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The “Bloody Books” of Special Collections

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The “Bloody Books” of Special Collections

Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

Gettysburg College’s Special Collections and College Archives is home to a wide variety of incredible items, including many items that are related to the Civil War and the Battle of Gettysburg. Of the Battle of Gettysburg related items in the collection, few demonstrate just how intimately the battle affected the College better than the so-called “Bloody Books.” These books, whose presence in Gettysburg predated 1863, remained in the College’s libraries during the battle and bore witness to the College’s transformation into a Confederate field hospital in the aftermath of the fighting on July 1st. They have remained in the College’s possession ever since, and contain reminders of the battle within their pages to this day. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

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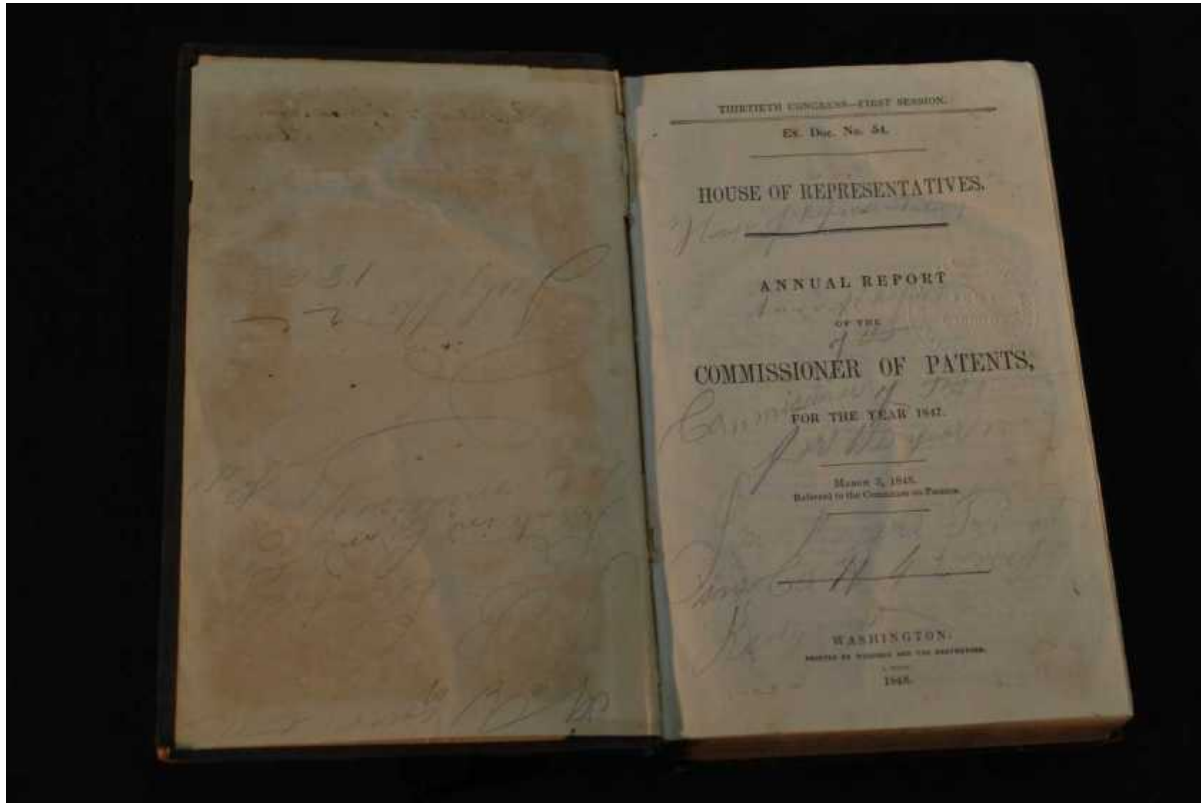
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The “Bloody Books” of Special Collections

