

This photograph – unidentified until now – was taken February 22, 1894, on Butler Street between 39th and 40th streets, Lawrenceville. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Oakland Branch.





The Mystery of the ALLEGHENY ARSENAL Cannon Photo

By Tom Powers

Part of the fun of historical research is the detective work. Many times, what takes you down one trail will lead you to something you never would have anticipated.

During my research into the Allegheny Arsenal, I came across an interesting photograph of a cavalry troop in front of the main gate at Butler and 40th streets in Lawrenceville. I had seen this photo in old issues of *The Pittsburgh Press*¹ and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*² but their captions never explained the occasion. What really grabbed my attention was a banner held above the cannon, but the low resolution of the news photos obliterated the words. Considering that someone had taken the time to create their own caption within the photo, there had to be more to the story.

I was thrilled to discover an original print of the photo in the Pennsylvania Department at the Oakland Branch of the Carnegie Library. The photo's index card provided a brief description: "Mexican bronze gun given to the Grand Army Veterans to make into badges—1895." That narrowed things down, but I wanted more.

My colleague Jim Wudarczyk, who has been researching the Arsenal for more than 30 years, offered a possible clue to the photo's identity: a badge commemorating the 1862 Arsenal explosion. However, this badge was dated 1909. Was this the badge the cannon was melted down for? The dates didn't match

and the soldier's uniforms in the photos were not 1909 vintage, but there was also a clue on the back of the badge—the name of the manufacturer: Heeren Brothers.

I checked with Mike Kraus, curator at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum, just two blocks from the library, to ask if the museum had any badges that might match. None—but he did have a bit more information on the badges and the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), the leading Civil War veterans organization.

I went online to my "go-to" site for all things Pittsburgh: "Historic Pittsburgh" (<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh>) administered by the Heinz History Center and the University of Pittsburgh. Most hits for Heeren Brothers gave only the street address

for their factory at Eighth and Penn (now a parking lot). One article, though, contained a brief company history that mentioned the G.A.R.'s 1894 convention in Pittsburgh, and that the Heeren Brothers "struck medals of a brass cannon which was used in the Civil War, and made a small replica that is now on exhibition in Soldier's Memorial Hall."³

When I tried the phrase "GAR 1894," up popped a commemorative program for the G.A.R.'s convention, or "encampment," on September 10, 1894. Searching "Heeren" in the program's 164 pages found Otto Heeren as a member of the G.A.R. finance committee, though no mention of the cannon and badges. But searching for "cannon" led me to page 36—and *the* photograph.

