

MARSHALLS BATTALION BARRING THE DOOR BALTIMORE.

FIRST DEFENDERS & FIRST BLOOD IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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Disclaimer: This article includes inappropriate language as used in historical context.

The root cause that looms over the titanic conflict that was the Civil War (1861-1865) is the institution of slavery in America. Since the first enslaved African was offloaded in Jamestown (1619), through the struggle for Independence, and amidst the growing pains of a new nation, forced labor was at the heart of the country's systems of production. The proliferation or limitation of slave labor defined the politics and delineated sectional boundary lines within the country, a festering issue eating away at the foundations of national unity.

On the eve of that great American crisis, 15 of 34 states in the United States permitted slavery within their borders. Delaware, the first state to officially enter the Union, was a border state and arguably the last to retain the "peculiar institution." Although the 13th Amendment officially abolished slavery in December 1865, Delaware would not ratify it until doing so symbolically in February

1901—36 years later. It is ironic, then, that Delaware also produced the first casualty of the Civil War, a Black man in a blue uniform who was blooded in defense of that Union.

Nicholas "Nick" Biddle's earliest years are shrouded in mystery. This is largely due to a scarcity of documentary evidence, a sadly common obstacle to sharing African American stories and perspectives. In fact, were it not for the notoriety he gained in the first days of the American Civil War, it's likely his story too would have faded into the mists of the past entirely.

Brought from the other side	11
Wheel of old Casks	2 1/2
Five pair and Cows hides	1 2 1/2
Paire of flaxen the sheaves	7 10
Paire of wheate in the sheaves	1 12 1/2
Paire of hys in the sheave and Tom eels	12 1/2
Paire of Corn in the crib	8
one Bay mare	8
one Black mare	8
one Dun hors	8
one Bay mare three years old	7 10
one gray mare three years old	7
one old mare	3
Thirty two Sheep and Tactons	13 10
one yoke of oxen Colled Lam and Lyon	8
one yoke of oxen Colled mark and mendall	8
one yoke of oxen Colled Joon and Shouton	7 10
one yoke of oxen one Star young the other old	7
one bull	2 10
Two three years old Steers	3 15
Two body year Steers	3
Two four years old Heffers	4
one three years old Heffer	1 10
Three three years old Heffer	3 15
Two year old Steers	1 15
Two Cows and Calves one Colled pink the other Clony	4
Two Cows and Calves one Colled Brown the other Blatten	5 10
Two Cows and yearlings	6
Two barren Cows	5
one Negro man Colled Jim	60
one Negro man Colled Peter	60
one Negro man Colled Dublin	60
one Negro boy Colled Bill	30
one Negro boy Colled Spriner	30
one Negro woman Colled Dener	50
one Negro woman Colled Hanner	50
one Negro woman Colled Red	1
1/2 pound of well	5 15
Hard Cash in the House	13 19 1/4
To one two years old Bull	5 1/2 19 1/4

The 1785 probate record of Robert Burton of Lewes, DE. It lists numerous "Neagro" men, women, and children. They have no last names but a specified monetary worth.

*They are listed after the livestock.
Image Courtesy: Delaware Public Archives*

Nicholas Biddle, in fact, is not the name that he had at birth. He was born and enslaved in Delaware sometime in 1795 or 1796. The determination to shape his own future must have burned in him, however, because at an unknown point between then and January 1840, the man who would take the name “Biddle” carried himself away to freedom. The route that Biddle took to his new life as a free man is just as unknown as his birth name, but a prominent route of the Underground Railroad through Delaware did begin to emerge in the 1820s. Known havens for Freedom Seekers are recorded in Camden, Middletown, and Odessa, with Wilmington being the hub of this network and directed by the noted abolitionist Thomas Garrett. Perhaps it was this relay of safe houses that ferried him to freedom, or perhaps he was one of those who risked retrieval by boat from a remote, unoccupied stretch of Delmarva beach in the dead of night. Whichever the case may be, he ended his journey and settled in Pottsville, PA.

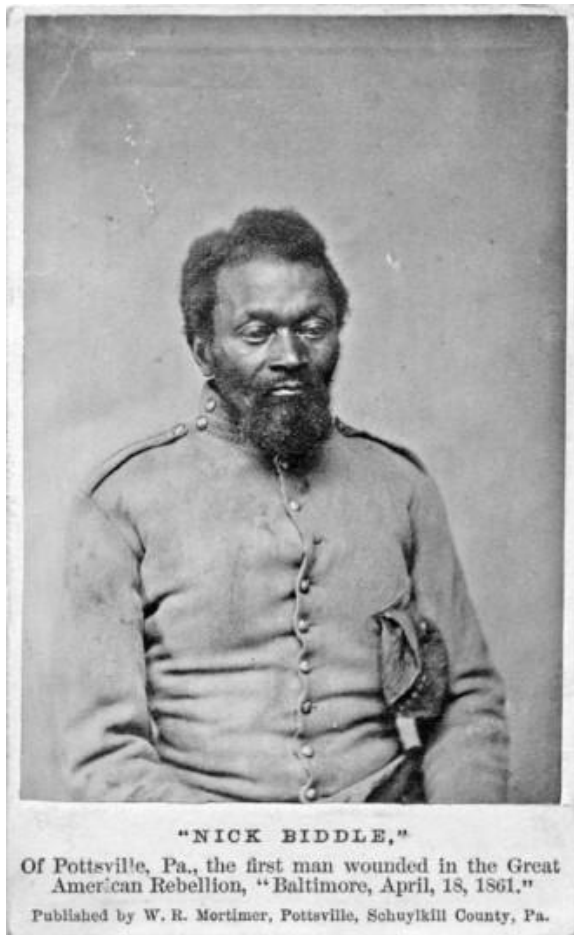


*The Mansion House Hotel in Pottsville, PA.
Image Courtesy: Philadelphia and its Environs, and the Railroad Scenery of Pennsylvania (1875)*

Whether he settled in Pottsville directly or arrived there via Philadelphia is uncertain,

but he did take his name from noted Philadelphia financier and President of the Second Bank of the United States, Nicholas Biddle. Some stories allege that, upon his supposed arrival in Philadelphia, the Freedom Seeker found work in the financier Biddle’s household and adopted his employer’s name as his own out of gratitude. Other versions maintain that he encountered the financier while working as a porter at the Mansion House Hotel in Pottsville during a party hosted there in January 1840. The two stories agree, however, that after that event, Nicholas Biddle—most often known simply as “Nick”—was a fixture of the Pottsville community, working odd jobs, selling oysters and ice cream, and living in a modest home on Minersville St.

In particular, Nick Biddle took a keen interest in the local militia company, the Pottsville Blues, which renamed itself the Washington Artillery Company in 1842. Biddle quickly befriended its members and, even though it was illegal for a Black man to join military organizations at the time, the part-time soldiers gave him a uniform and unofficially adopted him as one of their own.

