

Narrow Escapes: Two Original Accounts of Civil War Shells in the Hands of Carlisle Civilians After the War

Introduction by Barbara Houston

Original narratives recounting the experiences of local citizens during the Confederate occupation of Carlisle in late June and early July of 1863 are always of interest to staff and patrons at CCHS. Our much-used collection of contemporary accounts, particularly those that describe the shelling of the town, is a perennial favorite of students writing history essays, reporters setting up Civil War-related stories, and history buffs in general. It includes such well-known works as J. W. Sullivan's "Boyhood Memories of the Civil War 1861-'65," military memoirs and regimental histories pertaining to the action around Carlisle, and the personal accounts provided by numerous local letter-writers and diarists.

Recently, local Civil War-era narratives of a different sort have come to the attention of staff in the library. These deal with incidents related to the aftermath of the war; specifically, the excitement, curiosity, and extreme danger posed by the unexploded mortar shells that were apparently kept as souvenirs in the years following the war.

The first of the two accounts which follow was written in 1907 by Frank Wetzel of Carlisle, and concerns events that transpired during the war in his boyhood neighborhood, near Carlisle Barracks. It also provides a hair-raising tale of the subsequent (mis)handling, several years later, by a group of young boys and a Civil War veteran who should have known better, of a live shell found by the writer's father following the Confederate occupation in July of 1863.

Because 19th century maps, particularly local ones depicting small towns, were often meticulously labeled with the names of individual householders and business owners, and because Wetzel is a descriptive and engaging narrator, it is possible to follow the action he describes literally block by block, and in some cases nearly house by house.

The second account consists of a small article which appeared in the May 15, 1868 issue of the *Carlisle Herald*. Entitled "A Narrow Escape," it describes a near-catastrophe at the home of William Bentz on South Hanover Street, in which a shell kept as a memento winds up in the family cook stove. The article concludes with these words of wisdom to readers, indicating that incidents of this type were perhaps not unfamiliar:

"Those of our readers who have in their possession any of these Lee *billets* will apply the moral of this occurrence – which, we submit is *not* to experiment with them in hot coal stoves – they won't burn."

Wetzel Narrative

This Shell

was thrown from one of the guns of Fitzhugh Lee on the evening of 1st July 1863, in his attack on Carlisle. It failed to explode.

It was found by George Wetzel, my father, either upon his premises, Corner of Penn and Bedford Streets, or near by, and was buried in the ground for a number of months, and then placed in a rainwater hogshead for many more months with a view of so dampening the powder that it might be opened with safety.

Several years after this it was concluded that the powder would not explode, and a civil war veteran, who lost the four fingers of his left hand at the battle of Antietam, William Fenical, a workman in the wagon-maker shop of my father on North Bedford Street, now occupied by the bakery shop of C. C. Failor, screwed the shell in this vise, and with a wrench took out the screw through which the fuse passed and emptied the powder out on a heap on his work bench, on the right hand side of the front door of the shop. On the bench and by his side was several inquisitive boys, among them myself and my cousin — Robert Smiley. Fenical was smoking a pipe, and with a view of testing the powder, put a pinch of it in his pipe; it exploded and blew the fire out into the pint or more of powder emptied from the shell – the whole exploded and blew Smiley off the bench, burning the eyebrows and hands of Smiley and myself and the moustache and eyebrows of Fenical – at the same time badly scaring the entire party. The shell has been carefully preserved ever since. It is a constant reminder of the perils of that eventful day and night.

My father resided at the Corner of Penn and North Bedford Street and on the Bedford Street side stood his shop.

