

# DOVER TIDINGS

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*Civil War Field Desk*

## **Papers from a Civil War Field Desk**

In our last issue Associate Curator Lori Carbone wrote of an unusual Civil War field desk in our collection containing roughly 100 military orders—and other documents associated with the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut Heavy Artillery. As with so many of our artifacts, this piece has more than one tale to tell and, in this issue, we shall consider the story of the desk itself.

Our records indicate that the desk came from the estate of a Dover resident, Lydia A. Higgins (1884-1971). An unmarried music teacher, she was the daughter of Eben and Sarah (Goulding) Higgins of Newton and Dover. There were no apparent connections to Connecticut on either side of her family.

***On removing a drawer, we found on the side  
a neatly carved signature, placed so as to be invisible  
to all but the closest scrutiny***

Constructed of white pine, our desk was clearly handmade, with precisely fitted dovetails and a sculpted partition on the right-hand side suggesting the



*James Humber's signature on inside of drawer*

maker was a skilled craftsman. The worn finish and multiple ink stains point to considerable use. On removing a drawer, we found on the side a neatly carved signature, placed so as to be invisible to all but the closest scrutiny, reading “J Humber, 79<sup>th</sup> NY A”.

Precise identification of the maker was facilitated by the fact that only one of New York's many Civil War soldiers bore the name Humber. James Humber enlisted as a private in Company C of the 79<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry on August 12, 1862. His civilian occupation is given as carpenter. Further research revealed that he was an Englishman, baptized on March 26, 1832 in Burton-in-Kendall, Westmoreland, England and had emigrated to New York City with his parents as an infant in the year of his birth.

The 1860 Federal Census shows James as a 28 year old laborer living in New York's 19<sup>th</sup> Ward (Upper East Side) with wife Anne (24), son John (6), son Monroe (5), daughter Lydia (3), and "Baby Humber" (two months). James Humber's motivation for leaving a wife and four children to enlist in the 79<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry at the age of 30 is not clear, but he may have sought the \$100 enlistment bounty being offered at the time. The 79<sup>th</sup> New York, also known as the Cameron Highlanders, was a Scottish regiment originally formed as a social club in 1858 and uniformed not in regulation Union blue but in traditional Scottish kilts, plaid trews (trousers) and glengarry caps.

***on March 28, 1863, James Humber deserted  
and was arrested exactly one year later***



*Sergeant of the 79th New York Highlanders*

By the time of James' enlistment, the 79<sup>th</sup> was already a battle-hardened regiment, and, with them, he fought at South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In March of 1863 the regiment, demoralized by their defeat at Fredericksburg, was ordered west to join the Vicksburg campaign. Travelling down the Ohio River by steamboat, they stopped briefly in Louisville, Kentucky, where, on March 28, 1863, James Humber deserted. His activities over the next 12 months are unknown, but he was arrested on March 28, 1864 and taken to Alexandria, Virginia, where he served the

remainder of his enlistment in prison. We do not know whether Humber was recaptured or returned of his own accord, however the fact that he came back one year to the day from his departure and his relatively lenient sentence

(deserters were routinely executed by firing squad) suggest that there may have been extenuating circumstances.

***Originally constructed as a factory, the Prince Street Prison survives today as an upscale residential condominium in Alexandria's fashionable Old Town neighborhood***

While situated in the Confederate State of Virginia, the proximity of both Alexandria, Virginia and neighboring Arlington County to Washington, D.C. was such that both were seized by Federal forces at the outbreak of the war and their elevated positions strengthened with multiple forts, batteries, and gun emplacements. Alexandria also became the site of five military prisons housing captured Confederates, Union deserters, and Union soldiers deemed habitually drunk and disorderly. While there are no known records indicating in which prison James Humber was held, the Prince Street Prison at 200 South Fairfax Street is known to have held Union deserters.