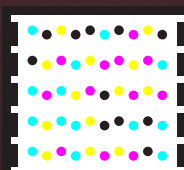
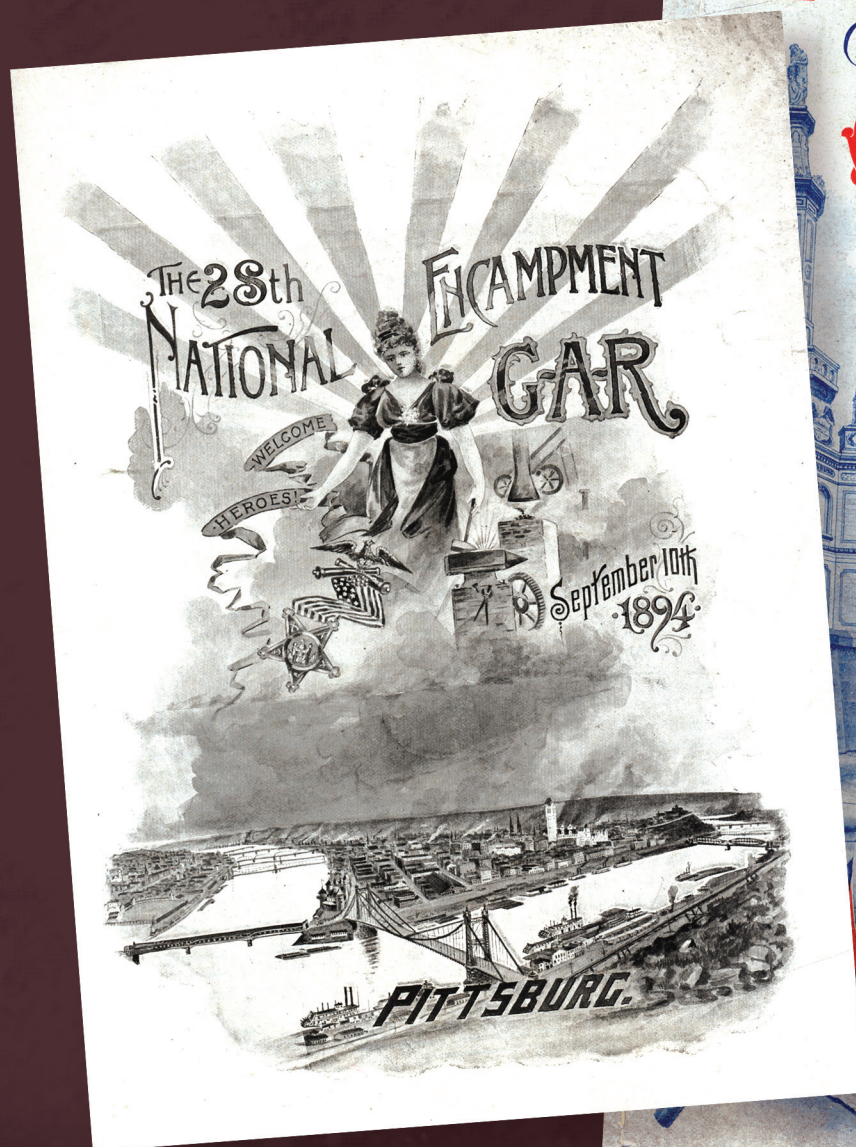
Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum in Oakland is home to the replica cannon made from the metal of the G.A.R.'s "Historic Gun." Curator Mike Kraus poses with the half-size field piece.

Photo by Tom Powers.

