

"The Glory of Old Cannon"

By: Thor Borresen, June 12, 1939

(In triplicate)

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THE GLORY OF OLD CANNON

by
Thor Borresen
Junior Park Research Technician
Colonial National Historical Park
Yorktown, Virginia

Few there are, if any, young or old, who do not take a second look when they see the word cannon, or whose interest is not quickened when they hear it mentioned, and probably there are still fewer who have not a feeling of respect for those old cast-iron or bronze guns mounted on village greens or town squares throughout the country. Why should Americans not have a feeling of respect for old cannon? Upon the power of these guns, the valour of the men who manned them, and the unceasing determination of the men who made their creation and accoutrements possible, our nation was built.

Washington for six years fought the greatest and most powerful nation in the world; pitted his small and poorly equipped army against a powerful enemy with unlimited resources of guns, ships, and man power, and finally made it come to terms. His early military training was not acquired on the battlefields of Europe, where battles were fought with military precision and

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age-old custom. His training was procured in the hard, cruel warfare of the frontier—in battles where no quarter was asked or given—battles infinitely unlike those in Europe, where fields had been cultivated for years, a single soldier could be seen at a distance of more than 1,000 yards, and outcomes were determined by man power and guns and strategy.

How everlastingly galling the memory of such defeats as Braddock's, a defeat impossible to deter by strategy employed in Europe, a defeat following a fight in which Indians appeared suddenly and unexpectedly from ambush, struck a hard blow, and disappeared, only to reappear in another, vulnerable spot. In frontier combats a whole army could be hidden within a few hundred feet of an unsuspecting opponent; from concealed guns one's comrades fell dead and wounded beside one; and no one could discern the direction in which to fire to retaliate. In such warfare was the training of our great military leader. We wonder if Washington had any realization in those early days of his career how well this experience would serve him, and how valuable it would prove to be in later years.

When we consider the eventual outcome of the Revolutionary War, can we say that Washington was ever defeated in any of the battles or skirmishes fought during the war? Hardly, when we consider the tactics and manoeuvres instigated by him.

Only a fool-hardy individual would have dared to meet the English troops in an open frontal attack with such troops and equipment as existed in the colonies. General Gage tried it in South Carolina against Cornwallis with disastrous results. Washington, with his sense of responsibility to the men under him and to the colonies as a whole, realized this. His frontier training became one of his greatest assets. If he could not meet the English on equal footing, why not render a hard blow at every opportunity? If he could not defeat them in open battle, why should he not try to wear them down? Burgoyne's surrender in 1777 is an example of this training. He was harassed continually from every angle, until his resistance became more and more feeble and he was finally pocketed.

The failure of Cornwallis's campaigns in the Carolinas against General Greene, and later in Virginia against Lafayette, proved the value of the tactic to strike hard and retire at every opportunity. When Cornwallis reached Yorktown he was a tired man. Both French and American journals written by officers present at the siege of Yorktown mention the poor defense provided by him at that post. On march through the South the rear portion of his army had been constantly tormented by the Americans, but whenever the British main army was deployed and cannon placed in position the enemy had vanished. Did he expect the same in York-

town? When his cannon commenced firing, did he expect the American Army to disappear? If so, his calculations failed, for here he found the American Army prepared to stand its ground. The result is well known, and the Americans' miscellaneous collection of cannon did its share toward the surrender.

Many Allied officers who had received training in the greatest armies of Europe, where every piece of cannon was constructed for a specific use and men trained to perfection, must have wondered at the heterogeneous equipment carried by the Continentals, especially by the militia. How inadequate by comparison the artillery of the colonies! A three-pounder where there should have been a six-pounder. A cast-iron naval or garrison piece where there should have been a light, bronze cannon. The gun carriages consisting of a mixture of field and siege carriages to make suitable conveyances for naval or garrison guns in the field. One author calls it a mongrel system.¹ Another gives a good account of the artillery in use and of the limited number of cannon procured from the various foundries in the colonies. Insufficient resources permitted acquiring them only in

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small quantities.² Knox cursed the shells for not fitting the guns. Even Washington himself must have looked skeptically at his army on the march. But his skepticism concerned only their equipment - he knew the determination behind each man; he knew the sacrifices they were willing to make in order to have a country they could call their own; and with this knowledge and faith, he planned his every move. He would attack only when the odds were not too great, often only when there was a possibility of capturing a few cannon and supplies which could be added to his equipage. Thus, many of his small but quick and unexpected attacks were made in order to augment his supplies.

