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Confederates in the Dorm: Hidden In Plain Sight

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Confederates in the Dorm: Hidden In Plain Sight

Abstract

You can imagine the terror in the young 21-year-old's eyes as he realized who was charging down the Cashtown Pike into Gettysburg on the 26th of June. You can feel the chill that might have run down his spine as he realized that the rebel army he had deserted, the one he had escaped by running to the Federal lines, was crashing down upon him again. And the deserter's fate during this war was simple: execution. [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Confederates in the Dorm: Hidden In Plain Sight

THURSDAY, MARCH 8, 2012

You can imagine the terror in the young 21-year-old's eyes as he realized who was charging down the Cashtown Pike into Gettysburg on the 26th of June. You can feel the chill that might have run down his spine as he realized that the rebel army he had deserted, the one he had escaped by running to the Federal lines, was crashing down upon him again. And the deserter's fate during this war was simple: execution.

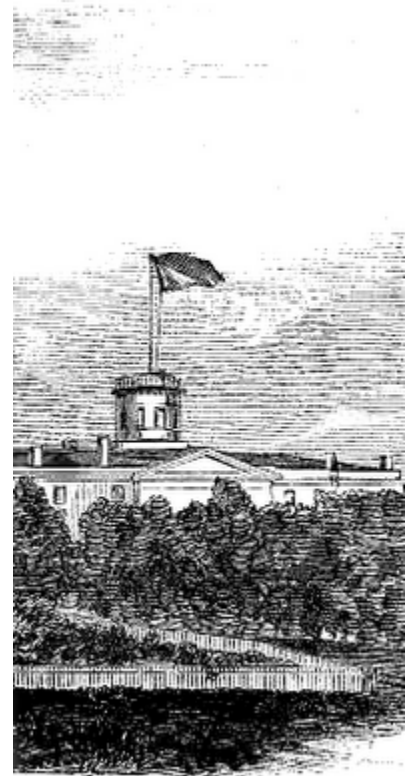
Last week I cancelled office hours. Cancelled might be a strong term: I delayed them from 7:45pm to 9:00pm. I know, it broke the solemn vow of my professorial duties. But I left a nice note on the office door and headed to Special Collections on the fourth floor of Musselman Library.

[Gettysburg College's Special Collections](#) never ceases to amaze me. Every time I wander through the doors on some wild lead or another, I find the most dumbfounding artifacts of a past long forgotten. Wednesday was no different.

Students living within the main edifice in 1863 at Pennsylvania College were required to be back in bed by a certain time each night. The college's tutor, Mathias Richards, performed bed checks. He kept meticulous notes on who was tardy, who was absent and who caused particular trouble in what otherwise were supposed to be quiet halls.

Who has looked at the Record of Absences from rooms or building for Pennsylvania College in 1863 since Mathias Richards penciled in the notes in tight block letters? I would wager very few eyes, more than likely a few interns writing a catalog record or two. Other than that, I would guess no one has spent much more than a moment to glance at the register.

Richards, with many of his classmates, joined the local company of volunteer militia bound for Harrisburg to defend the Commonwealth against the rebel invasion. The register became haphazard after his absence, with a long column of ditto'd observations that a majority of the college left on the 17th of June, either to fight or to flee. Of the 102 college and preparatory students who lived in the college edifice, only 19 students remained on campus after June 17th - 5 Seniors, 3 Juniors, 1 Sophomore, 1 Freshman, 2 Partial course and 7 Preparatory students. That's a scant 16% of the whole



By late June 1863, Penn Hall had all but completely emptied of students. / Harpers Weekly 22 June 63

student body still living within Pennsylvania Hall.

One of those who remained behind was a partial course student named Arthur Markell. While his classmates evacuated to the safety of their homes, and other joined the Pennsylvania Militia, Markell found himself stranded. His family home in Winchester, Virginia was very much inaccessible, behind Confederate lines. Even if he could have made it to his family in the Shenandoah Valley, his welcome mightn't have been so warm. Arthur Markell was on the lam. He had broken a sacred vow. He was a wanted man.

First Lieutenant Arthur Markell had deserted from the 5th Virginia Infantry in March of 1862.



For one Confederate, the watchful gaze of Mercury became home for a short respite from war.

In 1861, as war was looming on the horizon and Virginia's fate was yet to be decided, Arthur Markell was a student at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. But the Old Dominion's [hesitant decision to leave the Union](#) would change that quickly. The young student returned home, and was instructed to join up with his local militia company at Harpers Ferry. He eventually found himself coerced into service in the 5th Virginia Infantry, Company A.

