

The President's Letter

By Chris Pilliod

This is my 50th letter as president and every once in a while something curious in a historical vein catches my ear that is of enough interest to store in my memory bank. I often find myself asking of those events, "what kind of coinage would they have used???" Being an avid collector I always desire to look at the transpirations from the coinage aspect. "What Flying Eagle or Indian cents might have been in their pockets? What condition would they have been in?" Everyone carried cents back in the day; the cent was ubiquitous and carried some meaningful spending weight. Based on the heavy wear that most issues come, surely everyone had a host of them most of the time. They were the "workhorse" of the everyday man's toils. And it wouldn't surprise me in the least bit if someone of the era had two or three bright red Mint State 1877's jingling in their pocket.

One unique historical event in this regard stands out clearly in my mind, and several years ago I was able to visit the site. This event is at the core of nations' history and transpired in the nascent days of small cent coinage. During the years of tenure here at Carpenter Technology I have on a number of occasions traveled the roads between our home plant in Reading, PA to one of our mills in Hartsville, South Carolina. Along the way while enjoying the fresh smell of pines of Virginia and the Carolinas along I-95 I would glance at the brown historical markers denoting various Civil War battlefields. Crunched for time and always faced with a long drive, the signs went mostly unnoticed.

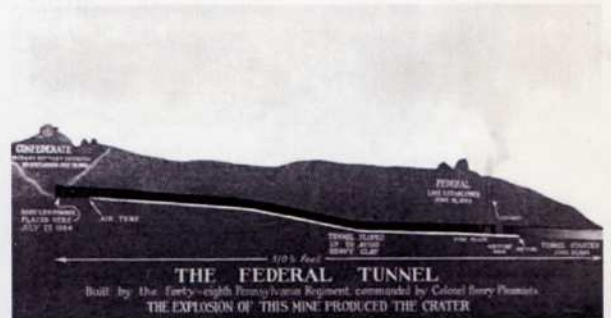
But then some years ago I watched with fascination the Ken Burns documentary on the Civil War. If you have not seen it, please place it on your to-do list. It's a wonderfully portrayed documentary highlighting the key social, political and economic issues of time as well as the bloody battles of a war that dragged on far, far too long for anyone's appetite. Then there was this strangely odd segment that had me, to say the least, fully absorbed involving Union troops at "The Battle of the Crater" during the Petersburg, Virginia campaign. Of enormous intrigue was the leading protagonists of this curious adventure, a small band of "coal crackers" from the mining area of Pottsville, Pennsylvania-- just 25 miles north on Pennsylvania Route 61 from where my office sits. And while I sat there watching I distinctly recalled one of those brown signs off I-95 announcing the Battleground of Petersburg.

As the story unfolded it was certainly a scheme that was hard to swallow, even for a non-military type such as myself. And if it was not a Ken Burns documentary I would have questioned the authenticity. The siege of Petersburg would be the longest lasting battle of the entire Civil War, dragging on from May of 1864 until the Spring of 1865. The Union soldiers engaged in skirmish after skirmish but could not penetrate the Confederate positions atop the large hill southeast of Petersburg. They would make marginal charges, only to be repelled back to the base of the hill.

It was during the spring of 1864 that Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry approached the commanding officers with his outrageous idea to end the stalemate. After all, he and his contretemps were bona fide coal miners and

knew how to handle explosives safely and to advantage. I can imagine their commanding officers' eyes popping as the scrabble-faced boys with the missing teeth laid out their plans to end the battle quickly. Their idea was to secretly bore a large hole at the base of the hill all the way up to just below the Confederate encampment. Once there they would carve out a large den-sized area to accommodate explosives to blow the hilltop to Timbuktu! The final decision came down to General Ulysses S. Grant, who after much rumination, reluctantly gave the go ahead.

The Union boys began digging that June. And dig, dig, dig they did! This would be followed by more digging...the entire month of July would be around-the clock digging. To help conceal their efforts they only moved the dirt to the mouth of the tiny tunnel and then hauled it on out at nighttime. Finally in late



July the 586-foot tunnel was complete and the explosives would be set. The den of the tunnel shaft was filled with 8,000 pounds of gunpowder, buried 20 feet underneath the Confederate's main camp.

The plan was to detonate the charges in the middle of the night and then attack the Confederate positions while they were dazed by the proceedings.

At 4:44 a.m. on July 30, the explosives erupted in a massive shower of earth, men, and guns. A crater was blown open stretching 170 feet by 80 feet wide with a depth of 30 feet. "Clods of earth weighing at least a ton, and cannon, and human forms, and gun-carriages, and small arms were all distinctly seen shooting upward in that fountain of horror," remembered a newspaper correspondent. When the dust settled, a crater 130 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep scarred the landscape where troops had slept a moment before.