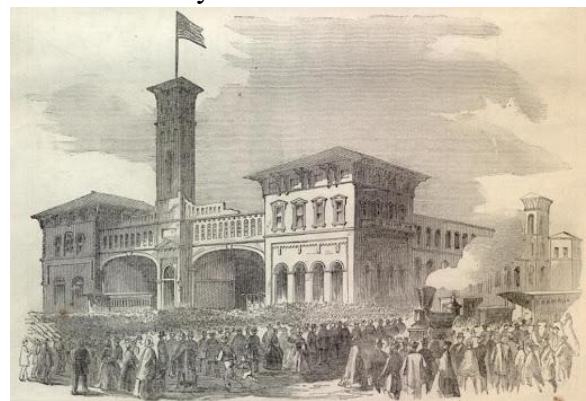


*Nick Biddle posing in his uniform, ca. 1864.
Image Courtesy: State Museum of
Pennsylvania*

When the Secession Crisis began in December of 1860, the Pottsville militia companies and those of the surrounding Schuylkill County region were an aberration for their time, being frequently- and well-drilled. They were also eager to serve, offering to travel to Washington D.C. in defense of the capital on April 11, 1861—the day before the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. With the city defenseless, their offer was swiftly accepted. The five militia companies, including Biddle and the Washington Artillery, departed for Harrisburg to be taken into Federal service. The local *Miners' Journal* recalled the scene:

As the companies proceeded down Centre street, to the depot of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, they were greeted with cheers from the thousands who lined each side of the street, and a perfect ocean of handkerchiefs waved by the ladies, who had taken possession of all the windows, and every available situation along the street. All the stores were closed and business entirely suspended. At the depot the crowd was immense, and it was almost impossible to force your way through it. The tops of the passenger and freight cars, the roofs of the depot and neighboring houses, were black with spectators. Never had so great a concourse assembled on any one occasion before in Pottsville.

The men arrived in Harrisburg, PA, and were swiftly sworn into Federal service—all of them except, of course, Nick Biddle. It was not yet legal for African Americans to serve in the U.S. Army, so Biddle remained with his fellows as a volunteer orderly (assistant) to one of the officers: his friend, Captain James Wren. The men were then almost immediately hustled back aboard trains bound for the beleaguered Washington, traveling via Baltimore, to become the city's "First Defenders."



The Railway Depot in Harrisburg, PA, where Biddle and the First Defenders departed for their date with destiny in

Baltimore.

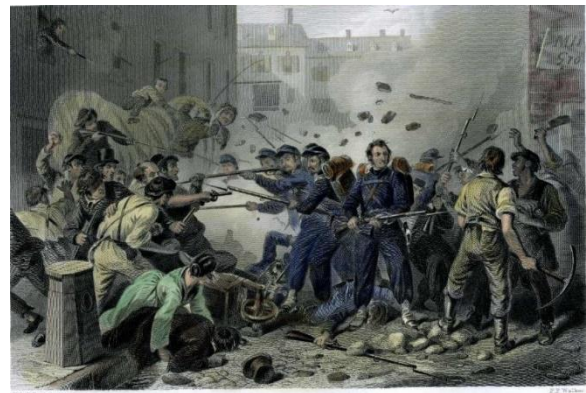
Image Courtesy: Public Domain (Harper's Weekly, 1862)

There was no direct route from Harrisburg to Washington in 1861 and passengers were required to switch rail lines in Baltimore for the final leg of the journey. At any other time, having to route through Baltimore wouldn't qualify as much more than a minor inconvenience; on April 18, 1861, however, it was a much different matter. Baltimore was a preeminent maritime city and had a rough-and-tumble reputation to match. What's more, the city was known to have significant population of pro-Southern sympathizers. Just two months earlier, rumors of an assassination plot necessitated that President-elect Abraham Lincoln sneak through Baltimore by night in order to take up his Constitutionally-mandated office. Now, Nick Biddle and the First Defenders were riding the rails right into a powder keg ready to burst.

Upon learning that pro-Union troops were due to arrive in the city, nearly 2,000 Confederate sympathizers gathered to confront them, wielding clubs and makeshift weapons in addition to their vitriol. The Pennsylvanians, outnumbered four-to-one, were mostly unarmed: they had been promised that good muskets were waiting for them in Washington. Fifty soldiers of the Regular Army were also aboard the train under orders to garrison Fort McHenry by the harbor, but that meant they could only escort the fresh volunteers part-way. Once the Regulars diverged, the Baltimore Police Department was to step in and see the First Defenders to their destination at the Camden station, where a second train awaited to take them to the capital. To get there, Biddle and

his comrades would have to cross two miles of hostile streets.

As Biddle and his friends stepped down from their train, it was immediately obvious that the long walk across the city to the Camden station was going to be a perilous one. Before long, the Regulars departed and the members of the Baltimore Police deployed to hold back the mob proved ineffective: surges would break through the cordon, landing flurries of blows, spitting on the troops, and decrying them as "damned Black abolitionists." As Camden station appeared in sight ahead, the crowd's fury intensified and the police line began to dissolve.



MASSACHUSETTS INFANTRY PASSING THROUGH BALTIMORE.

The Railway Depot in Harrisburg, PA, where Biddle and the First Defenders departed for their date with destiny in Baltimore.

Image Courtesy: Public Domain (Harper's Weekly, 1862)

Bricks, stones, and bottles flew through the air, pelting down among the Pennsylvanians. The sight of 65-year-old Nick Biddle in his uniform seemed to especially provoke the crowd. Captain James Wren, the friend who had accepted Biddle as his volunteer orderly, recalled that the mob targeted Biddle specifically, hurling projectiles and ugly

racial slurs at him. There was nothing to be done, Wren lamented, commenting that, “poor old Nick had to take it.” Biddle was struck repeatedly. One brick hit him in the forehead, causing a grievous injury that cut deep enough to expose bone. Blood coursed down his face. **With this wound, many historians believe that the Delaware-born Nick Biddle was the first man to shed blood in conflict with Confederates, making him the Civil War’s first casualty.**

Several other soldiers suffered broken bones or were knocked unconscious as they scrambled aboard the train cars, uncomfortable freight wagons with the unforeseen benefit of being sturdily built and without windows—providing much-needed protection from the howling mob outside, the boldest of whom actually clambered up and tried to break in. Biddle wrapped his head with a handkerchief and pulled his cap down over the injury as the train pulled away. The shaken First Defenders rode in silence to Washington. Their first taste of soldiering had been a sour one.



Captain James Wren, here an officer in the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry. Image Courtesy: US Army Military History Institute

As the first soldiers to arrive in Washington, the troops were quartered in public buildings all over the city. Biddle and the Washington Artillery were put up in the capitol building itself. Veterans later recalled that, as Biddle looked up at the looming unfinished dome from the rotunda, he took his cap and handkerchief from his head. Droplets of blood sprinkled the fine marble floor. Early the following morning, a lean and lanky figure appeared among the exhausted men: Abraham Lincoln had come to offer up his thanks to the men in person. The First Defenders called upon him for a speech, to which Lincoln instead replied, “I did not come here to make a speech. The time for speechmaking has gone by, the time for action is at hand. I have come here to give you a warm welcome to the city of

Washington and shake hands with every officer and soldier in your company providing you grant me the privilege.” No one denied him.

Lincoln commiserated in particular with the bruised and battered, but came up short in surprise at the sight of a formerly enslaved man in military uniform, the wound on his head wrapped in bandages stained red. The President urged Biddle to go and seek treatment for his injuries, but he declined and restated his determination to remain with his comrades.

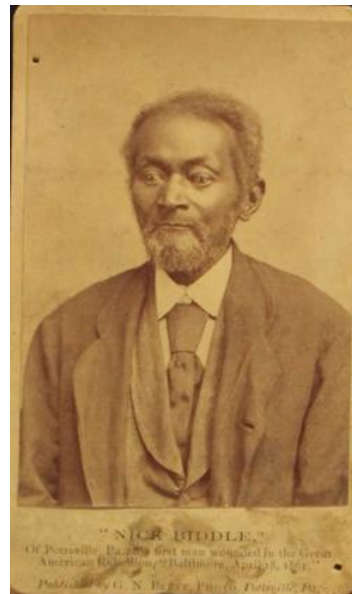


*Federal troops parade in front of the unfinished capitol in 1861.
Image Courtesy: Library of Congress*

The First Defenders served out their initial 90 days of service, primarily in Washington, before returning home. When the Washington Artillery returned to Pottsville and paraded through town, Biddle was at the front of the column. Most of those men promptly reenlisted for three more years in the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. The majority ended up in Company B, led by Captain Wren. For Nick Biddle, however, the war was over. Bearing the scar and showing his age, he remained at home while

his comrades served faithfully throughout the war.

