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## The Remnants of the Crater

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# The Remnants of the Crater

## **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.*

In the final years of the Civil War, the Army of the Potomac laid siege to Petersburg, Virginia. Petersburg was the center of supply for both the city of Richmond and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and Grant understood that he could cripple the Confederate army by capturing the city. He hoped to end the battle quickly, but through a series of missteps and complicated battle scenarios, the siege lasted more than nine months—longer than any other Civil War battle. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **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

### The Remnants of the Crater

By *Claire Bickers '20*

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In the final years of the Civil War, the Army of the Potomac laid siege to Petersburg, Virginia. Petersburg was the center of supply for both the city of Richmond and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and Grant understood that he could cripple the Confederate army by capturing the city. He hoped to end the battle quickly, but through a series of missteps and complicated battle scenarios, the siege lasted more than nine months—longer than any other Civil War battle.

The most notorious battle during this campaign was the Battle of the Crater. On land that had once been part of the Griffith plantation, Union soldiers dug a mine and detonated black powder underneath Confederate lines to create a gap through which Union troops could march on the city. The situation quickly deteriorated as unit after unit charged into the Crater. The Confederates were enraged to realize that many of the troops they were fighting were USCTs (United States Colored Troops), and treated them with particular cruelty. The men who charged into and around the Crater were in frenzied disarray; the battle devolved into hand to hand combat and bayonets were used with abandon.

Many men did not survive that battle. Neither did their rifles. What remains of their weapons are shattered, bearing the scars of the savagery of the fighting. Many are still loaded, Minie balls ready for the assault that will never come. They are the remnants of a brutal battle unlike the noble picture that Lincoln painted at Gettysburg. The men who died July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1864 in the Crater didn't nobly sacrifice their lives for a comrade, breathing their last breaths in the arms of a friend. Instead, they died frantic and alone, a teeming mass of men trying to escape disaster.

After the end of the war, the Griffith family moved back to their plantation. Seeing an opportunity to capitalize upon the relic hunting that was already becoming commonplace, they created a small museum (of sorts) on their property, featuring the vestiges of the most notorious battle of the siege. The Griffiths preserved rifles that were cracked in half, bent and splintered, or otherwise destroyed by the trauma of battle. Not long after the Civil War finally ended, people lined up to see these remnants from Petersburg that they already understood to have been sanctified by blood; Frederick Douglass himself visited the Crater and Crater Museum in October of 1878. When the National Battlefield was eventually created, the Griffith collection

changed hands. Many of the same artifacts that they chose to display are still exhibited by the park to this day.

At most Civil War sites, weapons such as rifles or cannons provide visitors a tangible link to the past. To ensure the continued survival of these important Petersburg artifacts, many of these Crater rifles were sent to conservation treatment last year, from which many of them just returned. This care will help ensure that their voices can remain poignant reminders of the brutality of battle for generations to come.



*A remnant of a Crater rifle, after conservation treatment.  
Photo courtesy Claire Bickers.*

Sources:

Bowery, Charles R., Ethan Sepp Rafuse, and Steven Stanley. *Guide to the Richmond-Petersburg Campaign*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014.

Kidd, Sherry Williams. "Petersburg National Battlefield Opens New Exhibit Honoring Frederick Douglass<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>." *The Prince George Journal*, March 13, 2018.

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*remnant of a Crater rifle, after conservation treatment. Photo courtesy Claire Bickers.*  
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