

Pittsburgh's Fort Pitt Foundry in the Civil War

By Arthur B. Fox

AMONG THE EARLIEST and most successful establishments for casting heavy ordnance in this country was the Fort Pitt Foundry in Pittsburgh. The works turned out 80 percent of the Union Army's heavy cannons and 15 percent of its field artillery during the Civil War.

The foundry was started in downtown Pittsburgh in 1814, but soon moved to what is now the Strip District between 12th and 13th streets, in the area now used as a parking lot across Smallman Street from the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. After war broke out in 1861, the factory underwent a \$240,000 expansion. Between 1861 and 1865, Fort Pitt Foundry produced more than 2,000 pieces of artillery — everything from small mortars to the gargantuan 20-inch Rodman Columbiad cannon. As early as March 1862, the foundry had also produced more than 20,000 rounds of shot, and shells of all calibers.



In addition to the plant's 31 lathes spinning out cannons, a special lathe was constructed in 1864 to produce the Rodman guns, a cannon that was 20 feet long and weighed 58 tons. These cannons could shoot a 1,080-pound projectile nearly five miles. The Army purchased the first one, named after Lieutenant Thomas Rodman, commander of the Allegheny Arsenal, and shipped it to Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, N.Y. It was fired only eight times for demonstration — never in combat, for its destructive power was believed

to be so immense that it would defy verification.

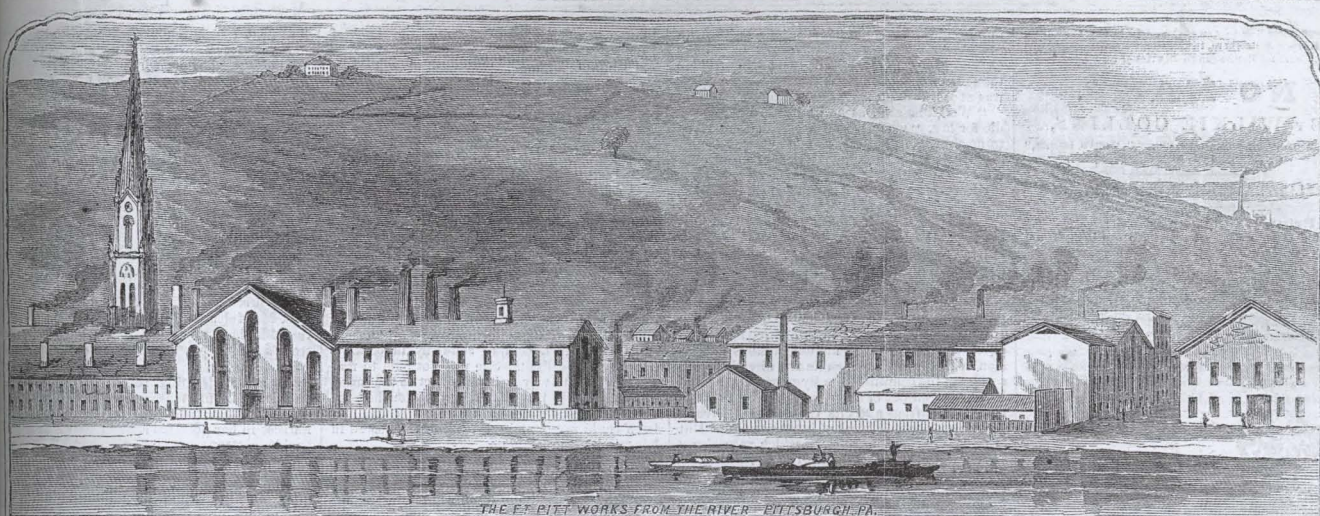
Researchers have now located four more 20-inchers that the foundry cast. The final Rodman, cast in 1869, is preserved at Fort Hancock in Sandy Hook, N.J. ☼

Arthur B. Fox, whose research interests include the Civil War, last wrote for *Pittsburgh History* in the Fall 1998 issue.

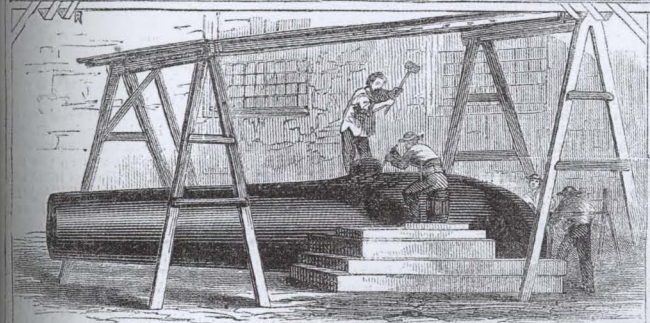
For more on the foundry, see Samuel P. Bates, "The Fort Pitt Works," in *Martial Deeds of Pennsylvania*

(Philadelphia, 1976); "Cannon Manufacture at Pittsburgh," *Scientific American*, March 15, 1863; "A Great Cannon Foundry," *Scientific American*, Sept. 10, 1864; and E. Omstead, W. Stark, & S. Tucker, *The Big Guns: Civil War Siege, Seacoast, and Naval Cannon* (New York, 1997).

