

## *The Cannon in Cane Creek*

The first thing I want to say is, “It isn’t there anymore. Don’t go looking for it!”

This story has its origins in the battle of Shiloh and the heavy fighting on the morning of April 6, 1862. The 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Light Artillery, Capt. Emil Munch in command, was camped on the Eastern Corinth Road not far from the current park’s southern boundary. When the Confederate attack rolled toward them the cannoneers deployed their six guns and did their best to halt the gray tide. Five men and twenty-two horses were killed and Capt. Much was severely wounded in the thigh.

Confederate artillery joined in the fight and a cannonball slammed into one of the Union cannon and disabled it for the rest of the fight. It was hauled away to Pittsburg Landing and after the battle it was found the axle body had been hit and cracked. The axle itself was made of iron and was protected by the thick wooden axle body which supported the weight of the heavy barrel. It was the body which had absorbed the brunt of the damage.

Ideally the cannon barrel would be placed on a new carriage. This wasn’t an option after the battle so the axle body was strengthened with a few iron bands and pronounced ready for service. Munch’s Battery was not involved in the fighting during the subsequent siege of Corinth so the repair was never tested under battle conditions.

The gun in question was a bronze 12 pounder howitzer, a smoothbore weapon that could throw a shell over a thousand yards. The barrel was pretty hefty, weighing in, on average, at about 785 pounds.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Battery was directed to send two howitzers to support the infantry guarding the Memphis Road beyond Alexander’s Crossroads. (The Mount Carmel Methodist Church on Wenasoga Road is at the old Alexander’s Crossroads.)

Sergeant William Z. Clayton, who was an acting Lieutenant and had also been wounded at Shiloh, led the two guns out from Corinth and spent a couple of tense days waiting for the Confederates to appear. On the morning of October 3<sup>rd</sup> the Confederates under Van Dorn attacked and the tiny force of infantry and artillery were no match for them. The Union forces fell back steadily and occasionally took the time to fire a few shots to slow the enemy.

The repaired gun seemed to be holding up fine until the fifth shot when the reinforcing bands split and the damaged axle body began to come apart. The gun was attached to the limber and the six horses began pulling it in the direction of Corinth. As they approached Cane Creek the axle snapped and the gun was disconnected from the limber. In a final effort to save the cannon the prolong rope was attached to the end of the carriage and the artillerymen attempted to pull the carriage across the Cane Creek bridge using brute force. They couldn’t do it. They heaved but the rope snapped and its fate was sealed.

With the enemy hot on their heels Sgt. Clayton ordered the barrel to be spiked and the remains of the weapon pushed over the edge of the bluff into Cane Creek. If the enemy was going to capture it, Clayton was not going to make it easy for them. “Thunk!” Cane Creek was dry and the barrel landed on the sandy bed as the artillerymen raced for the heights of Oliver’s Hill.

A spare gun was brought in from town and the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Light Artillery kept up the fight for the rest of the battle. The following day, when the fighting was done and the dust had settled, the cannon was found to be safe and sound on the bed of Cane Creek. The Confederates had been too busy to fish the thing out of the ravine and so it avoided capture.

A work crew hauled it into town where the spike was removed from the vent and the barrel placed on a new carriage. The men of Munch's Battery were delighted. The gun was back in fighting trim and was called on soon enough during the Vicksburg campaign.

Sergeant William Clayton came out of the fight smelling like a rose. He was promoted to Lieutenant and later to Captain in command of the battery. After the war he returned to Winona, Minnesota and Clayton Township in the south of the state bears his name.

So where is the gun today? Good question without a good answer. It may be on display at Shiloh; we have over two dozen Union made howitzers which might or might not be the gun in question. Or it could be on display at Gettysburg or Antietam or in some courthouse square anywhere from New York to Iowa. The records which trace the pedigree of cannons are pretty shoddy and it's difficult to identify a gun to a particular unit.

At Shiloh we have three cannons (out of 226) which we can trace to the batteries which used them in battle. One is a beautiful Confederate piece cast from North Carolina church bells and another is a Union howitzer with all of the unit's battles carved into the breech. The third gun? Well the third gun is very special. It was a Union gun captured at Shiloh and then recaptured here at Corinth. We put in on permanent display last week in the lobby of the Interpretive Center and I'll bet you can guess the topic of next week's conclusion to my "Artillery Trilogy."