

Fremont (née Fish), Sewall Lawrence ^[1]

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by Dorothy Fremont Grant, 1986

30 Aug. 1816–1 May 1886

Sewall Lawrence Fremont (née Fish), army officer, chief engineer, and superintendent of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, was born in Bellows Falls, Vt. (in the year of "[no summer](#)"^[2]), the third child and second son of Salmon and Tizrah Dutton Fish. He was named for his ancestors Samuel Sewall, the American jurist, and James ("Don't give up the ship!") Lawrence. When he was a child his parents moved to Charleston, Sullivan County, N.H. Appointed from Charleston to the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., he was graduated seventeenth in a class of fifty-two on 1 July 1841 and commissioned a second lieutenant in the Third Artillery.

He served in the Florida War (1841–42) and in garrison at [Fort Johnston](#)^[3], N.C. (1842–45). During this time (1843) he changed his name to Fremont, and persuaded his father and family to do likewise. He was ordered to the military occupation of Texas (1845–46), and in the [War with Mexico](#)^[4] he took command of Major David Ringgold's battery when Ringgold was killed in action at Palo Alto on 8 May 1846. After the battle of Resaca-de-la-Palma (11 May 1846), Fremont was promoted in rank and ordered to Fort Moultrie, S.C. That fall he became assistant professor of geography, history, and ethics at West Point. Advanced to captain on 3 Mar. 1847, he was placed on quartermaster duty in Washington, D.C., but was mustering North Carolina volunteers at Fort Johnston by the end of 1847. While quartermaster in the Third Artillery, he survived the wreck of the USAT *San Francisco* on Christmas Eve of 1853 while she was on her maiden voyage to San Francisco; this wreck was memorialized by John G. Whittier in "Three Bells." Fremont resigned from the army on 4 Apr. 1854.

As an assistant engineer of the United States, he was then assigned to the improvement of the Cape Fear and Savannah rivers. He assumed full management of the [Wilmington and Weldon Railroad](#)^[5] on 8 Dec. 1854. On 25 Feb. 1861, Governor [John W. Ellis](#)^[6] appointed him colonel of the North Carolina militia as chief of artillery and engineer. Later he held the same rank in the Confederate States Army. On 31 Aug. 1861, after the fall of Hatteras, he assumed full command of the coastal defenses from the [New River](#)^[7] south to the state line. He planned the fortification at Federal Point, which he named [Fort Fisher](#)^[8] in honor of his close friend [Charles Frederick Fisher](#)^[9], of Salisbury, who was killed in the Battle of First Manassas. Subsequently, to his consternation, Colonel [William Lamb](#)^[10] deviated from his original design for the fort while Fremont was attending to the movement of troops and supplies. General Robert E. Lee commended the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad as the "lifeline of the Confederacy." Through a Northern friend in Massachusetts Fremont brought into Wilmington from Nassau, through the Union blockade, rails and other needed hardware made in Northern steel mills to keep the road in efficient running order.

After the fall of Fort Fisher, Fremont was arrested on 3 Apr. 1865 by his West Point classmate W. T. Sherman, who offered "a pass to Nassau or a foreign port, but if he remains in our lines he is simply tolerated and must keep close indoors." By an act of the North Carolina legislature on 1 Apr. 1869, the name of the then small town of Nahunta, north of Goldsboro, was changed to [Fremont](#)^[11] in recognition of his service to the Confederacy.

At the end of December 1871, he resigned from the Wilmington and Weldon to assume the same position with the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad, which was subsequently reorganized as the [Carolina Central](#)^[12]. In 1876, he acquired Clarendon Plantation on the Lower [Cape Fear River](#)^[13]. Though now a rice planter he continued his professional work, serving as architect for the North Carolina Asylum for Colored Insane at Goldsboro (1878) and as city surveyor for the city of Wilmington (1880–83). In 1886 he was the U.S. architect at Memphis, Tenn., where he died in May.

On 6 Apr. 1848, Fremont married Mary Elizabeth Langdon, the only daughter of Richard Langdon, a merchant, and Mary Eliza Everitt Langdon, daughter of Dr. Ruben Everitt and sister of Dr. Sterling Bird Everitt, all of Smithville (now Southport). The ceremony took place in the Langdon home where Mary was born, located in Smithville directly opposite Fort Johnston. She was the great-granddaughter of the Reverend Dr. Samuel Langdon, of Hampton Falls, N.H., pastor of the Old North Church, Boston (1747–74), president of Harvard (1774–80), and cartographer of the present Canada-United States boundary. Her grandfather, Samuel's son Paul, was founder and first principal of Fryeburg Academy, Maine, which is still extant.

Fremont and his wife had six children. The first three, Ellen Mae, Richard Langdon, and Mary Lawrence, with their mother also survived the wreck of the *San Francisco*, but the girls died in childhood and Richard died at twenty-three. The younger children were [Sewall Lawrence, Jr.](#)^[14] (1854–1908); Mary Elizabeth (1856–1931), who married John Dancy Battle; and Francis Murray (1858–1900), who married Henrietta Brown Addison. All six children and their parents were buried in Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington.

Fremont was an Episcopalian and a charter member and senior warden of St. John's Church when it was formed from the congregation of St. James' Church, Wilmington. At the time of his death, he was a trustee of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina. A political conservative, he was a strong Union man and cherished the old army but was also a firm believer in states rights ^[15]. He was a stern disciplinarian, "a thorough soldier at heart, . . . his rigid principles of integrity were dreaded by those . . . whose influence was sufficient to remove him from positions where he was a stumbling block . . . to their money-making notions."

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