Napoleon has always been considered one of the world's greatest military geniuses. As a military strategist and an organizer he was. He could not master his own ego, nor could he control his personal ambitions, but he did have an uncanny knowledge of psychology. He used the egos and ambitions of his soldiers as a means to gain his own ends, and placated them by freely giving out medals and promotions as service rewards. He failed to see that his country gradually was losing its man power and that its entire economic system was being thrown out of balance. When he did, it was too late. He had made too many enemies, which

² Birchiner, William L., Historical Sketch of the Organization, Administration, Matériel and Tactics of the Artillery, United States Army, (Washington, D. C., 1884).

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Washington was not only a great military leader, but a great statesman as well. After gaining freedom for his country, he steered its course until it was safely organized, and its Constitution safely functioning. Many of the principles laid down by Washington are still followed to this day. Nations which were considered world powers when this country was struggling for independence have since lessened considerably in importance, whereas this nation has never taken one step backward and today is the greatest power in the world.

To follow the story cannon have played in the rise and fall of nations would be a lengthy task and would take volumes to record. Their development and power is obvious. When diplomats have failed to settle an important question, the army and its cannon have been called into action to compel others to listen or, as has often happened, to meet defeat. When the huge mortar planted before Petersburg, Virginia, during the War Between the States

⁵Ibid.

was called "The Dictator", how well it was named.

Let us now consider what has become of all the ancient cannon. Many of them, both bronze and cast-iron, were recast into new guns. Some, especially those which have been regarded as trophies, have been placed in various government yards surrounding government buildings, usually mounted on a concrete block or a cast-iron stand. Others we find in the most out of the way places. Photograph No. 1 shows an old American cast-iron field gun, or rather a conversion into one, as can be seen by the piece of wrought iron wrapped around the neck of the button in order to form the two lugs needed for an elevating screw. This gun is mounted on an old tree stump, in front of an inn, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. In ~~Aspen~~^{Portsmouth}, Virginia, you will find one on the corner of Court and High Streets with its muzzle stuck in the ground. This is an old cast-iron piece dating back to Queen Anne's time. Why is it there, and what is its history? Probably no one knows. Many are found buried half way in earth or concrete near the docks and keys, used as deadmen for fastening ropes of ships lying at the dock. Others are used as fences, by the simple attachment of chains. Usages are many - too many and too numerous to mention.

To the War and Navy Departments we owe a debt of grati-

tude for having preserved old guns for future students of military history, a history in which they played a large part. Even when a call came for old metal to be cast into new and modern weapons, the army and navy resolutely retained their old guns as trophies. In the last few years another government department has begun to show real interest in these relics—the National Park Service, ~~a branch~~ of the Department of the Interior. Recently thirteen original guns were presented to Colonial National Historical Park at Yorktown, Virginia, by courtesy of the United States War Department. Seven of these were guns surrendered in Yorktown by Cornwallis and bear the inscription

Surrendered by the Capitulation of Yorktown
October 19, 1781.

But of the 240 guns surrendered, only about twenty-five or thirty can be accounted for. Where are the rest?

The National Park Service is endeavoring to place these old trophies before the public in the one and only way they should be presented. Other guns are lying on a concrete block, a piece of wood, the ground, or wherever they may be displayed, but the Park Service is displaying them in their proper element. Photograph No. 2 shows the Grand French Battery, one of the siege batteries of the Allies' first parallel erected before Yorktown in 1781, now a reconstructed earthwork in Colonial National Histor-

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Surely this method of presenting the nation's relics to the public is of a much greater interest than that method used so prevalently by which the old cannon represent merely a piece of cast-iron or bronze with a hole through the center, and when two or more guns are laid in a row the second or third receives hardly any consideration. Here, it is different. Here, one, two, three, or more in a row create an entirely different impression. Here, they represent the power and determination of a people wanting to be free and independent. They tell a story of a victory, a story in which, when statesmen's words failed, their voices spoke and were heeded.

