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A Gun With a Story: Waller Patton's Civil War Pistol

Laurel J. Wilson
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Musselman Library Special Collections is home to a wide variety of artifacts, including a rather impressive number of Civil War era items. One Civil War artifact, the Patton Pistol, stands out from the rest by virtue of the story attached to it. The 1861 Navy Colt revolver originally belonged to Waller Tazewell Patton, who was the great uncle of General George S. Patton Jr. of WWII fame.

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Gun With a Story: Waller Patton's Civil War Pistol

By [Laurel Wilson '19](#)

Musselman Library Special Collections is home to a wide variety of artifacts, including a rather impressive number of Civil War era items. One Civil War artifact, the Patton Pistol, stands out from the rest by virtue of the story attached to it. The 1861 Navy Colt revolver originally belonged to Waller Tazewell Patton, who was the great uncle of General George S. Patton Jr. of WWII fame.



The 1861 Colt Navy Revolver owned by Confederate Colonel Waller T. Patton and donated to Gettysburg College Special Collections by James D. Patton '13. Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections.

Waller T. Patton was a Colonel in the 7th Virginia Regiment of the Army of Northern Virginia. He was mortally wounded during Pickett's Charge on July 3rd, 1863, when a piece of artillery shrapnel removed much of his jaw. He was brought to the Pennsylvania College Hospital (now known as Pennsylvania Hall at Gettysburg College), where he eventually died on July 21, 1863.

While in the hospital, Waller Patton's wounds prevented him from speaking. This forced him to communicate by writing on a slate with chalk instead. He also had to be kept propped upright so that he would not suffocate. Like many mortally wounded soldiers who knew they would not be making it home to their families again, Waller Patton wrote letters home expressing his thoughts and final wishes. In some of these letters, he allegedly made his peace with God, expressed his love for his mother and proclaimed his undying loyalty to the Confederate cause. He also expressed his regret that he was dying in Pennsylvania, which he apparently believed to be "foreign land."



Waller T. Patton. Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

After Waller Patton died, his body was embalmed and sent south at the request of his family and was eventually interred at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. His pistol was sent home to his family as a memento of him, which was in keeping with common practices at the time. The personal effects of dead and dying soldiers that were sent home to families often took on a special role within the process of mourning for the soldier's family. Objects such as the pistol played heavily into mourning culture and ideas of the so-called "good death" during the war. The objects provided a physical link to the soldier and his last moments on earth, something that many families cherished as they were usually unable to physically be there in person as the soldier was dying.

After the war, many of these objects became cherished family heirloom pieces that helped remind families of the personal cost the war had to their family. Waller Patton's pistol became such an heirloom piece, as it was passed down through the family and

became a key piece in the arms collection of General George S. Patton Jr. The pistol was eventually donated to Special Collections at Gettysburg College as a gift of James D. Patton, who graduated from Gettysburg College in 2013.

Sources:

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