Arthur Markell ran from the army in March of 1862. He made his way between the lines, surrendering to General Banks at Charlestown, Va. He was sent to the Old Capitol Prison in Washington City, where he let fly every piece of information he had on where the Confederate forces were situated in the Valley. After signing an oath of allegiance, he was let go.

Markell wandered northward, ultimately ending up in Gettysburg just two months after he had skedaddled from the rebels near Winchester. Pennsylvania College, like Roanoke College, was a Lutheran college. Markell would have fit in perfectly among the Pennsylvanians and Marylanders who dominated the school's population. He settled down to his studies once again.

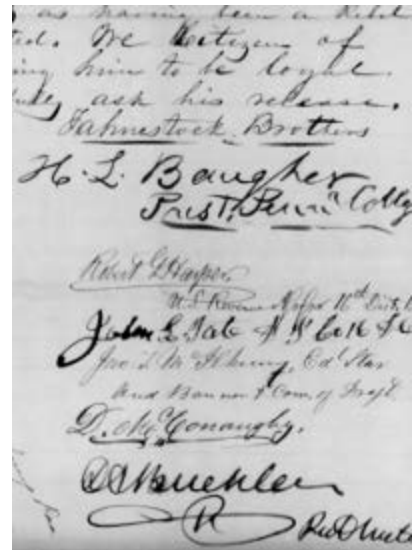
Until June of 1863, he was safe. But as soon as Markell got wind that Confederates were setting their sights on Gettysburg, he headed south. His friends in town had begged him, "to seek a place of safety," from the oncoming tide of Confederates. If Markell was caught, he clearly knew his fate. Deserters were low scum in the Civil War. Traitors who revealed secrets to the enemy were doubly vile. Markell was running for his life. The Federal army, he wagered, was his best bet for safety. Down the Emmitsburg Road he ran, until he was stopped by a curious officer. When questioned, the young, naive and scared man more than likely told the truth. He was a Confederate deserter seeking protection from his own former countrymen. The officer arrested him.

Markell found himself once again imprisoned, this time held at Fort McHenry in Baltimore. He begged the Commander of the Middle Military District General Robert Schenck for his release, explaining his story in a detailed letter. Many prominent citizens of Gettysburg banded together and vouched for Markell's loyalty in their own letter to General Schenck. The young man was finally released in early August after signing another oath of allegiance. He never returned to complete his studies in Gettysburg. Pennsylvania College's rebel deserter had escaped once again, this time from a

much more awkward fate than marching and fighting. He had escaped both the executioner's bullet and the Federal prison.

My biggest question is how this all went undiscovered for so long. The Battle of Gettysburg, out of every topic within the Civil War, has had more eyes passing over more documents in more archives than any other. The gaps within the scholarship though, particularly in the civilian end of the story, are huge. Not simply huge, they are drive-a-Mack-truck-through-them huge. It is frightening how little even some of the experts on this field know about the citizens who lived here before it became a battlefield.

This whole tale emerged from one line in the attendance register buried away in Special Collections. Markell, unlike the rest of his fellow students who, the ledger explains, "Left after 17th," is instead listed as, "Left as Refugee." Those three words were a tiny thread. They were tantalizing words waiting to be pulled. Am I weird that these types of dangling threads nag at the back of my skull until I yank them and run the lead to ground? Am I odd that this type of thing keeps me up culling databases until 2am on a Saturday night, bleary-eyed and hunched over my laptop's glowing screen as I marvel at some long-dead deserter's paper trail?



Prominent citizens vouched for Markell, including Robert Harper, David McConaughy & College President Henry Louis Baugher.

Jake and I have a mutual friend, a colleague in the world of public history. Invariably when we're around her we start spouting random historical tales we've recently run across in our research. Invariably, her response is the same: "Where do you guys find this stuff? Don't you have a life?"

Yes, yes I do have a life. But I also have an unquenchable thirst for discovery. I want to see more new things, touch more undiscovered documents, see more pieces of the 'true cross' that no one has ever laid eyes on before. I have an insatiable curiosity for historical tidbits. I think that curiosity is the prime tool for any historian to possess. I want to be the first person to the pinnacle of this or that historical mountain. But I want to climb that mountain not to brag that I was first, but simply to see how weird and wild the view is from up there.