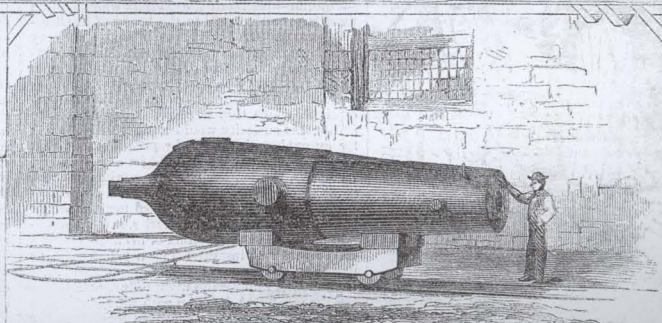
The Fort Pitt Foundry's Rodman gun sits in a Brooklyn park near Fort Hamilton and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. *Opposite page:* The April 23, 1862 *Harper's Weekly* featured the foundry, which was located near the present-day Heinz History Center in the Strip District.



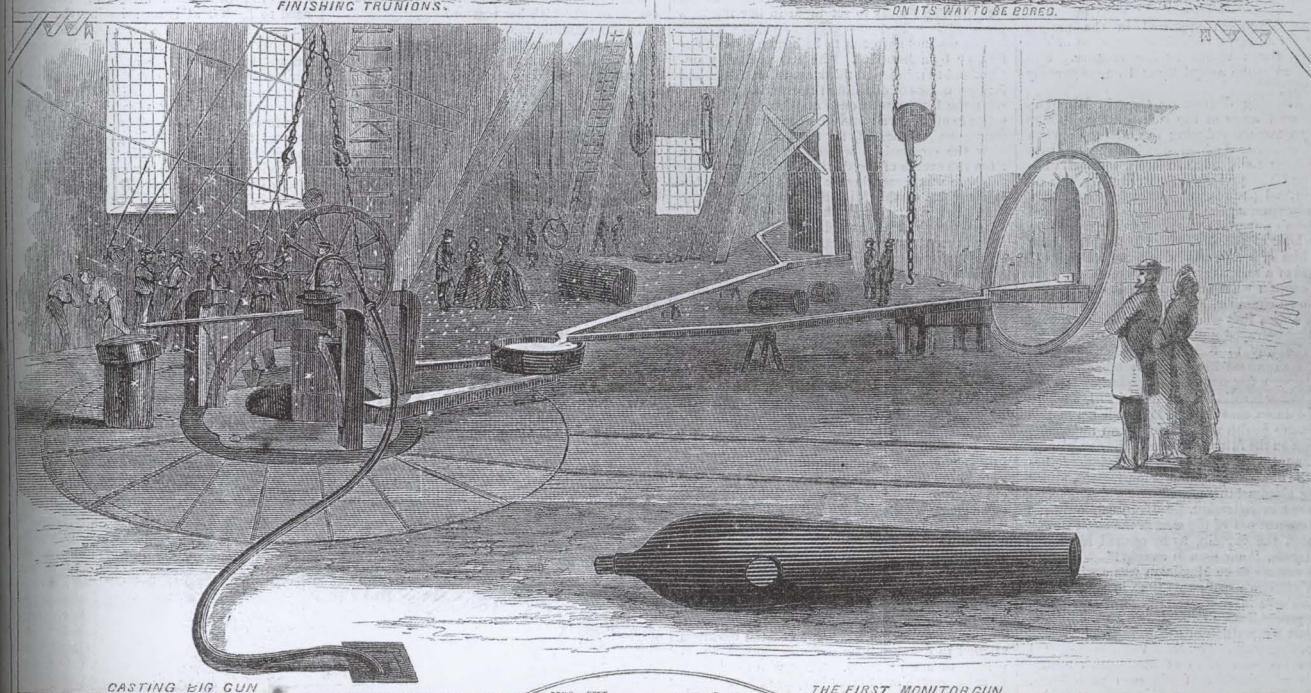
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