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# Cannons and Columns: The Phoenix Iron Company and the Civil War

Laurel J. Wilson  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Cannons and Columns: The Phoenix Iron Company and the Civil War

## **Abstract**

Anyone who has visited a Civil War battlefield is familiar with the sight of artillery pieces dotting the landscape, marking the places where artillery units were positioned on the field. Gettysburg National Military Park has one of the largest and most diverse collections of these now silent sentinels, ranging from bronze Napoleons to breech-loading Whitworth rifled guns. One of the most common types of cannon found at Gettysburg is the 3-inch Ordnance rifle. The Ordnance rifle is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which are its connections to Phoenix Iron Company of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

*[excerpt]*

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Gettysburg College, cannons

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### **Cannons and Columns: The Phoenix Iron Company and the Civil War**

By *Laurel Wilson '19*

Anyone who has visited a Civil War battlefield is familiar with the sight of artillery pieces dotting the landscape, marking the places where artillery units were positioned on the field. Gettysburg National Military Park has one of the largest and most diverse collections of these now silent sentinels, ranging from bronze Napoleons to breech-loading Whitworth rifled guns. One of the most common types of cannon found at Gettysburg is the 3-inch Ordnance rifle. The Ordnance rifle is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which are its connections to Phoenix Iron Company of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.



A 3-inch Ordnance rifle at Gettysburg National Military Park. Photo by Hal Jespersen via Wikimedia Commons.

John Griffen was superintendent of Safe Harbor Iron Works, which was a subsidiary of Phoenix Iron Company. He designed the first "Griffen Gun" in 1854, which would later evolve into the 3-inch Ordnance rifle. Griffen's production method for creating wrought iron cannon tubes resulted in extremely strong and durable artillery pieces. His method, which was improved upon and perfected by Samuel Reeves of Phoenix Iron Company, was able to overcome the problems associated with the brittleness of iron, a feat that other manufacturers of iron cannon tubes at the time were unable to replicate.

Ordnance rifles became one of the three most common types of cannon used during the Civil War, along with 12-pounder Napoleons and 10-pounder Parrot rifles. They quickly became a favorite of artillerymen due to their reputation for accuracy and safety. Unlike their cheaper counterpart, the Parrot rifle, the Ordnance rifle did not have a reputation for bursting. There is just one recorded instance of a 3-inch Ordnance rifle bursting its muzzle off, which occurred while firing a double load of canister at the Battle of the Wilderness.

The success of the 3-inch Ordnance rifle during the Civil War brought plenty of good publicity to the Phoenix Iron Company. After the war, the company continued to grow and flourish, becoming the largest employer in Chester County, PA by the late 1800s. The company's postwar success was largely due to the production and sale of Phoenix Columns, which were invented by Samuel Reeves in 1862. The Phoenix Column proved to have a wide variety of structural applications and was used to build everything from bridges to buildings, helping American cities grow to greater heights.

The industrial side of Civil War history is not explored anywhere near as frequently as it likely should be, despite the incredibly vast overall impact that industrialization had on the outcome of the war. The story of the Phoenix Iron Company is an excellent example of how the industrial capability of the northern states helped the Union to achieve victory in the war. The 3-inch Ordnance rifle provides a link between the battlefields of the Civil War and the industrial and technological advances that were occurring at the time.

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