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Fruit of a Vile Tree: The Eshelman Family's War

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Fruit of a Vile Tree: The Eshelman Family's War

Abstract

Frederick Eshelman's father wasn't home. He was in Petersburg, the chilly and treacherous trenches stretching to his right and left as far as the imagination might take them. That's where the danger was. That's where war lived. [*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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Fruit of a Vile Tree: The Eshelman Family's War

THURSDAY, JANUARY 15, 2015

Frederick Eshelman's father wasn't home. He was in Petersburg, the chilly and treacherous trenches stretching to his right and left as far as the imagination might take them. That's where the danger was. That's where war lived.

And in Fairfield, Pennsylvania, the war was about as far away as it could be. Tides of battle had lapped at the borough and the county, men had trampled the streets and horses had broken into a gallop on the way toward the gap at Monterey Pass. But it was January now and the muddy roads were crispy and quiet.

Catherine Eshelman was now a single mother. Her husband Hiram was alive and well, but she had to raise her passel of children without his help, without his influence. Frederick was 7. His sister Sarah was a year older. His older brothers John and William were about 9 and 11. Though Catherine had Mary, her daughter of about 15, to rely on, keeping watch over so mane children in such a lonely house must have been tough.

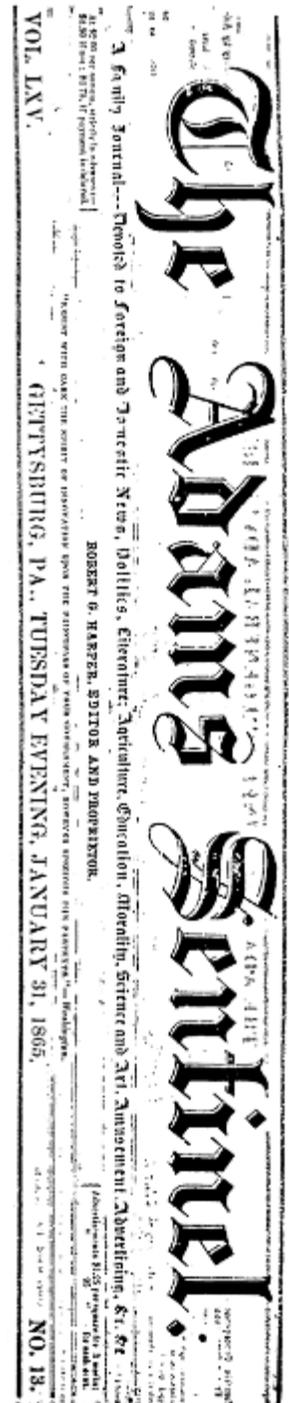
Every house in Adams County had the weird and odd relics of war. Some places they were hunks of iron, pieces of shells lined along a mantle. Others had swords hung on walls, abandoned by officers long ago captured and imprisoned.

And some homes, like the Eshelman's, had even more awkward souvenirs of war: rusting and broken gun barrels.

One of Frederick's brothers, playing with the weapon-turned-toy, shoved the butt of the barrel into the coals of the wood stove. He grabbed his little brother and told the 7-year-old to listen to the tube.

The sounds of gunfire were old hat to Hiram Eshelman in the trenches at Petersburg. By 1865, most soldiers were no longer phased by rifles, cannon and explosions. Even his scant few months since September in the ranks likely had deadened Hiram's ears to that sound.

But Catherine, in peaceful Fairfield, heard that sound anew. She heard that jarring bang and that sickening splatter of what once was her beloved son's skull burst to pieces. On the 17th of January, 1865, a long forgotten bullet from the grand invasion of Pennsylvania finally found its mark in a 7-year-old boy's brain, another



casualty of the battles near Gettysburg.

Hiram Eshelman marched home a few months later. War had taken from the family, but not in a way anyone might have expected.

A Sad Accident.
We are called upon to record another sad and fatal accident from the careless use of fire-arms. On Tuesday week, two little boys, children of Mr. HIRAM ESHELMAN, of Fairfield, were playing with the barrel of a gun, which had been picked up after the army left that place. The children, it seems, were in a room, and while the elder of the two placed the breech of the barrel in the stove, he called on his little brother to put his ear to the other end "to hear something," when the gun discharged, the contents passing through the head of the boy, and causing almost instant death.— The lad was about 7 years old, and what adds to the sadness of the affair, is the fact that his father is absent in the army. We do not know when we have been called upon to record an accident so distressing. It is another sad warning against the danger of handling shells and cast away guns, which are daily picked up on the battle field.—*Star.*