



Carnegie's Civil War

Time Capsule

by Jessica Reem and Brian Butko

TWO ORGANIZATIONS IN the Pittsburgh area are asking for help with an unusual Civil War "time capsule" that had gone undisturbed for nearly a half-century but was found recently to be missing many fascinating and valuable items.

The "time capsule" is a room at the Andrew Carnegie Free Library in Carnegie once used by the Captain Thomas Espy Post No. 153 of the Grand Army of the Republic. The GAR acquired the room in 1906 for meetings and to house its growing collection of Civil War objects. Many of the relics were simple — a block of wood from a pine tree on the Spotsylvania battlefield, for instance — while others held more value: rifles, swords, flags, and other objects.

The post closed in 1937, but when library officials unlocked the room in 1984, they discovered many objects missing. The room was soon bolted shut again.

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The "time capsule" room at the Andrew Carnegie Free Library in Carnegie as it appears today. Controversy surrounds the whereabouts of many Civil War items once held there.

In 1992, through efforts of the library and a military reenactment group called Company A, 9th Pennsylvania Reserves, another assessment of the room's riches was made. But a persistent lack of money and attention still plagues the space, endangering the remaining relics.

"The library just does not have the funds or resources to restore the GAR room," said Randy Dunlap, a member of the reenactment group, "but they have always been supportive of the 9th and everything that we have done to help preserve the room."

The group has applied for a historic preservation grant, but the whereabouts of many of the artifacts remains unknown. Equally unclear is who, if anyone, may have had access to the room during the years it was not actively used. What is known is that many of the objects listed in an inventory the GAR post published in 1911 are missing.

Library officials and members of the 9th Pennsylvania Reserves ask that if you, or anyone you know, has any information about the missing pieces, or would like to help with the restoration, call the reserves' 24-hour hotline: (412) 344-2417, access code 9772, or write to the 9th Pennsylvania Reserves, P.O. Box 10402, Pittsburgh, PA 15234.

Listed below are a few of the post's artifacts, with descriptions from the 1911 inventory booklet. Some of the more offbeat items are token remembrances from a simpler time, while others have stories as interesting as the pieces. Seven of the 10 items remain at large.

31—Epaulette

William Mansfield gave this account: "A short time after the battle of Chancellorsville, Va., May, 1863, the slaves from the plantation of my Grandfather... were sent down on the battlefield to gather up clothing and blankets.... [A] slave, Uncle Nelson, belonging to my grandfather, pulled out of the weeds and mud a very full and long broadcloth overcoat.... The epaulettes were taken from the coat a few days later and given to me, and the coat later cut up and made into a suit for my grandfather, the Rev. James. L. Powell, who was a Baptist preacher. The other epaulette, boy like, I cut up and destroyed."

45—Hand Grenade

"Secured at government sale of army supplies in Pittsburg[h], Pa., January 1906.... Used to defend forts and breast work by throwing them by hand among the charging columns."

52—Sword

After Union Lieutenant Samuel Davis was killed in the Battle of Cold Harbor, his sword was shipped to his parents in Pittsburgh. "Noted rebel sympathizers," they refused to pay the \$1 shipping fee, so the express company sold the sword for just that. It was sold again for \$1 twenty years later by W.H.H. Lea, a fellow member of Lieut. Davis' Company I, 112th Regiment, Pa. Veteran Volunteers. The sword was secured from Lea in 1906.

54 — Granite

This piece was chipped off a boulder on Little Round Top in Gettysburg as it was being prepared for a monument to Colonel Vincent and Captain Hazlett, Union officers who both fell dead across the rock.

85 — Pine Wood and Bullet

A planing mill in Richmond, Va., was working wood from the Cold Harbor battlefield into floorboards when a worker (a former Confederate soldier) discovered the bullet. He gave the piece to a co-worker who was a Carnegie resident.

124 — Granite

More granite, this piece chipped off the Pennsylvania monument in the National Cemetery, Andersonville, Ga.

129 — Bone Ring

Bertha Johnston described how she acquired the ring in 1863: "[F]ive Union prisoners of war, who had escaped from the Daleville, Va., prison came to my house on the plantation of my master.... They kept hid in the timbers, and I fed them on corn bread and little meat with butter milk to drink. Before day on the third morning I ferried them over the river. After I had them over, the only thing they had to offer me was this ring, which I refused, as I wanted no pay for my trouble.... I was only anxious to get them away, as it would have been death to me if found helping them."

130 — Hornets' Nest and Canteen

Found in 1900 on a pine branch near the site of Lee's headquarters during the 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg. After the nest was cut down, it was found to be built around a Union canteen. In 1908, it was presented to James Harper, then commander of the Espy Post in Carnegie. The donor also showed Harper the tree and limb the nest was cut from.

138 — Pine Cone

A local veteran retrieved this in 1908 from a tree growing in a shell-made crater on the Petersburg, Va. battlefield.

167 — Sword

Colonel Walton Dwight, 149th Reg., Pa. Volunteer Infantry, was wearing this sword during the first day's fight at Gettysburg when he was injured and moved to a makeshift hospital in the seminary on the east edge of town. When Confederates captured the building, a lieutenant took the sword and belt "and buckled it on himself against the Colonel's protest. On the fourth day of July, the Union troops re-entered the hospital, capturing a few Confederate officers in the building, among others was the Lieutenant with this sword, and as he was escaping through a window, he was shot and killed.... The sword and belt were taken off him and returned to the Colonel on his couch nearby." ☀