

"A Nuisance in Your Backyard: The Wall's Station Naval Proving Ground"

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The Wall's Station Naval Proving Ground, once located near the border of southeastern Allegheny County and Westmoreland County, began testing artillery for the United States Navy in late 1861. During the Civil War, the Lincoln Administration was interested in the production of large coastal defense weapons capable of sinking an enemy ship with a single solid shot. Heavy cannons and mortars of various sizes were cast at foundries, including the Fort Pitt Foundry located in Pittsburgh, and transported to Wall's Station, a former mail stop along the Pennsylvania Railroad. This passenger station was on the southern side of the Turtle Creek, across from present-day Pitcairn. The heavy cannons would be unloaded at the adjacent rail yard.

One of the unique relics of this time period can be found in Westmoreland County: a 1,080-pound cannonball measuring 20 inches in diameter, sitting upon a concrete pedestal in Trafford's Westmoreland Park. The history of the nearby naval proving ground and how this cannonball ended up in the park is intriguing, but the lesser known story is how the early settlers of Westmoreland and Allegheny Counties, located near this former proving ground, unsuccessfully tried to shut down the government's testing operations.<sup>1</sup>

### **Selecting the Testing Site**

Before the U.S. government purchased a cannon from the Knap Fort Pitt Foundry owners, the guns had to be tested, and a remote area at the edge of Westmoreland County, away from the more populated neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, served as an ideal testing site.

The proving ground once spanned the region that borders two counties, Allegheny and Westmoreland, with the initial testing site operating in what was then known as Patton Township. The principal area for testing was located near the present-day Mossie Bridge that connects Monroeville with North Versailles, the span crossing over the Turtle Creek and the

Norfolk Southern Rail lines. The cannon testing was later moved east, closer to Westmoreland County, nearer to present-day North Huntingdon Township.

Anyone wishing to locate these old proving grounds on a map, or better visualize the span of this once immense operation can obtain a substantial panoramic view of the site by standing in the rear parking/access road behind Haymaker Village Shopping Plaza in Monroeville. From this vantage point, one is provided with a view of the Norfolk Southern railway line down in the valley below, sitting alongside the Turtle Creek. Looking across this creek, the observer is facing a steep hillside that holds State Route 48 as the backdrop to the old site.

This vast area was once referred to as being located in “the hollow of a bluff sixty feet high.”<sup>2</sup> Today, this location falls into the parcels of four districts in Allegheny County (from right to left) Monroeville, Pitcairn, Wall, and North Versailles, and two communities from Westmoreland County, North Huntingdon and Trafford. The view looking east, toward Westmoreland County, was the farthest point for the proving ground where Stewart Station, North Huntingdon Township once sat along the Pennsylvania Railroad. The remains of this old train station still exists today and at the time of this writing was occupied by Irwin Interior Systems at 75 1st Street, Trafford.

### **Artillery Action & Artifacts**

In 1865, the Fort Pitt Foundry cast a 20-inch naval shell gun, the XX-Dahlgren (XX indicating the Roman numerals), nicknamed "Beelzebub." This massive gun, capable of firing projectiles of solid shot, explosive shells, shrapnel, grapeshot, or canister, was tested at the Wall's Station Naval Proving Ground on April 20, 1865. While the gun was never used in the

Civil War, the casting of this gun in Pittsburgh by the Fort Pitt Foundry positioned the company as a significant military producer of iron and steel for the nation's defense.

Post-Civil War, artillery continued to be cast at the Fort Pitt Foundry in Pittsburgh and transported on railcar to Wall's Station. The topography of the steep hillside that currently supports Route 48 (Mossie Boulevard) served as an ideal natural backstop for the hundreds of cannonballs that were fired from the newly forged guns. There was "an immense pile of dirt" in the "bullock pen" that would absorb the impact of the rounds fired against this hill.<sup>3</sup> However, this wasn't always the case; one newspaper account stated that the hillside closer to Wall, Allegheny County, was not as steep, and occasionally the fired missile went up the hill and "landed dangerously near buildings on the Taylor Farm."<sup>4</sup> An apparent outcry from a citizen concerned with the roaming projectiles required moving the location further east down the tracks nearer to present-day Trafford. It was reported that the area near Stewart Station, where the cannonballs were shot into the hillside, caused a "tunnel" 75 feet deep as a result of the many shots fired into that particular spot.<sup>5</sup>

In 1906, John Routh, a retired Pennsylvania Railroad conductor who was interviewed about the proving ground, talked of an "immense amount of metal embedded in the hillside near Mossie until the railroad expansion wiped out a portion of this hill, taking most of the iron relics in its path."<sup>6</sup>