Back in Pottsville, Nick Biddle carried on much as he had before his moment of destiny that April day in Baltimore. He donned his uniform just one more time in 1864 to have his image struck by a local photographer. That image, the one seen above, was copied hundreds of times and sold at the Great Central Fair in Philadelphia to raise money to raise money for soldiers' relief. He was compared by others at the event to Crispus Attucks, a man of African and Native American descent who was first to be slain at the Boston Massacre in 1770. Biddle himself never made this comparison, but his likeness became a local staple: “a photographic album is not considered complete in Pottsville without the picture of the man whose blood was first spilled in the beginning of the war,” one of Biddle's comrades remembered later in life.



*Nick Biddle sometime after the Civil War.
Image Courtesy: New York Military History Museum*

After the war, Biddle fell on hard times. He suffered from rheumatism and a variety of other maladies that sapped his strength and modest savings. He was forced to turn to charity from his Pottsville neighbors. The local newspaper, *The Miners' Journal* appealed to the community for help: If poor old Nick Biddle calls on you with a document, as he calls it, don't say you are in a hurry and turn him off, but ornament the paper with your signature and plant a good round sum opposite your name. Nick has been a good soldier and now that he is getting old and feeble, he deserves the support of our citizens.

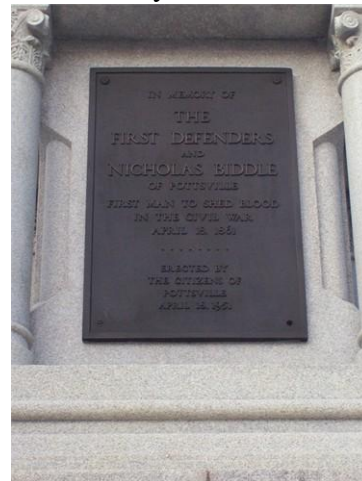
Nick Biddle died at his home on August 2, 1876. He was approximately 80 years old. At the time of his death, Biddle was destitute, with no money available to go towards a proper burial. He seemed bound for an unmarked potter's burial when his old First Defender comrades came to the rescue: all of the survivors pitched in a dollar for his funeral and interment. They formed a solemn processional down the street to the burying ground, heads low as drums rumbled out the mournful cadence. Wearing their old uniforms, the men of the Washington Artillery placed a floral cross upon his breast and lowered his simple coffin into the ground. Over the grave sat a headstone, also paid for by the First Defenders. It read:

In Memory of Nicholas Biddle, Died August 2, 1876, Aged 80 Years. His Was the Proud Distinction of Shedding the First Blood In the Late War For the Union, Being Wounded While Marching Through Baltimore With the First Volunteers From Schuylkill County 18 April 1861. Erected By His Friends In Pottsville.



An ode to Nick Biddle, written by a comrade after his death. Image Courtesy: Collection of John David Hoptak

Through the years, time forgot Nick Biddle. His tombstone was broken by vandals while his saga, and that of the First Defenders, were overshadowed by later events. Pottsville, however, remained proud of its Civil War contributions and dedicated a monument in Garfield Square on the 90th Anniversary of the riot in Baltimore in 1951.



Bronze plaque dedicated to the memory of Nicholas Biddle and the First Defenders. Image Courtesy: Deborah Nouzovski (findagrave.com)

As for Biddle himself, he never made much of his service or place in history. When pressed about the events in Baltimore in his later years, he was often heard to remark, “that he would go through the infernal regions with the [Washington] artillery but would never again go through Baltimore.” The life of Nicholas “Nick” Biddle is that of someone no less remarkable than many better remembered in history. It’s the story of a man born and enslaved in Delaware, who had the courage to seize his own freedom, had the will to make a place for himself as a free man of color in an unaccepting world, whose loyalty to country and comrades carried him where no oath bound him to be, and whose character inspired such affection and devotion from his friends to the end. It’s an epitaph anyone could be proud of.

In spite of the wrath of time, Nick Biddle’s story remains one worth telling.



Current gravestone of Nicholas Biddle at Pottsville’s Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church burial ground, which replaces the original marker lost to vandals. Image Courtesy: John David Hoptak

Acknowledgement: A special note of thanks must be extended to John David Hoptak, an NPS Park Ranger at Antietam National Battlefield, who conducted much pioneering research to rescue Nick Biddle’s life story from obscurity. Much of the above is the fruits of his extraordinary efforts.

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BALTIMORE RIOT OF 1861

Bullets vs. Bricks in Baltimore: A mob out for blood clashed with troops en route to Washington

By Michael G. Williams, HistoryNet
8/8/2011

Bullets vs. Bricks in Baltimore

A mob out for blood clashed with troops en route to Washington



On the afternoon of April 18, 1861, Baltimore Mayor George W. Brown dispatched a strong letter of warning to Abraham Lincoln. “The people are exasperated to the highest degree by the passage of troops,” Brown wrote, “and the citizens are universally decided in the opinion that no more should be ordered to come. The authorities...did their best to day [sic] to protect both strangers and citizens and to prevent a collision, but [in] vain....it is my solemn duty to inform you that it is not possible for more soldiers to pass through Baltimore unless they fight their way at every step.”

Earlier that day five companies of Pennsylvania militia and a detachment of 4th Artillery Regulars ran into a rock-throwing mob at the Bolton Street station. Nicholas Biddle, a 65-year-old black orderly, caught the brunt of the crowd’s wrath. That incident, though minor, reflected the sectional tensions which destined America for civil war.

It was another thread in the seemingly endless tangle of problems facing the embattled U.S. president. Since December 1860, death threats had been pouring into Lincoln’s office. More than half a dozen

states had already left the Union, and more were sure to follow. In the week leading up to the Baltimore confrontation, matters worsened. Confederate batteries fired on the besieged Federal garrison at Fort Sumter, and Virginia passed an ordinance of secession, leaving only a strip of river between the unguarded Union capital and enemy territory.

On top of this the president had to contend with Baltimore, a city the British once branded “a nest of pirates.” Its deeply pro-Southern populace made it unfriendly ground for the Rail Splitter, who had won a paltry 4 percent of its total popular vote in the last election. And now he’d received a letter in which Baltimore’s mayor expressed his citizens’ “universally decided” wish that he withdraw his order for 75,000 troops. The suggestion was completely out of the question. The Confederate Army was preparing for battle just across the Potomac. Without a substantial military force to protect it, the U.S. capital remained an inviting target, and Northern troops’ shortest route was through the major railroad hub of Baltimore, the North’s gateway to the South. Lincoln knew that if Union forces were denied this vital transportation route, the North would lose the war before it started. He would have his soldiers, and he would have to get them by way of Baltimore—even if they had to fight their way through as Brown had warned.

The next morning a wood-burning locomotive chuffed south along the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad carrying 700 members of the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, the first outfit drilled and equipped to answer the president’s call for troops. Like the

Minutemen of 1775, the 6th's ranks had reported for duty without question or delay. On April 16, Major Benjamin Watson closed his law office in Lawrence with scarcely two hours' notice. In Lowell 17-year-old Private Luther Ladd traded his machinist's apron for a uniform and buff trimming. Addison Whitney left his job in the Middlesex Corporation's No. 3 spinning room. When members of this 11-company regiment—once farmers, merchants, tradesmen and lawyers—left for Washington, they were heralded by Northerners as the Union's heroic protectors.