The blast destroyed the Confederate fortifications in the immediate vicinity, and instantly killed 351 Confederates. However the Union troops assigned to rush the encampment were confused and tardy in action. Incredibly they charged through Confederate lines and swarmed into the 170-foot crater, only to be trapped and slaughtered in a furious counter charge.

The Confederates gathered as many troops together as they could muster for a counterattack and formed around the crater and began firing rifles and artillery down into the Union troops, in what was later described as a "turkey shoot". This quick response by the Confederates reclaimed the earthworks and drove the Union force back towards the east.

Grant later scribed, "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war." Union casualties were 3,798 (504 killed, 1,881 wounded, 1,413 missing or captured), Confederate casualties were approximately 1,500 (351 killed, 900 wounded, 300 missing or captured).

After soaking in this segment on TV, I told myself I'm stopping to visit that dang tunnel next time down. "Gotta see that tunnel!" I said to myself over and over. So during this winter I did just that.

The large steep hill at the crux of the battle rests only a couple miles off the bustling I-95 interchange. It was a cold blustery day when I visited and I could hear a light rumble of 18-wheelers when I crouched down to stare at the entryway of the tunnel. The tunnel stared back at me with little change from 1864; it was a small opening, not tall enough to stand, and I could envision the Union workers crouching and hauling out their payloads from the opening. What surprised me the most of the tunnel was how small it was, definitely not for the weak of heart or claustrophobics



The entire site was empty from the cold wind except for the attendant two miles back collecting the \$7 entry fee. The tunnel was still fully intact from the battle, except the opening was closed off from a locked chain door. I scanned the area with squinted eyes and when I was confident not another soul was nearby I gave the door a mighty tug... I mean who wouldn't want to re-enact the long crawl to the other end, and imaging placing the explosives in place, quietly slithering back down to the friendly confines of the Union camp, and at a selected time detonating the charge.

But try as I might I couldn't break in for my personal re-enactment. I stood there and wondered, "these guys crawling around in here, I gotta believe most, if not all had a few Indian cents in their pockets, maybe some Flying Eagles, maybe even an 1856 pattern. I wonder how many got lost in the soil during their endeavors, crawling around in the tunnel. And what was in the

pockets of those Confederates atop the hill blown to the smithereens." There's got to be some right around where I'm standing, I thought.

I headed to downtown Petersburg for a bite to eat. Even the downtown area is little changed from the Civil War, old brick buildings with worn out tile entryways dot the main street. Near the train depot the Appomattox River lazily flows along, outlining the north side of downtown. I wandered aimlessly around the entire downtown area, imagining myself a citizen of the town during the battle. Only a mile or two from the battlefield I was sure you could hear the roar of the cannons as you shopped for groceries and goods during the height of the battle.

As I was about to head for lunch, I noticed an elderly gentleman sitting outside a Used Goods store. I gave him the hi-sign and he returned my offering. "Any recommendations for lunch?" I asked.

As he mentioned a couple places and pointed directions, my eyes glanced through the windows of his shop. Man, was the place cluttered. When he mentioned business was slow I wondered if it was because it appeared almost impossible to navigate through the shop. He asked the purpose of my visit and when I explained it, he replied that most Yankees just went to the battlefield and never came downtown. After a long pause in our conversation he looked at me and said, "My grandfather was in the battle."

"You can't be serious??" I queried. I did some quick math and asked how old must have his father been when he was born. He revealed that both his father and his father's father sired children at advanced ages and that indeed his grandfather was a Confederate veteran.

"Lemme show you his discharge paper." And he walked me into his shop, where true to his word was a yellowed document hanging in a cheap metal frame tarnished and skewed. "I'll be damned," I muttered.

"This business has been in my family since after the war," he continued, "and I'm ready to call it a day and retire. You interested in buying it?"

"No," I replied, "it wouldn't be for me."

"Listen," he confided, "someone like you could make a go of it."

"I'm afraid it's a 'no'", I reiterated.

Before I walked off he made one last pitch, "During the height of the battle in 1864, an errant cannonball crashed through a window in the attic on the third floor. They say it was a Union misfire but I am sure they did it on purpose. It pierced the wooden floor and stopped on the second floor. Dad sold the cannonball years ago but we never fixed the floor. Still a great big hole up there. Maybe you could turn it into a tourist showroom."

"Perhaps someone else could," I said. "But is there any way I could have a look? I'd really love to see it."

"Maybe next trip," he suggested. "Right now there too much clutter to even get up there."

So now I'll have to make another stop in Petersburg and just hope I can make a trip up to that attic...