The approach of the Confederates had caused the evacuation of the Carlisle Barracks, (now the Indian School) and on the afternoon of the 1st of July, the writer, then about thirteen years old, and several other adventurous boys were

investigating (?) the empty barracks, when to their surprise a Union battery of field guns came into the grounds from the rear, by way of Henderson's Mill. We boys run home. This battery came into town and took position on the public square. (Had it remained at the Barracks they would not have been burned.) Early in the evening, as the Union militia were entering the town from the east on the turnpike from Harrisburg, a company of Rebel cavalry could be seen cautiously approaching the Barracks taking the Poor House road from the direction of the York Road. Finding the Barracks unoccupied, one of the Rebels came down toward the spring with a glass and viewed the town. At this time no buildings stood between the home of the writer and the Barracks. The movements of this man were plainly visible from our porch. John Arney, a butcher, came along with his musket and went over to the board fence along the old Moore lot where the Carlisle Shoe Factory now stands and was in the act of leveling his gun to fire at this man when old Andrew Kerr went up to him and prevented him, on the ground that his shooting this man would endanger the women and children of the town. Arney desisted and went on down Bedford Street toward Main where afterwards the citizens engaged the Rebels.

Father, together with several others, had left that morning to see the battle field of Gettysburg, and mother with six small children was alone in the house. I saw the Rebels fire the Barracks. They ran from building to building with torches and soon all were ablaze.

The entrance of Lee to the town was resisted by citizens behind the stone wall of the Cemetery, and piers of the C.V.R.R. bridge on Main Street, and the militia. Trees were felled across the street to prevent cavalry from entering. Soon word was sent over the town to leave within five minutes, as Lee intended to



Civil War mortar shells, collected after the Confederate shelling of Carlisle in July of 1863, similar to those described in these accounts.

Cumberland County Historical Society Museum Collection.

shell and fire the town. Mother had us all huddled in the cellar. With us were Wm. Swarner and John Fenical apprentices in the shop. Grandfather and Grandmother, John Shade and wife, (parents of my mother) lived just on square south of us, at the corner of North and Bedford Streets; Grandmother Shade was ill in bed – we rigged up an old spring wagon with bedding and got her into it. Swarner in the shafts and I pushing we moved her along with many others out the Carlisle Springs road to the farmhouse of Jos. Zeigler, now owned and occupied by Jacob Brubaker. The shells were screaming and cracking over us as we left. So precipitous was our departure that we left the coal oil lamp burning in the house – where it was found the next day by father who hastily returned to town. The floors of the Brubaker house were covered with refugees, worn out



Period map showing households on the north end of town, including several mentioned by Wetzel in his account.
Cumberland County Historical Society, Hamilton Library Map Collection.

and excited by the stirring events of the war and under the full belief that our home would be destroyed. Uncle Levi Zeigler drove toward town to render us service and found us at this place and took us all to his house about five miles from town. Here father found us and took us back to town. This shell is a constant reminder of a night, the most perilous and terrible in our experience. I received this shell the 17th day of February 1907, from my sister Annie, after the recent death of my father, 12 January, 1907, and I write its history on this 24th day of February, 1907.

[signature of Frank Wetzel]

Carlisle Herald
May 15, 1868

A NARROW ESCAPE

On Monday last, the wife and daughter of Mr Wm. Bentz, of our town, made a very imminent escape with their lives. The circumstances were these: During the shelling of Carlisle by that good Democratic Fitz Hugh Lee, a conical shell struck Mr. Bentz's house, but did not explode. This missile, after having been preserved as a memento for several years, was thrown aside, and ultimately found its way into the coal bin. On Monday last, the shell, without being observed, was shoveled into a bucket of coal and from thence carried to the cook stove where the contents of the bucket were thrown upon the fire. For more than a quarter of an hour after this Mrs. B. and her daughter were about the stove preparing dinner, and they had just stepped into another room when a most terrific explosion occurred, shaking the house to its foundation. The only real damage done was to the stove, which was blown into smithereens.

Those of our readers who have in their possession any of these Lee *billets* will apply the moral of this occurrence – which, we submit is *not* to experiment with them in hot coal stoves – they won't burn.

Newspaper account from the May 15, 1868 *Carlisle Herald*,
reporting another incident involving an unexploded Civil war shell.