But the journey's romance soured for the new troops as their train neared Baltimore. The regiment's commander, Colonel Edward F. Jones, held dispatches from railroad officials warning that his men would likely meet strong resistance there. It was a stark contrast to the trip's first 300 miles, throughout which jubilant crowds hailed them with refreshments and patriotic demonstrations at every station. They would find no such hospitality below the Mason-Dixon Line, where a warlike mood prevailed. Quartermaster James Munroe issued each man aboard the train 20 rounds of ball cartridges in preparation for their arrival at the Baltimore station. According to Private William Gurley of Company K, all accepted their lot "solemnly [and] with unchanged features," then capped and loaded their .58-caliber Springfields as ordered.

Few of the men spoke as they neared the city. The metallic scraping of ramrods and the train's rhythmic clatter were the only sounds that filled the coach—that is, until Colonel Jones entered the car and broke the silence with an ominous set of instructions.

"The regiment will march through Baltimore in column of sections, arms at will," he announced. "You will undoubtedly be insulted, abused, and, perhaps, assaulted, to which you must pay no attention...even if they throw stones, bricks, or other missiles.... [B]ut," Jones added, "if you are fired upon and any one of you is hit, your officers will order you to fire. Do not fire into any promiscuous crowds but select any man whom you may see aiming at you, and be sure you drop him."

With that, Jones moved on to the next car, leaving Gurley and his comrades to contemplate their fate. Ghastly images of mob violence flashed in their minds as they approached the northeast waterfront and Fort McHenry's ramparts came into view, with a Union flag still flapping in the breeze. Around noon the 6th pulled into the PW&B's President Street depot, where things seemed eerily quiet. Their arrival went largely unnoticed by pedestrians, most of whom hadn't yet realized that the train was carrying Federal troops. The calm wouldn't last.

Rumors of the Federals' arrival had already begun circulating, and Baltimore's residents and local leaders made no secret of their disdain for the Union's new administration. Some Baltimoreans' distaste for the new president had no doubt been heightened by a recent incident involving Lincoln himself. Just two months before, the president-elect opted to sneak through Baltimore under cover of darkness, to avoid a possible assassination plot. Southern cartoonist Adalbert Volck lampooned that humiliating maneuver in an etching, *Passage Through Baltimore*, depicting a cowardly-looking

Lincoln peeking through the side door of a boxcar.

Like all Washington-bound passengers arriving from Philadelphia, Lincoln had to switch trains at the B&O line's Camden Station, a mile and a half west of the PW&B's depot. Because a city law prohibited the passage of locomotives along busy thoroughfares, however, drivers had to use horses in teams of four to pull each car across town, where railroad workers then recoupled them to a B&O engine. The tedious transfer took passengers around the city's harbor, four blocks north on President Street, a mile west on Pratt and two blocks south on Howard. Lincoln had traveled the route while the city slept in February, but on April 19 the 6th Massachusetts was about to make that trip in broad daylight, through streets teeming with Southern sympathizers. This short distance between stations would test the newly minted Union troops' mettle as soldiers.

Baltimore had always been seen as an explosive city, hypersensitive to the shifting currents of politics. The present crisis was no exception. While most Baltimoreans felt that Lincoln should keep his hands off the South, there was also a smaller contingent of Confederate zealots there who were more than willing to go to war over it. Sending Northern troops through their hometown was like putting a lit match to a powder keg. Railroad officials, keenly aware of the danger, wanted nothing more than to get the Massachusetts men out of town as quickly as possible. Before Colonel Jones could even begin organizing his planned march, workers had uncoupled the engine and hitched teams of bay mares to each car. In swift succession they rolled out of the yard

and onto President Street. What happened next would catapult the 6th Massachusetts to near-mythic status—and also doom Baltimore to a lengthy military occupation. Inside the rail cars, the air was thick with tension. Every man tightened his grip on his Springfield, and most avoided looking out the windows, for fear of locking eyes with a pro-Confederate rough. Meanwhile bystanders couldn't help but notice the soldiers; their military caps and upright muskets betrayed the railcar passengers' identities. By the time they had gone just a few blocks, the 6th had attracted an angry crowd, spewing a torrent of epithets punctuated by cheers for "Jeff Davis!" The growing mob followed the line of cars, now seven long, as it turned onto Pratt Street, the east-west axis of the waterfront. By this time its ranks had swelled to several hundred. Suddenly the onlookers unleashed a shower of paving stones and gunfire on the seventh coach, which was carrying Major Watson and 50 troops. Two men were hit in the head and upper body with bricks, while another soldier lost his thumb to a pistol shot. Holding up his bloody hand, the latter requested permission to return fire, which Major Watson promptly granted. That volley repelled the rioters long enough for the major and his men to escape. Their car was the last to make it to Camden Station, arriving windowless and riddled with bullet holes.

Back at Pratt Street, an orgy of destruction unfolded. Rioters dumped heavy anchors and cartloads of sand onto the tracks. Charles Pendergast, a shipping agent who profited handsomely from transport between Baltimore and South Carolina's Charleston Harbor, handed dockworkers crowbars and pickaxes with orders to pry the rails from the

cobblestones and put the road out of commission.

Merchant Richard Fisher, in the middle of a business transaction with a Spanish sea captain, watched the rioters in horror from the second floor of his counting house. “You seem much agitated,” remarked the mariner. “This is nothing. We frequently have these things in Spain.” Fisher replied, “In Spain this may mean nothing; in America, it means Civil War.”

To the four companies stranded at the PW&B’s depot, it meant marching through a gauntlet of narrow streets flanked by tightly packed rows of brick buildings—terrain that put the 6th at a marked disadvantage. Military training of the day involved Napoleonic tactics for open battlefield scenarios, not a crowded, urban landscape such as Baltimore’s. What’s more, the Union men faced a plain-clothed enemy familiar with every inch of the neighborhood.

Once word came that the tracks were now impassable, the 220 men who still needed to reach Camden Station wheeled into columns outside the President Street depot under the command of stout Captain Albert S. Follansbee. Without hesitation, he gave the order to march. But as the columns moved forward, they were surrounded by a howling mob of secessionists shouting that they would kill every “white nigger” of them before they reached Camden Station.

The soldiers pressed on while onlookers pelted them with anything they could throw. The rioters had littered their path with makeshift barricades, to slow the troops’ progress. One rioter drew a swell of cheers from the mob as he took up position at the

front of the 6th’s line, marching oafishly while dangling a Southern Palmetto flag from a piece of flimsy lumber. Three blocks of this charade was all that Lieutenant Leander Lynde could take. He coolly stepped out of line, ripped down the flag and shoved it under his coat, then rejoined the march as though nothing had happened. The crowd responded with a fusillade of bricks and gunfire that injured at least six troops. Meanwhile Mayor Brown rushed east on Pratt Street to find the bridge near President Street covered with anchors and scantling. He curtly ordered nearby police officers to clear the obstructions, then hurried off to meet the advancing Massachusetts soldiers. They rounded the bend from President Street at the double quick, firing haphazardly at the mob, which was close on their heels. Just moments earlier some of Follansbee’s men had been attacked. A few were shot or beaten senseless.

The mayor and Follansbee met at the base of Pratt Street, and Brown introduced himself. “We have been attacked without provocation,” gasped the winded captain. Brown nodded, adding the laughably obvious recommendation, “You must defend yourselves.” Follansbee pushed on without a word. No one was safe. Bullets whistled past from all directions, striking rioters, soldiers and bystanders.

Four blocks west, at the corner of Gay and Pratt streets, the mob let loose a heavy barrage of stones and hot lead. “[That’s] right! Give it to them!” a rioter shouted. “They won’t shoot, they’re too afraid of their cowardly necks!” shrieked another. Finally Follansbee barked out the order to fire. The 6th’s men raised their rifles and delivered a volley, then jogged 200 feet to

South Street, where more stones and pistol shots rained down. Again the 6th returned fire. Eleven rioters dropped in that salvo, one of them hit in the throat.

