladies’ Aid Society. Founded in April 1861 this organization provided garments for soldiers, assistance in hospitals, and care for soldiers’ families. Once back in Atlantic County, General Wright’s responsibilities included surveying land for the growing communities of Egg Harbor City and Elwood with their connecting railroad, as well as serving as Weymouth’s postmaster. He moved his family to Elwood where he had acquired farm land. Reportedly, he also had time to devote to his steam sawmill business, and the Elwood Shoe Factory where he briefly served as superintendent overseeing the work of 60 to 80 employees.

Mr. Colwell’s untimely death coupled with the national economic crises of the 1870’s dashed many of the General’s plans. However, as luck would have it, Philadelphia industrialist Joseph Wharton returned from Europe in 1873 inspired by the agricultural information he had gathered. He was eager to employ his new
Wharton acquired Batsto and surrounding land at a Master’s Sale in 1876. A first order of business was to stabilize and renovate the mansion, a glorified farm house dating back to the mid-1700’s. Then, upon the General’s inquiry, suggestions for upgrading the mill came from The John A. Roebling’s Sons Co., of Trenton, N.J., manufacturers of “Iron and Steel Wire Rope, Bridge Cables, Ship Rigging, Wheels and Ropes for Transmission of Power . . . .” And Wright began to survey surrounding land with an eye to acquisition. His employer hoped to acquire enough “headland” to protect the vast Kirkwood-Cohansey Aquifer. Once done, Wharton envisioned piping this potable water to Philadelphia, a city with an existing water supply tainted by massive amounts of waste. While Wharton continued to hope for New Jersey legislative approval of his water plan, the General oversaw agricultural experimentation. Menhaden, a fish species abundant along the Jersey coast, were harvested and introduced as fertilizer; sweet potatoes were grown; private sales of “Fine Heifers and Cows, Both Dry and Milch,” were advertised; and cranberries, the estate’s most successful agricultural venture, were cultivated and harvested in the Atsion area of today’s Wharton State Forest. The 1880 U. S. Federal Census showed Elias, his wife, and daughter living in Washington Township, Burlington County. His occupation was given as “Engineer.” A decade later the family was residing in Atlantic City at 24 North Pennsylvania Avenue, and the General’s occupation was listed as “Architect.” He continued to survey Wharton’s holdings until he was stricken with paralysis on 28 December 1900; he died five days later on 2 January 1901 at his Atlantic City home.

The Daily Union, an Atlantic City newspaper, dedicated three front page articles—January 2, January 3, and January 7, 1901—to coverage of the General’s life and funeral. Headlines noted that he was a “good citizen and brave soldier.” One article added that “Joseph Wharton, the millionaire iron manufacturer and owner of the Batsto estate” was in attendance at the funeral. Escorting by comrades of the Joe Hooker Post of the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic), the General’s remains were buried in the family plot in Greenwood Cemetery, Pleasantville. In a tribute dated Philadelphia, 28 May 1901, Joseph Wharton wrote, in part, “The world in which he (General Wright) lived is better for his work and for his example. Two Bible promises apply to him: namely (1) ‘Seest thou a man diligent in his calling; he shall stand before princes, he shall not stand before mean men.’ (2) ‘Well done good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of they Lord.’”

John Hall, on page 513 of this work, The Daily Union History of Atlantic City and County, New Jersey, wrote that during his tenure as Wharton Tract surveyor, Elias Wright surveyed over 100,000 acres of land some of which had titles dating back to 1720 and included several owners and many conditions. “It is an enduring monument to his industry and energy and also to the tenacity of purpose of Joseph Wharton, who has saved much trouble for his successors by clearing up titles and boundary lines in Southern New Jersey.” Thanks to the efforts of both men, today’s approximately 122,000-acre Wharton State Forest, New Jersey’s largest state forest, makes up a significant portion of the Pinelands National Reserve, our nation’s first national reserve.