⁴Muller, John, A Treatise of Artillery, (Philadelphia, 1779).

⁵Birkhiser, op. cit.

⁶Scheel, M. de, Memoires D'Artillerie, Contenant L'Artillerie Nouvelle on Les Changemens Fait Dan L'Artillerie Francaise en 1765, (Paris, [1795]).

Today the National Park Service has established Historical and Military Parks throughout the whole nation. These parks represent the development of the country in every phase from its origin to modern times. Assistance and cooperation from every institution and individual is needed. Already too many of our valuable relics have disappeared. Let us preserve, displayed in their proper sphere, those we have left.

TB,OD
May 23, 1959.



Photograph No. 1

Illustrating a method occasionally found for mounting old relics. The gun is an early American one, originally a naval type. The wrought iron collar placed on the bottom for an elevating screw permitted its use on a field carriage.



Photograph No. 2

The Grand French Battery. In the foreground two 8" howitzers, one English and one French; upper center, 10" English bronze mortar; top, three French carriages mounting three American cast-iron guns of 1797.

(GNHP #6780)



Photograph No. 5

French Battery No. 2, second parallel. Showing two cast-iron English naval guns taken from York River mounted on French carriages of the earlier type---1751-1764. In right center are shown two 8" howitzers and carriages. Limber shown on extreme right.

(GNHP #6792)



Photograph No. 4

American Battery No. 2, second parallel, originally mounted ten 18-pounders, one 6" howitzer, three 10" mortars, and two Cohorns. Only four cast-iron guns are available for mounting in this battery. Redoubt No. 9 can be seen in the distance.

(CSHP #6799)



Photograph No. 5

One English 5.8" howitzer and carriage mounted in Redoubt No. 9. Two of this type of howitzer were captured when the redoubt was taken by the French on the night of October 14, 1781.

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How everlastingly galling the memory of such defeats as Braddock's, a defeat impossible to deter by strategy employed in Europe, a defeat following a fight in which Indians appeared suddenly and unexpectedly from ambush, struck a hard blow, and disappeared, only to reappear in another, vulnerable spot. In frontier combats a whole army could be hidden within a few hundred feet of an unsuspecting opponent; from concealed guns one's comrades fell dead and wounded beside one; and no one could discern the direction in which to fire to retaliate. In such warfare was the training of our great military leader. We wonder if Washington had any realization in those early days of his career how well this experience would serve him, and how valuable it would prove to be in later years.

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⁴ Guller, John, A Treatise of Artillery, (Philadelphia, 1779).

⁵ Birkhizer, op. cit.

⁶ Schœl, M. de, Mémoires D'Artillerie, Contenant L'Artillerie Nouvelle ou Les Changemens Fait Dan L'Artillerie Française en 1765, (Paris, [1795]).

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The Grand French Battery. In the foreground two 8" howitzers, one English and one French; upper center, 10" English bronze mortar; top, three French carriages mounting three American cast-iron guns of 1797.

(GNHP #6780)



Photograph No. 5

French Battery No. 2, second parallel. Showing two cast-iron English naval guns taken from York River mounted on French carriages of the earlier type—1751-1764. In right center are shown two 8" howitzers and carriages. Limber shown on extreme right.

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⁵ Ibid.

was called "The Dictator", how well it was named.

Let us now consider what has become of all the ancient cannon. Many of them, both bronze and cast-iron, were recast into new guns. Some, especially those which have been regarded as trophies, have been placed in various government yards surrounding government buildings, usually mounted on a concrete block or a cast-iron stand. Others we find in the most out of the way places. Photograph No. 1 shows an old American cast-iron field gun, or rather a conversion into one, as can be seen by the piece of wrought iron wrapped around the neck of the button in order to form the two lugs needed for an elevating screw. This gun is mounted on an old tree stump, in front of an inn, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. In ^{Portsmouth} ~~Norfolk~~, Virginia, you will find one on the corner of Court and High Streets with its muzzle stuck in the ground. This is an old cast-iron piece dating back to Queen Anne's time. Why is it there, and what is its history? Probably no one knows. Many are found buried half way in earth or concrete near the docks and keys, used as deadmen for fastening ropes of ships lying at the dock. Others are used as fences, by the simple attachment of chains. Usages are many - too many and too numerous to mention.

