

The last in a series of essays featured in conjunction with Greenwich Faces the Great War

# A Forgotten Soldier in a Forgotten War

By Peter Berg and Karen Frederick

**A**mong the soldiers who should be honored on Memorial Day is Edward Elvin Washburn. In 2006 a custodian found this brass plaque in the basement of a former high school building in Greenwich. The plaque was put on display in the Greenwich High School Media Center with the following information:



Memorial Plaque. Brass. Courtesy Greenwich High School.

*...Although it was determined that Mr. Washburn died in military service on October 17, 1918 in Cleveland, Ohio, it has never been established that he was a Greenwich teacher. ...The GHS community hopes its placement here might aid in the search for information regarding Mr. Washburn and the provenance of this plaque. At the very least it serves as a memorial of this teacher's call to duty and his ultimate sacrifice.*

A little more than nine years after the plaque was found and 96 years after the death of Edward Elvin Washburn, Peter Berg has uncovered information about this man and his life.

Edward was born on April 13, 1888, in China, Maine, the fourth of six children of Edith Elvin Crosby Washburn and Willis Wendell Washburn. His father's careers included harness maker, insurance

salesman, postmaster, town clerk and justice of the peace.

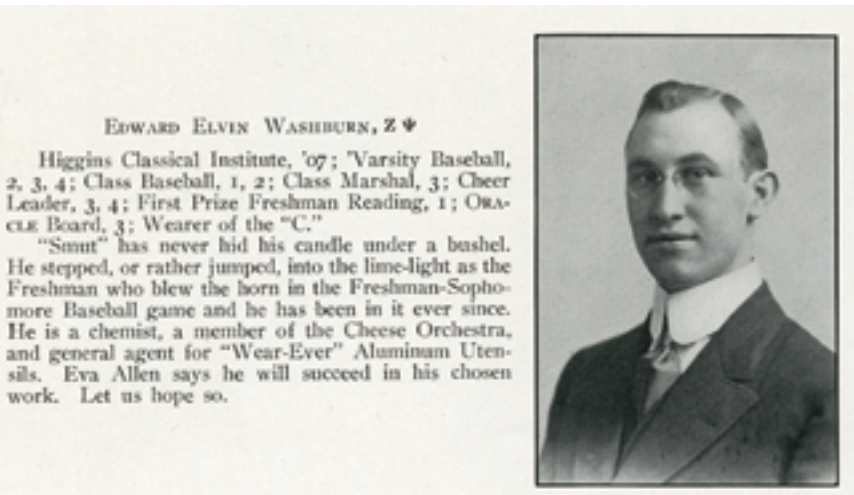
He attended Higgins Classical Institute, a prep school in Charleston affiliated with Colby College, graduating in 1907. He then enrolled in Colby College where he played varsity baseball and was class marshal, cheerleader for two years and on the Oracle Board. He graduated in 1912.

He was hired by Greenwich High School as a chemistry teacher, eventually becoming head of the Science Department. In addition, he coached the boys' baseball, football and basketball teams as well as being active in the high school dancing class.

In February 1917 the Connecticut General Assembly directed then-Governor Marcus H. Holcomb "to procure certain information relative to the resources of the State," especially about "men and materials available for use in the event of war." This military census, along with Washburn's State of Connecticut Military Service Record and his registration card, provides more information. He was single and lived at 59 Mason Street. He stood 5' 8¼" tall, had brown hair and blue eyes, was bald, had a ruptured ligament in his right leg, water on the knee and bad eyes; he did not claim any military exemption from the draft. Under Fraternal Orders, he listed "Masonic and Zeta Psi Fraternity." Under Previous Military Service or Training, he wrote "Local Greenwich, Conn. state police or home guard." He could ride a horse, handle a team, drive an automobile, ride a motorcycle, handle a power boat, had a little experience with electrical machinery and was a fair swimmer.

He was inducted as a private into the Army on July 24, 1918, and was assigned to the Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) unit. The CWS was established to develop and produce asphyxiating gases. A secret plant located in Willoughby, Ohio, 20 miles east of Cleveland, was established for its production. This was

Class Picture. The Colby Oracle, 1912. Courtesy Colby College.



Karen Frederick is the Curator of Collections and Exhibitions Coordinator at the Greenwich Historical Society. The full version of her article with references can be read on the Historical Society's website: [www.greenwichhistory.org](http://www.greenwichhistory.org).

where Washburn was sent.

The December 20, 1918, edition of the *Greenwich News and Graphic* reported the official results of the influenza epidemic in Army camps and military centers in the United States. From September 13, the date of the outbreak, to December 1, there had been approximately 17,000 deaths from influenza ("Spanish Flu") and pneumonia. One of these was Edward Washburn. He died on October 17, at the age of 30, less than a month before the War ended on November 11. Washburn was the first casualty of World War I from central Maine.



*Greenwich High School Football Team, 1915. Courtesy Greenwich High School.*

On October 25, 1918, the *Greenwich News and Graphic* printed the following:

*Resolved—that the Committee place on record the expression of its deep sorrow for the untimely death of Edward E. Washburn, who was an officient [sic] and loved teacher in the Greenwich High School for three years; who in that brief time had earned the respect and esteem of the community; and who entered with enthusiasm the military service of his country, in which he gave high promise of creditable achievement—a good citizen, a model teacher, a patriotic soldier.*

On December 18, 1918, a service flag containing 118 stars was dedicated at the high school. Of those stars, 117 were blue. There was one gold star for Corporal Edward E. Washburn, "the former head of the Science Department, who died in the service." Washburn's name does not appear on a brass plaque at Town Hall because, although he was a Greenwich resident who died in the military service, he did not die in combat or overseas.

*The Greenwich Historical Society thanks Peter Berg for his research on this forgotten soldier.*

## In Memoriam

On October 17, 1918, in Cleveland, Ohio, occurred the death of Edward Elvin Washburn, for several years a teacher in the Greenwich High School, and for one year the head of the Science Department.

Mr. Washburn, at the time of his death, was a Corporal in the Gas Defense of the Chemical Warfare Service, in Cleveland. In July he was sent, with other drafted men from Greenwich, to Camp Devens, where he was in the Infantry. Later he was transferred to the Gas Department. About a week before his death, Mr. Washburn had a mild case of Spanish Influenza, which developed into pneumonia. The disease did not assume an alarming form at first, but within a day or two it proved to be fatal. The body was taken to his home in China, Maine, where a military service was held.

It is impossible in a memorial of this kind to do adequate justice to the honor and respect in which Mr. Washburn was held by faculty and students. For three years and a half, Mr. Washburn worked in unusual harmony with the other teachers and with the school. He coached the boys in base ball, football, and basket-ball, in addition to his regular duties. He was an active participator in the dancing class of the High School. He strove constantly to foster and increase school spirit. He was a personal friend of every student, never too busy or too tired to give additional help and encouragement, outside of school hours. In school he was an excellent and a very popular teacher.

It was with sincere regret that the faculty and pupils saw Mr. Washburn granted a leave of absence for the duration of the war; and it is difficult to picture their grief when word was received of his death. The Gold star on the school service flag will ever commemorate a soldier and teacher, respected, honored, and beloved. In deep reverence we cherish the memory of EDWARD WASHBURN.

*"With a cherry smile and a wave of the hand,  
He has wandered into an unknown land."*

*In Memoriam. The Green Witch, November 1918, Vol. 11, No. 9. Courtesy Greenwich High School.*