That kept the mob at bay temporarily. But two blocks farther on, near the corner of Light Street, rioters hit the 6th's men again, this time killing teenager Luther Ladd, who just two days before had traded his machinist's apron for regimental dress. As the soldiers brought their guns to shoulder, Mayor Brown ran forward, shouting at them, "For God's sake, don't shoot!" Given the noise and chaos at that moment, it's unlikely that anyone heard him.

The regiment fired into the crowd one last time before Police Marshal George Proctor Kane and 50 officers arrived to form a barrier between the troops and the mob. To ensure that no one attempted to pass, Kane, a burly, no-nonsense tough, raised his revolver and cried out, "Keep back, men, or I shoot!" Kane's reputation intimidated even the roughest thugs, helping to quell the riot. Moments later the 6th was able to march the rest of the way to Camden Station, where they boarded a train to Washington, D.C.

Though the fighting had lasted less than an hour, there was a sizable butcher's bill. From the 6th Massachusetts, Addison Whitney, Luther Ladd, Sumner Needham and Charles Taylor were killed during the march. What's more, Taylor's face had been smashed beyond recognition from repeated blows with heavy paving stones. Thirty-six others in the regiment were wounded, many of them seriously. Of the rioters, 11 died—among them a ship's cabin boy who was hit in the stomach by a stray bullet. Countless others stumbled away to nurse their wounds.

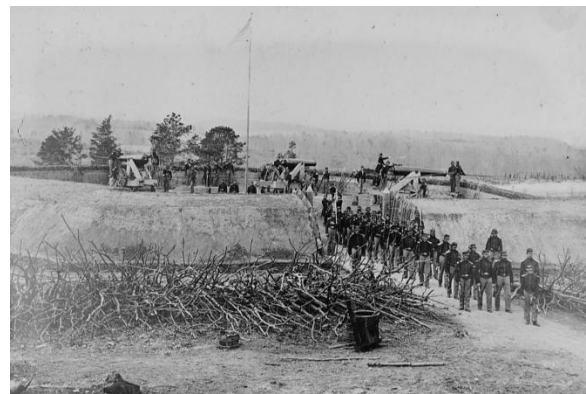
Reaction to the riot extended well beyond Baltimore. Many Americans, North and South, had still held out some hope that the conflict might be resolved before much blood was shed. North Carolina Congressman A.W. Venable, for example, had optimistically proclaimed that he would be able to wipe away every drop of blood shed in the war with a handkerchief.

The events of April 19 extinguished that last spark of hope. It was now clear that a long and bloody conflict lay ahead. The men of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment came to Baltimore with romantic notions of war. They left knowing how bitter it would be.

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A Triumph of Remembrance in Silver Spring, Maryland

By Norm Dasinger, Jr., Blue & Gray Education Society, April 8, 2022



Fort Stevens north of Washington, D.C., in 1864| LOC

In the summer of 1864, Confederate Gen. Jubal Early and 10,000 of his troops marched into Maryland. Eventually, these men were stopped outside Washington, D.C., as part of a series of engagements that ended at Fort Stevens, a few miles south of Silver Spring, Maryland, on July 12. The

appearance of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens has added supplementary interest in the engagement, but the casualties that occurred that day are equally as important. The Union soldiers who fell at Fort Stevens were eventually buried at Battleground National Cemetery, but the Confederate dead would remain where they fell.

In 1874, the Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Silver Spring, James B. Avirett, coordinated the exhumation of the remains of 17 of those Confederate soldiers who fell outside Fort Stevens. His efforts resulted in these men being buried in a common grave at his church.

Pastor Avirett was born in North Carolina and attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1861. He served as a chaplain in the Confederate States Army and was, in fact, the first chaplain to be commissioned to serve in the Confederate Army. After the Civil War, he served as a priest in Winchester, Virginia; Sligo, North Carolina; and Silver Spring, Maryland. He authored a book on his former Army commander Gen. Turner Ashby. His wife, Mary, was the driving force in the establishment of the Stonewall Cemetery in Winchester, Virginia.

As a communal means of remembrance, the church commissioned the placement of a lonely monument over this solemn burial trench.

On June 18, 2020, Kyley Schultz, a reporter for WUSA9 in Washington, D.C., wrote, “The Confederate memorial, a grave marker, was vandalized last week with black spray paint. This week, it was toppled to the

ground. . . An anonymous sign left at the foot of the statue read, ‘Here lies 17 dead white supremacists who died fighting to keep black people enslaved.’”

The official webpage of Grace Episcopal Church includes this statement: “We understand that these soldiers received a Christian burial in consecrated ground, just as their former opponents . . . At Grace, we know that we must be true to our past and learn from it, both the good and the bad.”

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FIGHTING THE ENEMY WAS A CIVIL WAR HAZARD. SO WAS MANUFACTURING WEAPONS. Explosions from Connecticut to Mississippi killed or maimed hundreds of munitions workers

By John Banks, HistoryNet, 3/31/2022

At about 8:45 a.m. on March 29, 1862, neighbors of Professor Samuel Jackson’s fireworks-turned-munitions factory heard a low rumble like the sound of distant thunder. Then came the roar of an explosion, followed by an even louder blast, as gunpowder and cartridges ignited in the south Philadelphia factory across the street from a prison.

Many of the 78 factory workers, mostly women and girls, never had a chance to escape the conflagration. Jackson’s 23-year-old son, Edwin, was among the 18 employees who died. Dozens of survivors suffered from burns or other injuries in the catastrophe—the war’s first munitions factory accident involving a major loss of life.

Other more deadly—and more well-known—munitions industry explosions rocked the home fronts during the Civil War.

On September 17, 1862—the same day as the Battle of Antietam—78 workers, mostly women, died in an explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal near Pittsburgh. And, on June 17, 1864—a sweltering day in the U.S. capital—21 women and girls died in an explosion at the Washington Arsenal. Most victims were young Irish immigrants. President Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton attended their huge, public funeral.

The Confederacy wasn't immune to these disasters. On March 13, 1863, a massive blast at a Richmond munitions factory on Brown's Island, in the James River, resulted in 64 deaths. The factory employed about 600 workers, roughly half women or girls. But bigger stories pushed the tragedy at Jackson's factory in Philadelphia—as well as deadly munitions industry explosions in Hazardville, Conn.; Springfield, Mass.; and Jackson, Miss.—to the margins of history. Each calamity underscored dangers faced by civilians supplying their military forces during an era of few safety regulations and standards.

“It is a solemn and terrible warning to those working in similar establishments,” a New York newspaper wrote after the Philadelphia disaster, “and we trust that its effect will be to make [munitions workers] more careful of their own safety by the strict observance of those cautions, the neglect of which may consign hundreds to untimely graves and carry suffering and desolations into many homes.”

Like a scene from an Edgar Allan Poe horror story, dazed, burned, and blackened survivors stumbled from the flaming and smoking ruins of Samuel Jackson's factory on Tenth Street. Others writhed in agony. Several female victims, “their clothes all aflame,” ran about “shrieking most pitifully.”

Heard a great distance away, the explosions shattered windows, damaged shutters and sashes, blew doors off hinges, wrecked plaster, and toppled furniture in nearby homes. A blast tossed a man cleaning a lamp in front of a tavern headfirst through a doorway. He survived, but the lamp was “broken to atoms.” The explosions even rattled inmates in gloomy Moyamensing Prison—the castle-like structure nearby where Poe supposedly slept off a drinking spree years earlier.