The settlement of Cavittsville, Westmoreland County, encompasses parts of both Trafford Borough and North Huntingdon Township, situated along Brush Creek where one of the massive Dahlgren guns was once tested for the foundry. Civil War author Arthur Fox relayed a story from his research that describes a gun arriving in Cavittsville on a railcar just east of Stewart Station, with the gun still loaded on the railcar, artillerymen fired a massive round into

the hillside across the valley near the present-day Mahaffey Hill Bridge.<sup>7</sup> Based on that description, the gun would have been aimed to fire across the valley, over Brush Creek, and into the hillside beyond. This description matches up with the story passed down to Dolores Bigler Capets, a North Huntingdon Township resident, who has lived near the Mahaffey Hill Bridge for over 80 years. Mrs. Capets can still recall the location of a small cavern that once existed in the hillside. Her father, Roy C. Bigler, was contracted in 1909 by Westmoreland County to build a steel bridge that spanned Brush Creek.<sup>8</sup> Near this location, Capets remembers a time during her youth when local boys would climb the side of the hill near this bridge to access the impression carved into the hillside that resulted from the impact of one of these fired rounds. Erosion and settlement of the earth has since wiped away the remnant of this old cavern.

The cannonball that is located in Westmoreland Park at the corner of Bruce Street and East Edgewood Avenue, Trafford, is a surviving artifact of the Wall's Station proving grounds, said to have been fired in the area between Trafford and Pitcairn near Mosside Boulevard. The legend mounted below the relic describes the ball being retrieved from the hillside of the proving grounds by former Cavittsville resident Richard Custer. Custer was a former Union Army soldier who enlisted in the 39<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in June 1861.<sup>9</sup> After the war, he married Sophia Cavitt and the couple settled in an old log home once situated in Cavittsville, North Huntingdon Township. Custer held on to the cannonball until the time their homestead was razed from a track widening project conducted by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Custer sought the help of his son-in-law, John O. George, to move the 1,080 pound cannonball onto his daughter Mary's property, the two men used a team of horses to relocate the relic. The cannon ball was mounted on a concrete pedestal outside of the George home where it sat near the corner of Brickner Street and Cavittsville Road in Trafford for decades. In 1990, Rebecca Jean Smith

donated the cannonball and pedestal to the Trafford community in memory of her parents John and Mary George. In 1998, a bronze plaque was added to the base of the pedestal.

### **A Naval Nuisance**

The lesser known story about the proving ground site, and its clash with the early inhabitants of this area, reveals how the political influences of the time were successful in quelling the desires of local residents wanting to live peacefully in this part of Westmoreland County after capitalist business interests were able to have a new law created in Harrisburg in order to continue the commercial operations.

In March 1871, a complaint was filed with the Allegheny County district attorney and a case was brought before the Allegheny County Court of Quarter Sessions by citizens living near the proving grounds protesting that the use and enjoyment of their land was being interfered with by the testing operations of the Knap Fort Pitt Foundry and others. A nuisance charge was filed asserting that the “firing of these guns shakes the whole neighborhood breaking glass in windows, knocking down plastering, cracking the walls, disturbing the sick, and rendering the vicinity for several miles around generally uncomfortable.”<sup>10</sup> The initial complaint was said to stem from events that occurred during the months of December 1870 and January 1871 when naval officers were conducting experiments in Patton Township that required the rapid firing of cannons every few minutes during the day. The conditions endured by the local residents that winter were covered in a story written by the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* describing the methods used to test the guns for their endurance and strength at the site. The narrative of what these locals tolerated can be highlighted here: “After these three preliminary tests, the guns are to be tested with five hundred rounds, each of sixty pounds mammoth powder, and one solid shot of four

hundred and forty pounds. After the five hundred and ninth round the firing to be continued with one hundred pounds of powder and one solid shot to each round.”<sup>11</sup>

The locals may have found partial relief one day in December when the firing abruptly ceased after a gun being tested was fired two hundred and ninety-nine times until the carriage holding the weapon gave way and the gun fell to the ground.<sup>12</sup>

Those initiating the complaint were represented by then Allegheny County district attorney Alfred L. Pearson, a former Union Army General and a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. While we do not know the names of the key residents involved in bringing forth the complaint, the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* reported that the prosecution was also represented by attorneys “J.P. Penney and G. Stewart.” John P. Penney was a former Pennsylvania State Senator, serving in 1863 as Speaker, retiring from the Senate in 1865, and then entering private legal practice in Pittsburgh.<sup>13</sup> Penney formed a partnership with another former state senator, William George Hawkins. The “G. Stewart” may have been a typo in the newsprint as it can be surmised that the article was actually referring to “Ekin Stewart,” also known as attorney Robert Ekin Stewart, a former resident of Stewart Station, Westmoreland County. Stewart, who was born in North Huntingdon Township in 1841, was also a former officer in the Union Army and began working in the offices of Penney and Hawkins in 1866.<sup>14</sup> Stewart was admitted to the Allegheny County Bar in May 1867, and, with his siblings still living at Stewart Station at the time of the nuisance complaint, he would likely have been informed by family members about the incessant testing at the adjacent proving grounds causing damage to nearby dwellings, if not observing the conditions himself first-hand.

