

# James Deshler

By Clarke Moore



*Brigadier General James Deshler*  
(Wikipedia)



James Deshler possessed the zeal of a first-generation Southerner. Born to transplanted Pennsylvanians, the future Confederate general was fiercely proud of his Alabama home.

It was this pride that, upon the outbreak of the Civil War, led him to abandon his United States Army commission, renounce his familial ties to Northern relatives and, ultimately, lose his life along the banks of Chickamauga Creek.

James Deshler was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, in 1833. His parents, David and Eleanor Taylor Deshler, left Pennsylvania in 1828 when David Deshler accepted a job on the Tuscumbia Railway. Through this opportunity and others, the Deshler Family prospered and became a part of the growing community of Tuscumbia.

James Deshler and his siblings were raised in

the wealth and comfort afforded them by the prosperity of their father. This prosperity did not shield the family from heartache, however. In fact, the Deshler family suffered more than their fair share of sorrow. Two of the three children died prematurely. Charlotte Ann, the only girl, died in 1844, at the age of 13. Only a year later, the oldest son, David Deshler Jr, died while swimming in the Hudson River. He was a cadet at the United State Military Academy at West Point at the time.

Following the lead of his older brother, James was offered an appointment to West Point in 1850. The time he spent at West Point demonstrated the potential and character that would later come to define him. While he was a cadet, James Deshler excelled in his academic course work. His hard work earned him the 7<sup>th</sup> position in the Class of 1854, ahead of fellow classmates J.E.B. Stuart, Stephen D. Lee, and Archibald Gracie, Jr. The son of General Robert E. Lee, George Washington Custis Lee, graduated first in the same class.

As an upperclassman, James Deshler befriended an underclassman that would go on to serve with distinction in the Civil War. This cadet, who would serve as chief of artillery

under James Longstreet, was Edward P. Alexander. In his book, "Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General

Edward Porter Alexander," he recalled James Deshler as a "...special friend to me at West Point where he was a first class man when I was a plebe...He was a rather small but very well built, active, energetic, & fine looking fellow with very attractive manners & qualities." Alexander also attributes his life-long fear of heights to a serious fall he took while climbing Indian Falls, at the goading of Deshler, while he was a cadet at West Point.

After graduation, James Deshler was assigned

General Deshler graduated from West Point ahead of JEB Stewart.

to the Third U.S. Artillery in California. After serving a year, James was transferred to the Tenth U.S. Infantry. While serving in the Tenth, James saw combat in Nebraska during the campaign against the Lakota Sioux Indians. He also participated in the Mormon War of 1858 in Utah. During his time with the Tenth, James Deshler was promoted to First Lieutenant.

James Deshler remained in the U.S. Army while talk of secession spread throughout the country. Alabama's secession in January, 1861 did make an impression on him, however. In May, 1861, James took a leave of absence from his post. In stark contrast to most other officers who left the Army to serve in the Confederate States Army, Deshler never resigned his commission. When he failed to return from an authorized leave of absence, the Army followed procedure and removed his name from the rolls of active officers.

With all haste, Deshler volunteered for service in the Confederate States Army. He was given a commission as a captain and assigned to service in Loring's Artillery in Western Virginia. During this time, Deshler served as the Adjutant General of Henry Jackson's Brigade. In this post, Deshler participated in the Battle of Greenbrier River in September, 1861 and the Battle of Allegheny Summit in December, 1861. During the latter action, Deshler was critically wounded – shot through both thighs – and forced to take a leave of absence.

After returning to duty, Deshler was promoted to colonel and transferred to the staff of Theophilus Holmes. This service required Deshler to move to North Carolina. Deshler remained in North Carolina until Holmes was ordered to join the defense of Richmond during the Peninsula Campaign. During this campaign, Deshler served as Chief of Artillery for Holmes.

After the Peninsula Campaign, Holmes was given command of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Deshler accompanied Holmes on the move. Upon arrival, Deshler was given command of an infantry division, comprised of Texans, and stationed at Fort Hindman at

Arkansas Post, Arkansas.

