Shattered by War: The Huber Family

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Shattered by War: The Huber Family

Abstract
The tale of Sergent Frederick Huber is relatively well known. The young man, fighting at the battle of Fair Oaks, was struck by three rounds, the final a bullet through his breast that quickly sapped him of his life. The Adams Sentinel reported the incident in the early summer days of 1862, underlining Frederick's bravery in the face of the great beyond. "Tell Father," he reportedly said with his dying breath, according to the Sentinel, "I have died for my country." [excerpt]

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The tale of Sergent Frederick Huber is relatively well known. The young man, fighting at the battle of Fair Oaks, was struck by three rounds, the final a bullet through his breast that quickly sapped him of his life. The Adams Sentinel reported the incident in the early summer days of 1862, underlining Frederick's bravery in the face of the great beyond. "Tell Father," he reportedly said with his dying breath, according to the Sentinel, "I have died for my country."

But who was that father?

Dr. Henry S. Huber was 48-years-old as his son lay dying in some godforsaken field in Virginia. Up to this point, Huber's life had been relatively uneventful. Most of his medical career he'd spent in Gettysburg, moving to Southern Pennsylvania after a nasty bout of malaria made him leave his practice in Chicago. Aside from his practice, the Doctor also taught physiology at Pennsylvania College, just north of his home on Chambersburg Street.

"As a physician," a former student later recalled, "Dr. Huber displayed a sound judgement in the diagnosis of disease, and in the application of remedies was bold and very successful." But his skill went beyond treating the flu. "As a surgeon he ranked above mediocrity, was dextrous with the use of the knife and operated with skill."

Henry knew what the inner workings of a human body looked like. He knew what happened when you poked and prodded at an organ, when you excised tissue or pierced muscle.

And reading the account of his son's wounds, the bullet piercing through his breast, the doctor-father must have instantly known the pain, known the dread, felt the blood trickling from his son's chest at that long and lonely distance. He didn't need to be told that Frederick had died; his mind would have filled in that gap long before he read the words.
That was May of 1862. Dr. Henry Huber made the long trek to the outskirts of Richmond. He stood in the destroyed hell that is a battlefield after war. He saw the carnage, saw the outcomes of the horror of this war. Then he exhumed his son’s battered corpse and saw the true depth of that horror.

How many corpses had he examined like this before? And yet this one was so different. Not a cadaver from a medical school classroom, but the shattered form of the son you loved so deeply. The son who won your pride as he grew to manhood. The son who graduated from the college where you teach human physiology and biology. The son you cradled in your arms when he was tiny. This wasn't just any body, this was Henry's Frederick.

The precious coffin was carted home and placed in Evergreen Cemetery, under a smart looking tombstone and with much local honor.

Time passed. And then the horror of war that seemed destined to remain in Virginia bled into Pennsylvania. And war came to Gettysburg.

Sometime during the fighting, Frederick Huber's eternal slumber on Cemetery Hill was disturbed. A shell plowed through his tombstone, cracking the marble artwork and wiping his name from the marker. Frederick Huber was once again no more. But he felt no terror. He felt no sorrow. He felt nothing when his epitaph was truncated from, "Frederick A. Huber," to simply, "Son of Dr. H.S. & P.J. Huber."

But where one shell instilled no terror, another would strike nothing but.

On the southeastern corner of Chambersburg and Washington Streets, the living Huber Family cowered. Outside was the hell which had taken Frederick, now come for them too. And then, as the chaos reigned in those first frantic hours of battle of July 1st, their home itself was pierced. A shell entered the third floor, crashing through the front and side walls of the home. Glass rained down as a window frame racked under the force of the speeding missile. A shutter was slammed to pieces and destroyed. Gravity pulled a few bricks down from their cemented perches.

Dust settled. The house still stood, a small scar at its roofline that would need to be fixed in the weeks after two armies finally left this southern Pennsylvania town. The damage amounted to $25. With new bricks, new window, new shutter, nary a scar remained to show where the shell had hit.

And still, what scars did that small speeding hunk of iron leave behind? What wounds were left that even Dr. Henry S. Huber, the talented physician and surgeon, could never heal even with his best efforts? Some wounds last forever.