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“Pretty Well Swiss Cheese”: The Innis House and the Battle Of Fredericksburg

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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.

A sea of houses and alleys covers the bloody path taken by seven Union divisions during the Battle of Fredericksburg. Nevertheless, a silent witness remains before the Sunken Road: the Innis House, one of two wartime properties owned by Martha Stephens is still standing today. It is not an impressive structure at first glance. The building stands at only one-and-a-half stories tall and consists of three rooms. The wall between the former parlor and the entryway, however, proudly bears its scars: more than 58 bullet holes. This bullet-riddled wall presents a clear message of the horrors of the Civil War while also revealing a layered narrative of a home and the civilians and soldiers who intersected around it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

[“Pretty Well Swiss Cheese”: The Innis House and the Battle Of Fredericksburg](#)

By [Zachary Wesley '20](#)

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Built between 1856 and 1861, the simple structure sat on the outskirts of the town of Fredericksburg, and its owner was just as much on the edge of society as the home. Martha Stephens was – and is – mysterious. She lived in the long-gone Stephens House next door. Intriguingly she owned the two houses under different names, which popular lore attributes to an attempt to avoid the loss of her entire property in a lawsuit (lawsuits being a relatively frequent occurrence for Stephens). Rumors swirled that she ran an illegal bar or brothel out of her home and that she took a formerly enslaved man as a lover later in life. Mrs. Stephens did not fit into the ideals of traditional Southern womanhood. Nevertheless, perhaps in an effort to warrant inclusion in this group, she claimed that she tended to wounded soldiers during the Battle of Fredericksburg, even though no Confederate soldiers remembered her presence.

The Innis House’s renters wisely vacated the premises before the fighting started. The home has no cellar and, as the structure would soon bear witness, would not offer sufficient protection from the hail of lead that crashed into it. Confederate sharpshooters occupied the upper half-story of the structure during the battle, leaving behind graffiti and drawing ample fire from frustrated Union soldiers. However, the bullet holes in the parlor wall appear at virtually every angle, including from behind, revealing that Confederate soldiers on Marye’s Heights and in the Sunken Road also fired into the home. Friendly fire into the Sunken Road, and thus the Innis House,

presented a serious problem for Confederates throughout the battle – despite the assumption that the Confederate forces were perfectly protected behind the stone wall. The home's walls – inside and out – were pretty well swiss cheese once the fighting stopped.



This picture of the parlor wall of the Innis House shows the bullet holes that still scar it. These were made by just some of the thousands of bullets that flew through the air each minute during the Battle of Fredericksburg. Photo courtesy Zach Wesley.

The Innis House continued in its pre-battle capacity as a private residence into the early 1970s, when the National Park Service acquired the property. After peeling back layers of wallpaper from the parlor wall, park personnel encountered far more bullet holes than they expected. Even today, the number of bullet holes (and one Minie ball that remains in a ceiling joist) elicits amazement and shock from visitors. Although the damage of war is an essential piece of the home's story, the full picture is far richer, weaving together the lives and experiences of people both on the fringes and in the mainstream of the Civil War Era South. Just as to find more bullet holes, all one must do is peel back the layers to reveal them, the same is true for the stories the house can tell.

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