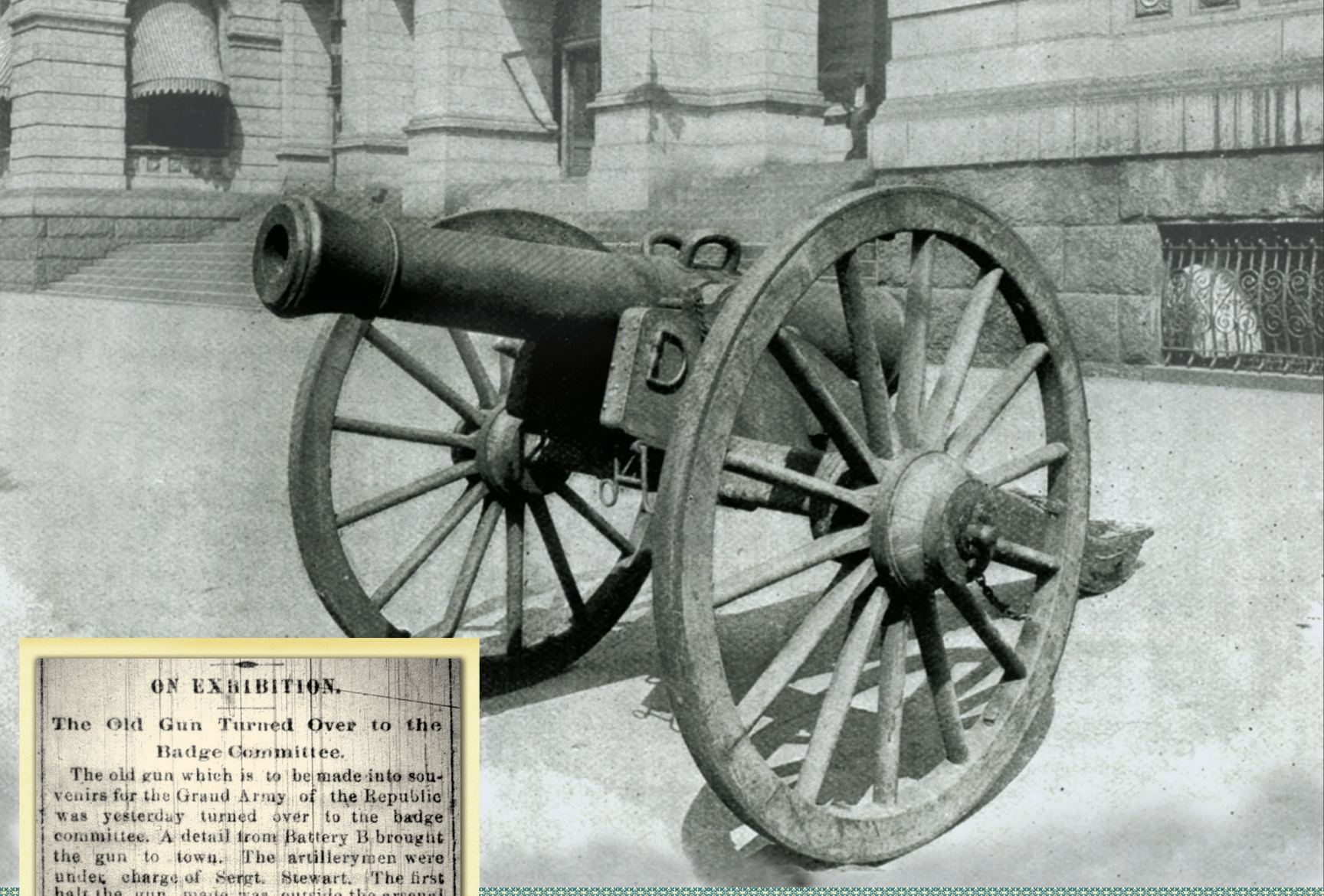


The photo's index card provided a brief description:
 "Mexican bronze gun given to the Grand Army Veterans
 to make into badges—1895."

The cover and inside cover of the 1994 G.A.R. conference program, which carried a story on the "Historic Gun."
 HHC L&A, E462.1 .J5 1894 1.



The Espy Post in the Andrew Carnegie Free Library and Music Hall in Carnegie, Pa., houses one of the most intact Grand Army of the Republic posts in the country. Learn more about the library's Civil War Room, the Grand Army of the Republic, and Captain Thomas Espy Post 153 here.



ON EXHIBITION.

The Old Gun Turned Over to the Badge Committee.

The old gun which is to be made into souvenirs for the Grand Army of the Republic was yesterday turned over to the badge committee. A detail from Battery B brought the gun to town. The artillerymen were under charge of Sergt. Stewart. The first halt the gun made was outside the arsenal gates, where a photograph of the piece was taken. The march to town attracted much attention and the streets were thronged with people. The cannon was paraded over the principal down-town streets and finally placed on exhibition on the front steps of the government building. It will remain there until the badge committee is ready for it.

Above: The G.A.R. program story featured this photo of the original cannon, the "Historic Gun."
HHC L&A, E462.1 .J5 1894 f.

Inset: This clipping from the February 23, 1894, issue of the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* confirms the time and place the "Historic Gun" photo was taken.
Photo by Tom Powers.

According to the program, the cannon in the photo was authorized by the Arsenal's commandant, Col. F.H. Parker, who was to "transfer one of the bronze cannon at said Arsenal, and upon its receipt the [G.A.R.'s] Committee on Badges selected the cannon, a bronze 12-pounder, composed of 90 per cent

copper and 10 per cent tin, weighing 1,756 pounds. It was a muzzle loading piece, and on the left trunnion was the stamp of the founder, N. F. Ames, of Springfield, Mass., and on the other trunnion the date 1842."⁴ That date means the cannon could have been used in the 1846 Mexican War, probably explaining the reference on the library's index card.