During the early part of January, 1863, Deshler participated in the Battle of Arkansas Post, where he commanded one wing of the Confederate lines that defended Fort Hindman.

When the Fort was decimated and forced to surrender, Deshler refused. He was prepared to continue the fighting. General William T. Sherman, whose forces were part of the Union assault, convinced Deshler that

there was no chance of victory and that he should surrender. Sherman continued to engage Deshler in conversation by inquiring if he had relatives living in Columbus, Ohio. Deshler responded rather defensively, in a tone so memorable that Sherman recorded the incident. Deshler informed Sherman that he had no relatives living north of the Ohio River.

After the surrender, Deshler and his forces became prisoners-of-war and were held in Union custody. Their confinement continued until May, 1863 when he was released in a prisoner exchange. When he reported for duty, Deshler learned that he had been promoted to brigadier general and transferred to the Army of Tennessee, currently operating in Central Tennessee.

Deshler resumed command of his infantry brigade. The Texans had been joined by additional troops from Arkansas to bolster the strength of the brigade. Deshler and his brigade were part of Major General Patrick Cleburne's Division. The brigade participated in the retreat from Tennessee and the abandonment of Chattanooga.

Deshler was an active participant in the fighting at Chickamauga. His brigade was engaged in the night assault conducted by Cleburne on September 19, which resulted in the capture of three Union field pieces and two regimental banners. Members of Deshler's brigade later said it was an unusually dark night. It was remarked that the only targets were the rifle blasts from the forces to the front.

The fighting continued on September 20. Deshler's men provided cover fire for two other brigades involved in fierce fighting. When the

General Deshler served in California and Dakota against the Souix and under General Albert Sidney Johnson during the Mormon War.

brigade failed to make sufficient progress, Cleburne rode to personally inspect the cause of delay. When he began to question Deshler about the reasons for his hesitancy, Deshler responded, rather fiercely, "Well, it's not my fault!" Cleburne ascertained that Deshler was positioned behind another brigade and he quickly resolved the alignment issue.

Upon taking the new position, Deshler continued to lead his brigade from the front. During an inspection of positioning and cartridge boxes, Deshler exposed himself to the Union guns. A shell struck him in the chest and killed him instantly as it literally tore his heart from his body. After the fighting, his body was buried on the battlefield by a friend.

After the war, the friend who had buried Deshler brought his father, David Deshler, to the battlefield to have his son's body disinterred. The elder Deshler carried the body back to Tuscumbia and had him buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

Roger Mills, who had taken over command of Deshler's Brigade after this death, later remarked about him: "...He poured out his own blood upon the spot watered by the best blood of the brigade. Amongst the host of brave hearts

that were offered the altar of sacrifice for their country on that beautiful Sabbath, there perished not one, noble, braver, or better than his. He lived beloved, and fell lamented and mourned by every officer and man of his command."

General Robert E. Lee wrote, "There was no braver soldier in the Confederate Army than Deshler."

Deshler was memorialized with a monument on the Chickamauga Battlefield. With no heirs to inherit his property, David Deshler, whose wife had died the year his son graduated from West Point, left his entire estate to the City of Tuscumbia with the stipulation that it be used for the education of white women and that it be named for his son, James Deshler. The Deshler Female Institute opened in 1874 until it was damaged by a tornado soon after. Members of the local Masonic Lodge repaired the buildings, but due to lack of funds, the school closed in 1917.

The buildings were torn down in 1924 and a new school building was erected, and named Deshler High School. A quarter century later, the present Deshler High School was built, and continues to carry the name of James Deshler, the granted wish of a broken-hearted father.

Upon his death along Chickamauga Creek he was leading his brigade under the command of General Patrick Cleburne.



The Narrative can be found in the TVCWRT book published in 2012 titled, *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*. Complements of the TVCWRT.