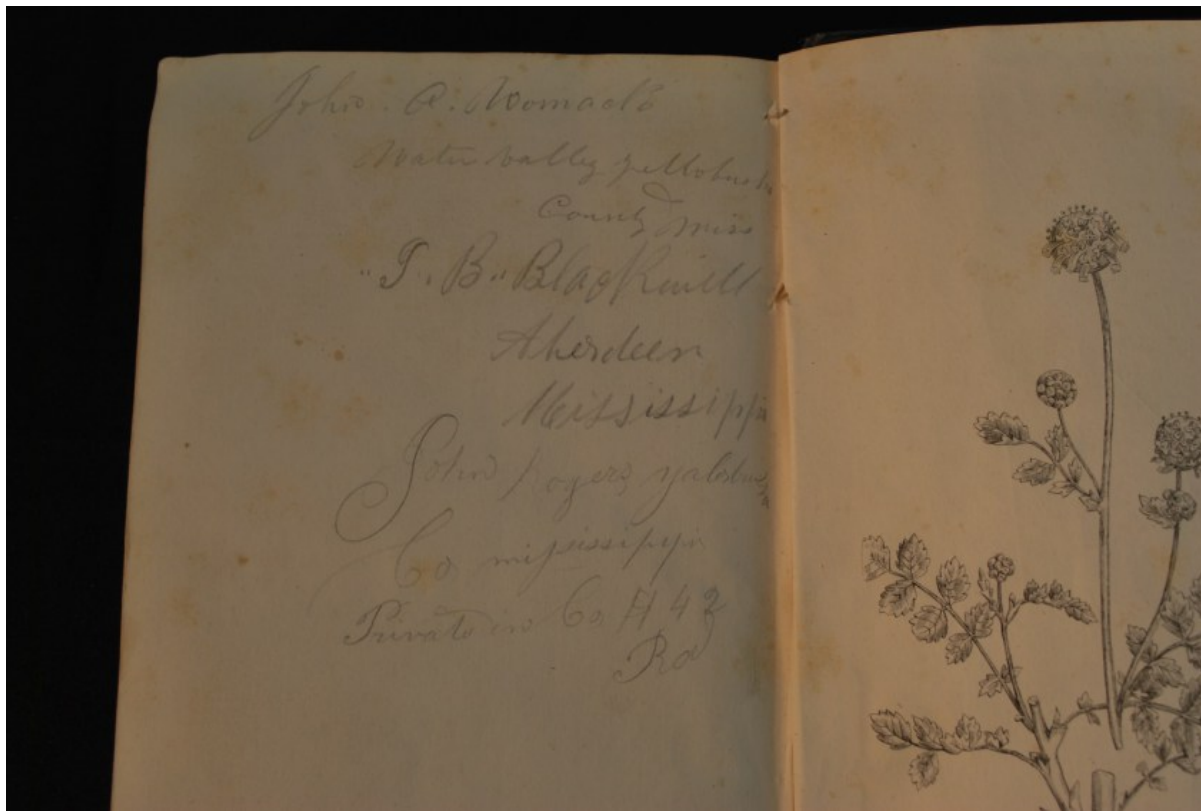
By Laurel Wilson '19

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Gettysburg College’s Special Collections and College Archives is home to a wide variety of incredible items, including many items that are related to the Civil War and the Battle of Gettysburg. Of the Battle of Gettysburg related items in the collection, few demonstrate just how intimately the battle affected the College better than the so-called “Bloody Books.” These books, whose presence in Gettysburg predated 1863, remained in the College’s libraries during the battle and bore witness to the College’s transformation into a Confederate field hospital in the aftermath of the fighting on July 1st. They have remained in the College’s possession ever since, and contain reminders of the battle within their pages to this day.

At the time of the battle, the College had three relatively small libraries located on the second floor of the main College building, now known as Pennsylvania Hall. In addition to the main college library, the two student literary societies, the Phrenakosmian and Philomathaeon, each had their own libraries as well. All three of these libraries would be pressed into service as hospital rooms, which may have led to some of the books in their collections becoming bloody or otherwise damaged. One relatively early reference to bloody library books can be found in E.S. Breidenbaugh's *The Pennsylvania College Book* (1882), which states: "Many blood-soaked volumes in the Library still remind of the use to which it was put." Later publications seem to have taken this description of "blood-soaked volumes" in the College library and run with it, as A. R. Wentz did in his book, *History of the Gettysburg Theological Seminary* (1926). Wentz details: "The southern troops were very indignant at 'the Dutchmen' for having shot down so many of their men. As if to express their indignation, they carried their wounded into the library room of the College building, supported the heads of some of them with volumes of old German theologians, whose pages thus were sealed together by the blood that flowed from the hearts of dying heroes."



Signatures in 1847 Patent Office Report book. Photo courtesy Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.

As it pertains to the books in Special Collections, the nickname "Bloody Book" is admittedly a slight misnomer. Unlike the books so colorfully described by Wentz and Breidenbaugh, the books that the nickname currently refers to do not, to the knowledge of Special Collections staff, actually contain any bloodstains. Instead, these books contain the signatures and notes of wounded men who were likely trying to stave off the

boredom that came with being stuck in the hospital. There are two books in Special Collections that have such notes and signatures either within their pages or scratched into their covers. The more well-known and well-documented of the two books is an 1847 Patent Office Report from the Philomathean Society library. It contains the signatures of three Confederate soldiers from 42nd Mississippi: J.B. Blackwell, Co. E., John Rogers, Co. H, and John A Womack, Co. H.

The other book, a 1768 copy of *Letters from the Marchioness de Sevigne*, was also in the Philomathean Society Library during and after the battle. It was discovered recently by Special Collections' book conservator, who noticed that there were names and notes scratched into the cover. The names and notes are a bit difficult to make out, but one of the notes reads fairly clearly: "H. Campbell is Dead." H. Campbell may refer to Harmon Campbell, a soldier from the 23rd North Carolina who was wounded in the back, thigh, and head on July 1st and died on July 13th. The 23rd NC was virtually decimated on nearby Oak Ridge, so it is entirely likely that Campbell was brought to the College hospital to be treated for his wounds, from which he later died.



The second "Bloody Book," bearing the notation "H. Campbell is dead." Photo courtesy Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.

The books that remained in the College's libraries during the battle would bear witness to the battle's bloody aftermath as the College was transformed into a makeshift hospital. It is for this reason that they have earned the nickname "Bloody Books," even if they are not literally bloody. These books are currently used to teach students about the

role of the College as a hospital and to give insight into what it would have been like for the wounded soldiers who were sent there. They show in a very tangible way just how the history of the Battle of Gettysburg and the history of Gettysburg College intersect and intertwine with each other, making them an incredibly valuable resource for students and researchers interested in exploring those connections.

Sources:

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