When I relayed this information to Mike Kraus, he was thrilled not only because the photo was identified, but also because now we knew that replica cannon was still at Soldiers and Sailors. Kraus said, "I knew it was G.A.R., but did not know where or when it was made."⁵

With the date of the G.A.R. convention in hand, I returned to the Pennsylvania Room and uncovered more information. In 1894, Pittsburgh newspapers had distinct political

leanings but all were unanimous in their excitement about this national event in their locality. Best of all, the September 10, 1894, issue of *The Pittsburgh Times* ran an article titled "The Historic Gun" that provided the date of the cannon photo: "On Washington's Birthday 1894, it was escorted from the arsenal to the post office,⁶ where it stood until taken away to be melted down for use."⁷

Only two Pittsburgh papers covered the cannon's transport, which was on February 22, 1894. It was exciting to read the next day's *The Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*: "Over it [the cannon] was raised a sign bearing this inscription: 'Historic gun donated by United States Government for badges for representatives to the twenty-eighth national encampment G.A.R.'"⁸

Collector Dave Aeberli obtained this unique badge and presentation case made from the "Historic Gun" for the 1894 G.A.R. convention in Pittsburgh. When closed, the case forms the shape of a cross-section of a railway rail. It's engraved with scenes of Pittsburgh factories.

Badge and case courtesy of Dave Aeberli.

The badge itself depicts smoking factories, marching soldiers, the Block House, and the seal of the City of Pittsburgh

Badge and case courtesy of Dave Aeberli.



In that same day's *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, this sentence nailed everything down: "The first halt the gun made was outside the arsenal gates, where a photograph of the piece was taken."⁹

But wait, there's more. Mike Kraus later told me that a collector, Dave Aeberli, had an original 1894 G.A.R. convention badge along with its original presentation case. Inside that case was a small pamphlet explaining that the badge was made from the "Historic Gun." The presentation case was most unusual: it was in the shape of a cross-section of a railway rail. Heeren Brothers went all out for this collectible.

The photograph was identified, the banner understood. Along the way we

learned about—and located—badges and a mini cannon made from the big cannon in the photo. A lot of research doesn't end

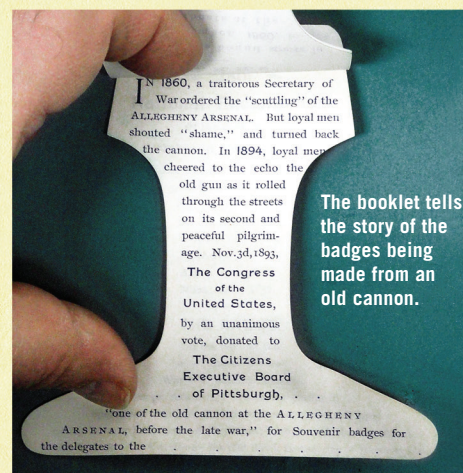
so tidy. But when it does, it's a thrill to connect disparate parts into an interesting story. ☀

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¹ Capozzi, Joseph, "Lost in Time: Deadly Arsenal Blast of 1862 Commemorated," *The Pittsburgh Press*, September 15, 1987.

² Ackerman, Jan, "Civil War Tragedy Here Remains Nearly Forgotten," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 17, 2002.

³ H.W. Correll, *Pioneer Pittsburgh Concerns: Thumb-nail Sketches of Some of the City's Old Organizations* (Pittsburgh: Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, 1929), p. 20.



The booklet tells the story of the badges being made from an old cannon.

⁴ Grand Army of the Republic, Dept. of Pennsylvania, *Proceedings of the Annual Encampment of the Department of Pennsylvania, Grand Army of the Republic* (Pittsburgh: H.D.W. English, 1894) p. 32.

⁵ Michael Kraus (curator, *Soldiers and Sailors*), e-mail to author, July 29, 2011.

⁶ The Pittsburgh Post Office was located on Smithfield Street between Third and Fourth streets at the time of the "Historic Gun" display. That spot is now occupied by One Oxford Center's parking garage.

⁷ "The Historic Gun," *Pittsburgh Times*, September 10, 1894.

⁸ "Observed Very Quietly," *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, February 23, 1894.

⁹ "On Exhibition," *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, February 23, 1894.