The above illustration from a Philadelphia German-American newspaper depicts the tragedy at Jackson's ammunition factory. The flying bodies were not the product of exaggerated illustration. Numerous eyewitnesses described such ghastly human projectiles. (Library of Philadelphia)

After the war broke out, the U.S. government had contracted Jackson to make “Dr. Bartholow's solid water-proof patent cartridges,” a “peculiarly made” ammunition for cavalry pistols. In the three weeks prior

to the accident, Jackson—a 45-year-old pyrotechnics wizard—was under intense pressure to produce cartridges for the Army of the Potomac.

The factory, which produced thousands of cartridges a day, consisted of frame structures and a one-story, brick building about 10 x 12 feet. Boards covered a powder magazine, “merely a large hole dug in the ground.” In moulding and finishing rooms, Jackson stored thousands of completed cartridges. Elsewhere in the tight quarters, workers stashed thousands of pounds of black powder loosely and in kegs.

After the explosions, hundreds of curiosity-seekers rushed to the site, followed by firefighters, who extinguished the blaze. Alerted by telegraph, the mayor soon arrived with the police chief. The city had not seen such an “intense state of excitement,” the *Philadelphia Press* reported, since a huge fire at the Race Street wharf in 1850.



Newspapers in Philadelphia chronicled the human cost of the blast for weeks following the disaster. Unsettling to modern values is the young age of many of the killed or injured workers. Due to their dexterity, young women were preferred for the task of cartridge making. (Philadelphia Inquirer) Frantic parents and friends of factory workers searched for loved ones among the crowd or in the ruins—“looking shudderingly,” the *Philadelphia*

Inquirer reported, “among the fragments of clothing which still clung to the almost quivering remains of the mutilated dead.” Responders commandeered milk and farm wagons for use as ambulances. To keep gawkers at bay, police roped off the scene.

Some injured received care in nearby tenements, but most were sent to the city’s Pennsylvania Hospital. Several suffered from bullet wounds from exploding cartridges. A young white worker, severely burned and covered with soot, was taken to the segregated hospital’s area for Black patients. “... it was some time,” the *Inquirer* reported, “before the mistake was discovered and rectified.” He died the next day.

At least five of the victims were teenagers; one was 12. When the blast rocked the building, 14-year-old John Yeager was carrying a box of bullet cartridges that also exploded, knocking out his eyes. His sister, Sarah, also was hurt. Both had helped to support a widowed mother.

Twenty-two-year-old Richard Hutson spent the last hours of his life at the house of Margaret Smith, who lived on Wharton Street, near the factory. His face was as “black as a man’s hat” because of severe burns. “He seemed to be troubled with the idea that he had caused the mischief,” recalled Smith, “but we tried to comfort him.”



Robert Bartholow, ironically a U.S. Army surgeon, patented his cartridge on May 21, 1861. The rounds featured a collodion-soaked paper cartridge attached to the bullet by a silk strip. The flammable paper was consumed upon firing. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)

The tragedy rocked widows Margaret Brown and her sister, Mary Jane Curtin. Five of Brown's children who worked in the factory were badly injured. Blown across the street into a wall of Moyamensing Prison by the blast, Curtin—the superintendent of children at the factory—somehow escaped physical injury. But three of her children, also munitions workers, suffered severe burns. Curtin also lost the \$60 in gold she carried.

Rescuers discovered Edwin Jackson's body, "shockingly burned and mutilated," among charred ruins. The previous evening, he had said he was unafraid of any explosion there. Samuel Jackson's daughters, 20-year-old

Josephine and 18-year-old Selina, also suffered terrible burns.

Heroes emerged to aid the sufferers: A woman cut her shawl in two, wrapping the pieces around two "half-naked" victims. A court officer put his coat around a burning girl, putting out the flames; and a U.S. Army cavalry officer, who happened to be riding past the factory, picked up a horribly burned victim and dropped him off at a drug store for medical aid. When the soldier returned to his camp, he found a detached hand in his carriage.

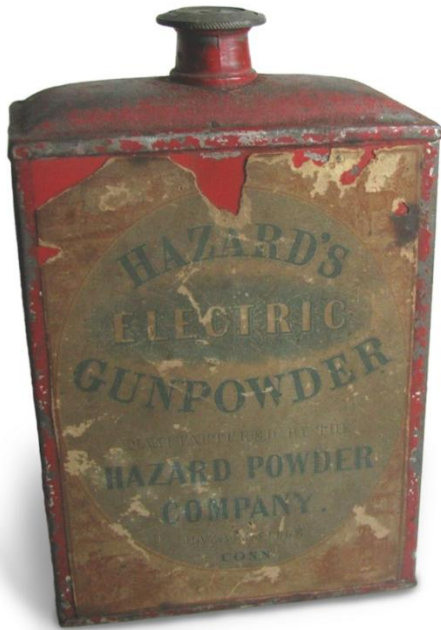
The catastrophe brought out the worst in people, too. Scoundrels snatched clothes from a woman's explosion-battered tenement on Austin Street, a block or so from the blast. A ragpicker offered fragments of clothes from the explosions for 25 cents.

When two victims sought aid at a residence in the neighborhood, the lady of the house indignantly slammed the door in the women's faces, telling them she "did not keep a house for working girls to enter." The local newspaper chastised the door-slammer: "Was the woman insane, or a fiend, or was it merely an instance of what utter vulgarity is capable of?"

Other grisly discoveries put an exclamation point on the horror show. Blood streaked the walls of houses in the vicinity. A cheek stuck to a building on Tenth Street. A portion of a thigh plopped in a yard, near where it left a bloody mark on the wall of a tavern. A severed arm hit a woman in the head, knocking her down, and a scorched and fractured skull with gray hair landed in the street.

“Heads, legs and arms were hurled through the air, and in some instances were picked up hundreds of feet from the scene,” the *Inquirer* reported. “Portions of flesh, brains, limbs, entrails, etc. were found in the yards of houses, on roofs and in the adjacent streets.” A policeman filled a barrel with human remains.

In the ghastliest news from this awful day, a man told a reporter that he saw a boy going home with a human head in his basket. The lad said it was his father’s.



Making gunpowder was fraught with peril, and the industry risks increased with the pressure of wartime production. The Hazard Powder Company of Connecticut suffered a catastrophe on July 23, 1862, when 10 tons of gunpowder ignited. But the company’s undamaged buildings stayed in production. (HN Archives)

Two days after the disaster, hundreds of people sought admission to Pennsylvania Hospital to check on the injured. “Such a

rush to this institution,” the *Press* wrote, “was never before known.”

Authorities worked quickly to determine the cause of the explosions. The fire marshal convened a coroner’s jury, which examined mangled remains of victims at the First Ward police station, among other grim duties.

The day after the disaster, the six-person jury also stopped at the home of Jackson, who wasn’t present at the disaster. Before Edwin’s burial in Odd Fellows Cemetery, the jury examined his battered body in Jackson’s Federal Street house.

The fire marshal concluded the first explosion occurred in the moulding room, where the strike of a mallet may have caused the spark that set off a 30-second chain reaction of death and destruction. But he couldn’t know for sure—all the witnesses in that area were dead or too badly injured to aid the investigation.

The jury determined the detonation of a scale of dry powder caused the catastrophe. “[M]any obviously essential precautions to prevent [the] accident,” it concluded, “seemed to have been entirely neglected.” But authorities never charged anyone with a crime.

Weeks later, Jackson’s factory re-opened in nearby Chester, Pa., along the Delaware River. Black powder for the operation was stored on a boat offshore, a safe distance from the factory. Despite the deadly south Philadelphia accident, Samuel Jackson had no trouble employing female workers, who made only 40 cents per thousand cartridges made.

“[T]hey would rather earn a living salary, at risk of their lives,” the *Inquirer* wrote in a sad commentary of the era, “than endure the indignities and hardships to many forms of female occupation.”