*Prince Street Prison, Alexandria, Virginia*

Originally constructed as a factory, the Prince Street Prison survives today as an upscale residential condominium in Alexandria's fashionable Old Town neighborhood, with few reminders of its grim past. The prison's commander and later Superintendent of all military prisons in Alexandria, Captain Rufus D. Pettit of the 12<sup>th</sup> Veteran Reserve Corps, harbored a deep hatred of Union deserters, routinely using torture to coerce "confessions" and walking the

streets outside the prison with a revolver, shooting at prisoners who dared put their heads in the windows.

*the earliest document contained in the desk  
dates from June 10, 1864*

Having determined the identity and circumstances of the desk's maker, our attention turned to the history of the desk itself. As mentioned previously, the contents suggest that it was the property of the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut Heavy Artillery and was almost certainly used by one or more of the regiment's several Assistant Adjutants General, officers whose responsibilities would have included receipt and transmission of military orders and other communications. While the regiment was mustered in on January 2, 1862 and served throughout the war, the earliest document contained in the desk dates from June 10, 1864, and the latest from August 24, 1865.



*Company C, 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery at Fort Brady, Virginia 1864*

The bulk of the orders were transmitted or received by two men, Captain Bela P. Learned of Company A, who became Acting Assistant Adjutant General on October 13, 1862, and Lieutenant Charles W. Filer, also of Company A, who replaced Captain Learned on May 11, 1865.

Having established both the identity of the desk's maker and the regiment in which it was used, we were left with the question of when trajectories of an imprisoned private from a New York infantry regiment and a Connecticut Heavy Artillery regiment would have intersected? Between January and April

of 1864, the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut Heavy Artillery was stationed amongst eight forts and batteries in Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia. All were within a five-mile radius of Prince Street Prison. James Humber would have arrived in Alexandria at some point after his arrest on March 28, 1864. On April 26, 1864 the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut Heavy Artillery was ordered to Bermuda Hundred, some 25 miles southeast of Richmond, Virginia, where it remained until ordered back to Washington, D.C. on July 10, 1865. Allowing for travel, they would probably not have returned to Washington until after James Humber's mustering out with his Company on July 14, 1865. The First Connecticut Heavy Artillery was mustered out on September 25, 1865.

***As a newly arrived prisoner,  
Humber may have welcomed a carpentry project  
as an escape from the brutality of his surroundings***

While certainty is impossible under the circumstances, it might be theorized that an earlier field desk was lost or destroyed, and, needing a replacement, Captain Bela Learned availed himself of prison labor at some point in April of 1864. As a newly arrived prisoner, Humber may have welcomed a carpentry project as an escape from the brutality of his surroundings. The desk would have been passed by Captain Learned to Lieutenant Filer on his assumption of the role of Acting Assistant Adjutant General in May of 1865 and was perhaps brought back to his home at the end of the war.

Charles W. Filer returned to his home in Norwich, Connecticut. He later served as chief in the War Division of the government's pension office under Presidents Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley, dying in Washington on March 24, 1914. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. James Humber returned to the West Farms Village neighborhood of Bronx, New York where he worked in a sawmill. He died on September 28, 1883 and is buried in West Farms Soldier Cemetery. In 1928, his son Winfield Scott Humber applied for and received a veteran's headstone for his father's grave. How the desk came into the possession of Lydia Higgins remains a mystery.

Elisha Lee  
*President*



Seedless grapes were a natural mutation, and farmers learned that by grafting plants they could expand their crop of seedless grapes without needing to grow vines from seedlings.

In 1876 a Scottish immigrant, William Thompson, did just that in California and was soon sharing cuttings with friends. The practice continued and by 1920 the Thompson seedless grape was the preferred variety chosen for producing raisins and was the first commercialized seedless grape (jasminevineyards.com).

Today grapes with seeds are hard to find. At the Caryl Farm we grow an historically local Concord variety that are large and sweet. Visitors in the late summer are encouraged to taste them, and most children are surprised by the seeds. The days of needing the “Everett Raisin Seeder” are truly over.

The tool may be obsolete, but the raisin is still an American mainstay.

Lori Carbone  
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