

A Tale of the Cannon Shell That Killed The First Soldier Of The La Crosse Light Guard

By Frederick Beseler - Special to the La Crosse Tribune

A significant piece of La Crosse's Civil War history thought to be lost for more than 120 years has been found.

The cannon shell that caused the first fatality in the La Crosse Light Guard was recently discovered in the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. For many years, Civil War historians and re-enactors in the La Crosse area believed the Confederate shell had been lost or stolen.

More than just an interesting relic, the shell's history makes it unique among Civil War artifacts.

"We have many artillery shells in our collections," said Jeff Kollath, curator of Programs and Exhibitions at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum. "But this is the only one where we know who fired it, when and where it was fired, who it was fired at, who was wounded and killed by it, who picked it up off the battlefield, who took it to La Crosse, who donated it to the Wisconsin Historical Society and how it came to be at the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum. It is a very complete provenance."

The story of the shell is forever tied to Myron Gardner of Trempealeau, whose life it claimed just before the battle of Bull Run on July 18, 1861.

Gardner was "a native of Indiana, born 1843 and settled in Trempealeau County in the spring of 1857," according to a Galesville Transcript newspaper story published about the time of his death. "Although of moderate education, he took delight in reading the history of his country, and when the present Civil War broke out, his zeal was fired up to defend the Constitution."

By July 1861, the politicians and President Lincoln were anxious for the Union Army to crush the rebellion. Gen. Irwin McDowell organized his army, and on July 16 some 35,000 Union infantry, artillery and cavalry crossed the Potomac River and headed for the railroad center at Manassas, Virginia, just west of Bull Run Creek.

The Second Wisconsin Regiment, with Company B (the La Crosse Light Guard), was part of a brigade commanded by then-Col. William Tecumseh Sherman. La Crosse's Company B boys were led by Capt. Wilson Colwell, who had just been elected the sixth mayor of La Crosse.

Confederate Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard knew that Union forces would have to cross Bull Run creek at various fords and bridges, including at Blackburn's Ford. He assembled his artillery and infantry in strong, defensive positions on the opposite banks of Bull Run, awaiting the approaching Union troops. Among the Confederate artillery units at Blackburn's Ford was the Washington Artillery from New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Galesville Transcript noted, "Gardner was wounded on Friday, the 19th of July, 1861 (actually Thursday, July 18) at about 10 a.m. preceding the great battle (of Bull Run) on Sunday. His company was occupying a hollow near the enemy's artillery batteries, and a rifled cannon ball struck a tree in front, glanced down in the earth and rose again, passing through the right leg of Myron, above the knee. His leg was amputated, but he died about four o'clock the next morning. His last words to his comrades were 'Boys take care of my gun.' His battles were over, and he no longer needed his cherished weapon for he was leaving the scenes of war for his Elysian Fields of eternity."

Thus, Pvt. Gardner's military career lasted exactly two months. He is remembered and honored as the first combat death of the La Crosse Light Guard. Whether his comrades took care of his musket is not known. However, the cannon shell that caused Gardner's demise was recovered from the field and sent home, nearly causing a separate civil war.

Tracing The Shell

Action reports note that the shell came from an Archer cannon of the Washington Artillery from New Orleans. A historic unit in its own right, the Washington Artillery is the only Civil War military unit still existing. It deployed to Baghdad in 2010.

In his 1991 book, "If This is War," Iron Brigade expert Alan D. Gaff writes, "The novelty of a cannonball wounding three of their number at Blackburn's Ford on July 18, 1861, so impressed the soldiers of Capt. Colwell's company that they retrieved the projectile with the intention of sending it to La Crosse as an important, historic relic."

Then things got complicated.

Orderly Sgt. Charles Messervey attached a label giving Marcus Pomeroy, the copperhead editor of the Tri-Weekly Democrat, more information about the shell and then gave the shell to Wisconsin U.S. Rep. John Potter for shipment to La Crosse.

Three days after the engagement at Blackburn's Ford, the Union Army, including La Crosse's Company B, fought in the much larger battle at Bull Run. It was a Union rout.

After the Union retreat back to Washington, D.C., instead of shipping the shell directly to La Crosse, Potter gave the shell to Gen. Rufus King, a West Point graduate and, prior to the war, editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper.

King attached his own letter describing the action at Blackburn's Ford: "Our Second Wisconsin Regiment was about two miles off when the action commenced and was immediately ordered forward. They came up at double quick and, as I hear directly from Gen. Sherman to whose brigade they are attached, formed into line and 'faced the music' with the steadiness of veterans.

"Not an officer or man flinched; but all stood their ground like men, though for the first time under fire. They escaped with the loss of one man killed and three wounded; Myron Gardner, F. L. Hildreth, G. Wenzel, and a fourth whose name I failed to get but whose injuries are not severe."

To further confuse matters, King indicated he would send the shell to the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison but actually sent it to the offices of the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper. Imagine the anger of the Company B boys from La Crosse of when they got their hands on a copy of the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper announcing the shell's arrival and display in Milwaukee.

Sgt. Messervey quickly wrote to Pomeroy back in La Crosse: "From Centreville I gave John F. Potter the rifled cannon ball which killed Gardner at Bull's Run. Potter said he would take it to Washington and send it to you.

Accompanying it was a letter descriptive of the affair. I see by the Milwaukee Sentinel that Potter gave the ball to Gen. King who intends sending it to Madison."

Gaff writes in his book, "The cannonball situation became even more confused when it was learned that Charles C. Bushee, previously a printer with the La Crosse Republican, had wanted it sent to

his former employer. The Republican thereupon began a tirade claiming that the Democrat was trying to steal the ball from its rightful owners. Pomeroy, who had yet to receive the cannonball, accused Congressman Potter of adding 'stealing to his other accomplishments,' claiming that Potter had scraped off the attached label before presenting it to Gen. King.

"While the two La Crosse newspapers traded accusations, the editors of the Milwaukee Sentinel kept the shell safely locked away, despite a plea from the boys to forward it to La Crosse," Gaff continued. "The Light Guard appealed their case directly to Gen. King who 'acted the gentleman he is' and ordered the 'deathly relic' released from custody in the Sentinel's safe."

Coming Home

According to Gaff's research, the shell was eventually carried from Milwaukee to La Crosse by James White. It was displayed at the offices of Pomeroy's Democrat. Pomeroy printed this description: "The ball weighs seven pounds, is cone-shaped, belted with lead deeply marked with the grooves of the cannon, and from contact with the tree from which it glanced on its mission of death, and is an ugly piece of metal to either dodge or have pass through a person."

Gaff notes that the shell was also displayed for a week at George Stanley's Jewelry Store before being returned to the Democrat newspaper.

According to the Wisconsin State Historical Society accession records now attached to the shell, it was apparently given to Gardner's sister, who lived in Arcadia.

In 1883 she gave the shell to the Myron Gardner Post 255 of the Grand Army of the Republic. When that post disbanded in 1889, the shell was donated to the Wisconsin Historical Society, where it languished for the next 100 years. In the 1990s the Historical Society transferred many military artifacts, including the shell, to the new Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

The La Crosse County Historical Society is working with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum to bring the shell to La Crosse in the future for display with the original La Crosse Light Guard flag. Ironically, it is not clear exactly where Myron Gardner rests - perhaps in Virginia, although there is a plot in the Arcadia cemetery that may be his final resting place.

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