At about 3 p.m. on July 23, 1862, five massive blasts rocked the Hazard Powder Co. mills in Hazardville, Conn., killing 10 people, nine of them employees. Among the dead was a man taking a bath and another walking his mule. “Blown out of existence,” the *Hartford Daily Courant* described victims of the disaster.

In the immediate vicinity of the mills, the explosions of tons of gunpowder produced an otherworldly landscape of dead cows and horses, uprooted trees, toppled fences, and acres of grass that looked “as if heavy rollers had passed over it.”

The blasts shattered windows and damaged roofs on houses at least two miles away. In Springfield, Mass., 10 miles away, “houses were jarred as if by an earthquake.” The rumble was “distinctly heard” as far as Northampton and West Brookfield, Mass., roughly 50 miles distant.

Thousands came to view the horrific scene. “One of the most appalling calamities that has occurred in this vicinity for many years,” the *Boston Journal* reported. The cause of the blasts was a “mystery,” newspapers said.



Gunpowder magnate Augustus G. Hazard lived in the Italianate home in Enfield, Conn., pictured above. It burned in 1969. Two members of the Beach family died in the July 1862 explosion at Hazard’s factory. The death of 40-year-old Arthur left seven children without a father. A boulder flung in the air by the blast killed his younger brother James. (Enfield Public Library; Courtesy of John Banks (2))

The company was owned by 60-year-old Augustus George Hazard, a politically well-connected businessman whose friendship with Confederate president Jefferson Davis raised eyebrows in the North. Colonel Hazard’s mills produced thousands of tons of gunpowder for the U.S. war effort—more than any other northern company except the duPont factories in Delaware. Confederate artillerists used Hazard’s gunpowder in the pummeling of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861—the opening salvos of the war.

Born in Rhode Island in 1802, Hazard was the son of a sea captain. After his family moved to Connecticut, he worked on a farm in Columbia there until he was 15, learned the trade of house painting, and eventually

settled in Savannah, Ga., where he became a dealer in paints and oils.

While in his adopted state, Hazard may have even joined the Georgia militia, earning the rank of colonel—a title that stuck with him the rest of his life. Extraordinarily successful, he became part-owner of a coastal shipping company that did a brisk business between New York and Savannah. The colonel was especially interested in one product: gunpowder.

By 1843, Hazard had assumed full ownership of a gunpowder company in Enfield, Conn., naming himself president and general manager. “Shrewd, energetic” and with deep interest in politics, the ardent Democrat became one of the state’s wealthiest men. Hazard and his wife, Salome, settled in Enfield, where he raised a family and built a mansion on Enfield Street, a few miles from his rapidly growing company.

By the outbreak of the war, the sprawling Hazard Powder Co. in Enfield covered over 400 acres and included massive infrastructure: rolling and granulating mills, woodworking, ironworking, and machine shops, packing houses, magazines, hydraulic presses, and more. In all, there were nearly 125 buildings—an operation that dwarfed Jackson’s in Philadelphia.

Power to operate the mills’ 25 water wheels and three stream engines came from the nearby Scantic River. Canals carried water to the complex, where Hazard also made gun cartridges and fireworks. Hazard’s employees voted to change the name of the industrial village to “Hazardville” in the colonel’s honor.



Civilians and soldiers investigate Washington Arsenal building ruins after the June 1864 disaster. (Library of Congress)

Work at Hazard’s company was difficult and often dangerous. In April 1855, Hazard’s eldest son, 23-year-old Horace, was mortally wounded by a gunpowder explosion at his father’s mill. Later that year, a wagonload of powder exploded, killing a teamster and his two horses, injuring a young girl, and damaging the roof of a powder mill. The next year, three horribly burned workers died following an explosion. In a blast in September 1858, the superintendent and three workmen were instantly killed.

The company mandated some safety rules. Fearful of sparks setting off gunpowder, Hazard banned iron and steel tools as well as pipes and matches for obvious reasons. Workers wore shoes made with wooden pegs instead of iron nails. Large, stone blast walls separated buildings.

Even Hazard, though, couldn’t plan for unexpected mischief by Mother Nature: In late April 1861, a lightning strike on kegs of powder produced an explosion heard as far away as Hartford. Remarkably, no one was injured.

Fifteen months later, however, the human toll of the accidental explosions was heart-rending. James Beach, who worked in the fireworks building, was washing in a brook after his shift when blasts rocked the grounds. Responders found the 28-year-old's body in the water, partially covered by a large rock. Beach had started work at the company only days earlier.

The only remains found of the six men who worked in the 20- by 30-foot press room, where the disaster probably originated, was a detached foot discovered about a quarter-mile from the blast zone. Arthur Beach, James' 40-year-old brother and the married father of seven children, worked there. So did luckless Patrick Fallon, who was on his first day on the job, and Henry Clark, a married father of five. Leno Monsean, another press room victim, had only recently been married.

The initial explosion triggered four more at surrounding buildings. To escape injury, panic-stricken workers in the cartridge-making building burst through doors and leaped through windows.

In 1864 the Washington Arsenal was the largest federal arsenal creating and storing ammunition for the Union Army. Because women often had slenderer fingers, they were better able to roll, fill with gunpowder, and pack cartridges into crates. Seated at their long benches, the women were not allowed to talk while at their tasks and their full, flowing dresses were made of flammable material. Hundreds of young women and girls were employed by the arsenal to create ammunition for the war effort. On June 17, 1864, fireworks left in the sun outside a cartridge room ignited, and

a resulting spark caused thousands of cartridges to flare in a massive explosion. When the room at the Washington Arsenal set ablaze after the explosion, the women were mostly trapped. Twenty-one women and girls were killed. "One young lady ran out of the building with her dress all in flames, and was at once seized by a gentleman, who, in order to save her, plunged her into the river. He, however, burned his hands and arms badly in the effort. Three others, also in flames, started to run up the hill and the upper part of their clothing was torn off by two gentlemen nearby, who thus, probably saved the girls from a horrid death, but in the effort, they too were badly injured," *The Washington Evening Star* reported a day later. "The scene was horrible beyond description. Under the metal roof of the building were seething bodies and limbs, mangled scorched and charred beyond the possibility of identification," another local newspaper reported. President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton attended funeral services three days later, and Stanton told army authorities, "You will not spare any means or expense to express the respect and sympathy of the government for the deceased and their surviving friends." A tall marble monument in honor of the girls was carved by Irish American sculptor Lot Flannery and stands today in the Congressional Cemetery near Capitol Hill. It is simply titled "Grief." The names of all 21 of the victims are inscribed on the base. —
Melissa A. Winn

The catastrophe could have been worse. A building packed with coarse, unground gunpowder was damaged, but it didn't explode. Enough gunpowder was in another building "to have destroyed the whole

village” if it had exploded, the *Courant* reported.

“One young lady ran out of the building with her dress all in flames, and was at once seized by a gentleman, who, in order to save her, plunged her into the river. He, however, burned his hands and arms badly in the effort. Three others, also in flames, started to run up the hill and the upper part of their clothing was torn off by two gentlemen nearby, who thus, probably saved the girls from a horrid death, but in the effort, they too were badly injured,” *The Washington Evening Star* reported a day later.

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En route home via train from New York, Hazard received word of the disaster at a stop in Berlin, Conn. His financial losses were estimated at \$15,000—\$12,000 for the roughly 10 tons of gunpowder that exploded, \$3,000 for five wooden buildings destroyed. But that was merely a dent in Hazard’s booming business.