To the War and Navy Departments we owe a debt of grati-

tude for having preserved old guns for future students of military history, a history in which they played a large part. Even when a call came for old metal to be cast into new and modern weapons, the army and navy resolutely retained their old guns as trophies. In the last few years another government department has begun to show real interest in these relics—the National Park Service, ~~a branch~~ of the Department of the Interior. Recently thirteen original guns were presented to Colonial National Historical Park at Yorktown, Virginia, by courtesy of the United States War Department. Seven of these were guns surrendered in Yorktown by Cornwallis and bear the inscription

Surrendered by the Capitulation of Yorktown
October 19, 1781.

But of the 240 guns surrendered, only about twenty-five or thirty can be accounted for. Where are the rest?

The National Park Service is endeavoring to place these old trophies before the public in the one and only way they should be presented. Other guns are lying on a concrete block, a piece of wood, the ground, or wherever they may be displayed, but the Park Service is displaying them in their proper element. Photograph No. 2 shows the Grand French Battery, one of the siege batteries of the Allies' first parallel erected before Yorktown in 1781, now a reconstructed earthwork in Colonial National Histor-

ical Park. Photograph No. 5 is another battery which has been reconstructed in the Park's battlefield area, a portion of the Allied second parallel. The drawings for the construction of the carriages shown in these two pictures were made from a book⁴ said to be the constant companion of the American artillery officers and the men in the shops.⁵ For the French carriages, a French publication was used, thus insuring authentic construction.⁶

Surely this method of presenting the nation's relics to the public is of a much greater interest than that method used so prevalently by which the old cannon represent merely a piece of cast-iron or bronze with a hole through the center, and when two or more guns are laid in a row the second or third receives hardly any consideration. Here, it is different. Here, one, two, three, or more in a row create an entirely different impression. Here, they represent the power and determination of a people wanting to be free and independent. They tell a story of a victory, a story in which, when statesmen's words failed, their voices spoke and were heeded.

⁴ Muller, John, A Treatise of Artillery, (Philadelphia, 1779).

⁵ Birkhiser, op. cit.

⁶ Scheel, M. de, Memoires D'Artillerie, Contenant L'Artillerie Nouvelle on Les Changemens Fait Dan L'Artillerie Francaise en 1765, (Paris, [1795]).

Today the National Park Service has established Historical and Military Parks throughout the whole nation. These parks represent the development of the country in every phase from its origin to modern times. Assistance and cooperation from every institution and individual is needed. Already too many of our valuable relics have disappeared. Let us preserve, displayed in their proper sphere, those we have left.

IB,OD
May 23, 1959.



Photograph No. 1

Illustrating a method occasionally found for mounting old relics. The gun is an early American one, originally a naval type. The wrought iron collar placed on the bottom for an elevating screw permitted its use on a field carriage.



Photograph No. 2

The Grand French Battery. In the foreground two 8" howitzers, one English and one French; upper center, 10" English bronze mortar; top, three French carriages mounting three American cast-iron guns of 1797.

(GNHP #6780)



Photograph No. 5

French Battery No. 2, second parallel. Showing two cast-iron English naval guns taken from York River mounted on French carriages of the earlier type---1751-1764. In right center are shown two 8" howitzers and carriages. Limber shown on extreme right.

(CHSP #8792)



Photograph No. 4

American Battery No. 2, second parallel, originally mounted ten 18-pounders, one 8" howitzer, three 10" mortars, and two Coehorns. Only four cast-iron guns are available for mounting in this battery. Redoubt No. 9 can be seen in the distance.

(CAMP #6799)



Photograph No. 5

One English 5.8" howitzer and carriage mounted in Redoubt No. 9. Two of this type of howitzer were captured when the redoubt was taken by the French on the night of October 14, 1781.

(CMP #5941)