

# Throwback Thursday: Remembering Homer Wheaton, the first 'Syracuse boy' killed in WWI







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During the First World War, the State Fairgrounds in Geddes became a large processing and training facility for the army, designated Camp Syracuse. In this image, at the Fairgrounds, soldiers practice use of bayonets attached to their bolt action rifles. Photo courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association  
Onondaga Historical Association

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on February 25, 2016 at 7:00 AM, updated February 25, 2016 at 7:09 AM

The news hit Syracuse on March 5, 1918, the first "Syracuse boy" to be killed in battle during World War I.

Corporal Homer Wheaton, of Company G, 101st U.S. Infantry, was killed in action with General John Pershing's forces in the Lorraine Sector of France on Feb. 27.

**Click the headlines to read the full newspaper stories:**

**CORPORAL WHEATON, SYRACUSE BOY, KILLED  
WHILE FIGHTING IN FRONT LINE TRENCHES**

Homer was born in Pompey in 1882, and from the beginning showed a remarkable aptitude for the military.

The Syracuse Herald said, "He was a soldier from the time that he was a child."

He showed great skill at military tactics at St. John's Academy in Manlius, graduating with high honors.



Homer Wheaton is believed to be the first soldier from Syracuse to be killed in combat during World War I. *Submitted image*

He entered Syracuse University's College of Law, studying there from 1902 to 1904 but did not graduate.

Wheaton left New York and moved to Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1907, he joined the staff of the Worcester Gazette and would become their sports editor.

He joined the National Guard. When his unit was ordered to France, he obeyed the call "with unswerving obedience and readiness."

One of the most characteristic stories about Wheaton came from a city editor of the Worcester Gazette. After Wheaton volunteered for foreign service, the editor asked him why he had done so, when he was well above the draft age. Homer replied:

"I am comparatively speaking all alone in the world. I have neither father, mother, wife nor child. And it seems to me that by going across to fight I can take the place of some poor fellow who has a mother or a wife to mourn for him and who by my volunteering will be given a chance to stay at home with those who are for him."

It was not until later that people learned all of the details how Corporal Wheaton had died. The Herald wrote on May 9, "the real facts of Corporal Wheaton's death show him to have been thus far one of the greatest American heroes of the war."

## ***Homer Wheaton Thus Far One of America's Greatest Heroes in War***

Sergeant Edward Creed, of Wheaton's 101st regiment, who had returned to Worcester, told the true story of Wheaton's death:

"A grenade squad of five men were picked to make a raid through No Man's Land. They were in a dugout, loaded down with grenades, awaiting the order to advance.

One grenade fell to the floor. The firing pin had been drawn. In five seconds the grenade would explode. The five men stood in terror, knowing that when it exploded they would be killed.

Corporal Wheaton did not try to pick up the grenade. He did not hesitate. He threw his body over the grenade. It exploded under him, killing him.

The other four men were saved."

He was a soldier from the time that he was a child.

Creed attended the funeral for Wheaton in France: "I stood at his grave with the firing squad, performing the last ceremony. Every man that could possibly get away from the front line attended the burial of the man who gave his life for his comrades."

Wheaton was honored with two medals after his death, the French Cross of War and the American Distinguished Service Medal.

## **TWO MEDALS AWARDED TO H.J. WHEATON**

Sergeant Creed hoped that Worcester would honor the sacrifice made by Wheaton.

Worcester did remember him, with a public square and a VFW post named in his honor. But so did his original hometown with a park on the East Side, as well as a street, Wheaton Road, on the North Side, and a monument at the Immaculate Conception Cemetery in Pompey.

Former Post-Standard sports columnist Bill Reddy thought Syracuse should have honored Wheaton a step further. On March 16, 1942, the Syracuse Common Council decided on a new name for the city's ballpark, Municipal Stadium. They chose a new hero, from a new war, Douglas MacArthur.

Reddy argued Syracuse needed to honor one of its own and saw in Wheaton "a story which Syracuse should never forget, those ancient deathless words rang true: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)'"



## From the archives: When the Oneida Bingo Hall burst into flames

Twenty-eight years ago, the controversial Oneida Indian Bingo Hall exploded at night.

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