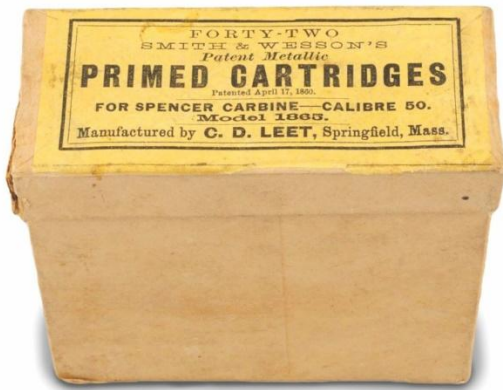
“The loss will not interfere with the operations of the company,” the *Courant* reported, “as there are 75 mills left.” Hazard, who began re-building almost immediately, continued to fill U.S. Army orders. By January 1864, his company was producing 12,500 pounds of gunpowder daily.

At 3:30 p.m. on November 5, 1862, sisters Lucy and Nancy Gray were toiling in the

small munitions factory on College Green, on the northern outskirts of Jackson, Miss. Roughly 40 people, mostly women and girls, worked in the two-story brick building that formerly housed a school for boys. Workers made artillery shells on the first floor, cartridges for small arms on the second. *Kaboom!*

A blast of unknown origin at the arsenal rocked the buildings of Jackson—the state capital and a center for manufacturing, munitions production, and military hospitals. Hundreds ran to the blast site. Firefighters quickly arrived, but they didn’t have access to water. They discovered a gruesome tableau of mangled bodies and charred flesh. Dangling from a tree was the body of a girl, her clothes still aflame. The explosion tossed workers like rag dolls, 50 to 150 yards from the factory.

“The sight was horrible,” reported the *Memphis Commercial*. “But there was another scene still more horrible, if that was possible, than the work of death—it was the sight of screaming women and maddened men calling aloud for their children! The loved one that had left them at the noon meal, rejoicing in their youth and in the attractions of beauty, like a holocaust of maidens, offered in impious sacrifice to the Moloch of war.”



The U.S. Army contracted the C.D. Leet & Co. to make the Civil War era's high-tech ammunition, metal cartridges that did not need percussion caps to detonate. Each round contained its own primer in the raised rim at the base of the cartridge. The ammunition allowed breechloading weapons like the Spencer to fire quite rapidly. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)

None of the four Confederate officers in charge of the operation were in the building when the explosion occurred. One was “providentially absent,” sick in his room. No employee survived the disaster—the Confederacy’s second-worst munitions factory catastrophe. For the Grays’ widowed mother, the tragedy was searing. Less than three months later, her son would die in a gruesome train accident.

“The unparalleled fact of the greater portion of the victims being helpless women is dreadful indeed,” a Mississippi newspaper wrote.

Perhaps a higher power spared a young man who made cartridges. He repeatedly complained about safety procedures but was ignored by a foreman. The morning of the disaster, he noticed gunpowder scattered about—a dangerous sign. Powder grains would stick to a pan and “flash”—suddenly

burst into flame—when placed over a wick to melt wax to seal cartridges.

Less than five hours before the catastrophe, he nearly leaped through a window after a flash. But his supervisor again ignored his complaints. Incensed, the young man quit on the spot—and thus became the last employee to leave the building uninjured. As soon as he heard the blast, Charles M. Atwood knew—*oh, my, he knew*. “There goes Leet’s cartridge factory,” the young man said to himself. Then he sprinted from his boarding house toward his former place of employment blocks away, in the heart of Springfield.

At 2:30 p.m. on March 16, 1864, a series of explosions at the C.D. Leet & Co. cartridge factory on Market Street reverberated in town. Leet’s employed 24 women and girls and 24 men at the factory, which made metallic cartridges for Joslyn and Spencer carbines and other weapons.

Small explosions and accidents were common at the three-story factory leased by 40-year-old Charles Dwight Leet. A week or two earlier, Atwood—as others also had recently—quit his job there because he dreaded the potential for something much worse. Perhaps he was pushed over the edge by an accident at Leet’s factory the previous month, when roughly a half-pound of gunpowder blew up—frightening more than a dozen female employees, burning five of them, and filling a room with smoke. But that accident paled when compared with this disaster. The final death toll was nine—four in the explosions and subsequent fire, five afterward. About a dozen suffered injuries.

Atwood and 10th Massachusetts Lieutenant Lemuel Oscar Eaton and Private John Nye—who just happened to be in the neighborhood—dashed into the burning factory to aid victims. To avoid an even greater disaster, Atwood helped remove kegs of gunpowder. As Eaton tossed cases out of harm's way, another explosion rocked the building, briefly knocking the officer senseless. He was due to return to his regiment the next day.

After removing four cases, Atwood and Eaton were moving another when it exploded. Somehow both escaped without serious injuries. (Two months later, Eaton was badly wounded in the leg at the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse.) Nye recovered from burns to return to his regiment.

Upon their arrival shortly after the first blast, Springfield firemen discovered a grim scene: flames leaping from shattered windows, huge columns of smoke, wailing victims, scores of gawkers, and friends and family searching for loved ones employed at the factory.

Fourteen screaming girls leaped from the third floor onto the roof of the shop next to the factory. They “were removed by ladders,” the *Springfield Republican* reported, “after the most frantic threats” to keep them from jumping to the ground.

“The appearance of those who were worst injured was shocking beyond description,” the *Republican* reported. “Every garment of their clothing was blown or burnt off, and some of them were literally a blistered and blackened mass from head to foot. So badly

were they burnt that it is surprising that they were not instantly killed.”

Calista Evans, a widow from New York, was burned over her entire body and died the next day at her sister's house in Springfield. She was on her second day on the job. Laura Bishop, who only recently had returned to work after an accident at the factory, also died.



Leet's factory also made unusual pinfire cartridges that were needed for the Lefauchaux Model 1854 revolver made in France. The U.S. Army had some 10,000 of those revolvers in its inventory when the war began. When the trigger was pulled, the hammer drove the brass pin that contained an explosive mixture. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)

John Herbert Simpson, a 27th Massachusetts veteran, was standing near the loading room when the first explosion rocked the building. “Shockingly burnt,” the 19-year-old died the next morning. His 15-year-old sister, Anna, also suffered injuries.

Willard Hall and Horace Richardson, Leet's business partners, also died the day after the

explosions. Hall, who supervised 20 men and women, suffered severe burns on his head and chest; Richardson fell through a set of stairs and into the cellar after the final explosion. He was attempting to save girls on the second floor.

Intense heat and fire caused the discharge of bullets from completed cartridges. Two put holes in the hat of contractor Jesse Button, who aided victims inside the factory and escaped with minor injuries. Another narrowly missed the head of a woman at her workplace on Main Street. Yet another zipped into a nearby dental office but caused no injuries.

Underscoring the horror, depraved onlookers picked up ghastly souvenirs: pieces of burnt flesh and fingers of victims. The following day, a crowd gathered to examine the disaster area. Some of the ghouls among them snatched “any piece of a partially burned dress, or other scrap the *Republican* reported, “as a memento of the terrible scene.”

A coroner’s jury of inquest determined the chain-reaction catastrophe began in the second-floor loading room. A flame from an exploding cartridge apparently caused another blast fueled by fulminate and gunpowder. A massive explosion momentarily lifted the third floor. In the chaos, panic-stricken employees descended the stairs, their burning clothes igniting cases of gunpowder.

Authorities reprimanded Leet, who was not in the factory when disaster struck, for woeful safety procedures. “Hazardous,” “highly censurable,” “highly reprehensible,”

the coroner’s investigation called his operation.

In a subsequent U.S. government investigation, an inspector called Leet’s copper cartridges, and the compounds used inside them, “exceedingly dangerous for magazines and transportation.” But Leet, who wasn’t charged with a crime, re-opened his factory weeks later.

And so the war—and cartridge-making—dragged on.

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