The defendants named in the case were listed as follows: Charles Knap, Joseph M. Knap, Orlando Metcalf, John McCune, George Myers, Elliott Ramsey, John Graham, and Elias

Cashdollar. The two notable defendants listed here include Charles Knap, owner of the Fort Pitt Cannon Foundry, and Joseph Moss Knap, his nephew and superintendent of the foundry,<sup>15</sup> who was also a former Union Army officer during the Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

On April 11, 1871, the nuisance case was presented before Judge Frederick H. Collier and a jury of twelve “good and lawful men.”<sup>17</sup> The initial jury was unable to come to an agreement on a verdict, and Judge Collier, also a former officer in the U.S. Army during the Civil War, discharged the jury from further consideration of the case when an agreement between the twelve men could not be rendered. Eleven days later, a motion for a new trial against the defendants was requested by the prosecution, but Judge Collier declined to hear it, and ordered it “to the argument list and heard before a full bench.”<sup>18</sup>

Attorneys for the defendants were not about to have the fate of these proving grounds decided by a local jurisdiction, and so moved quickly to have any future judgments come under less scrutiny. The foundry’s lawyers worked with local state legislators to pen a new law that would protect the interests of the very lucrative Pittsburgh operation, as there was concern that Knap and his operations could be driven out of Pittsburgh. In late April, the *Pittsburgh Post* reported that Knap was in Harrisburg for negotiations with parties to acquire a tract of land to build in Chester, Pennsylvania, located along the Delaware River.<sup>19</sup> There was great interest in this story as the newspapers reported that during the year proceeding this court case, Knap was said to have manufactured thousands of pieces of military artillery and the munitions to supply the guns, using eight to ten thousand tons of iron during the year, employing three hundred hands and expending over a million dollars.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after the second motion was rejected by Judge Collier, House Bill No. 1547 (Senate file No. 1490) was introduced in the Pennsylvania state legislature entitled, “An Act to



authorize the Knap Fort Pitt foundry company of Pittsburg to test cannon and other ordnance at their proving ground, in Patton Township, in the County of Allegheny.”<sup>21</sup> It’s conceivable that the actions of the legislature in Harrisburg were likely influenced by the local politicians wanting to ensure that Knap would keep his operations in Pittsburgh and continue to use the proving ground as a necessary part of the foundry operations.

The bill moved quickly through the Democratic majority senate and passed on April 28, 1871. Despite the objections expressed by Republican Senator James L. Graham of Allegheny County that the bill was passed in his absence, the article was signed into law by then Pennsylvania Governor John F. Hartranft, a former major general of the Union Army during the Civil War.

It is profound to consider the speed at which this Act was passed in the Pennsylvania State legislature in order to protection the interests of a private commercial operation. Commentary on the law today would certainly bring up the questions of the balance of personal freedoms enjoyed by the residents of the Commonwealth versus the interests served by a private industry contracted with the government. If there was opportunity for public comment on the bill, it does not appear to have been covered in the local papers. However, the significance of the business operations of the foundry cannot be understated. In 2012, author Dr. Quentin Skrabec included the production of the World's Largest Cannon in Civil War Technology among "The 100 Most Significant Events in American Business." Having the proving grounds available to the foundry certainly made it a necessary part of the operations, giving this part of western Pennsylvania a measure of significance, for without the ability to test their product, as the naval officers required, the operations would not have been able to continue.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting side note that occurred about two weeks after the law was passed, Felix Brunot, then Chairman of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, was travelling through Pittsburgh with a party of Native Americans on their way to Washington DC. He elected to stop and tour various places in Pittsburgh with this contingency and chose the proving ground as one of the places of interest to show to this group.<sup>23</sup>

On June 19, 1871, a motion was presented before Judge Edwin H. Stowe of the Allegheny County Courts to stay all further proceedings against the Knap Fort Pitt Foundry for the nuisance indictment based on the passing of the Act of Assembly noted above.<sup>24</sup> The proving ground therefore continued to operate, and by law, would have only been responsible for any direct damage caused from the testing operation (i.e. exploding munitions).

### **Today's Proving Ground**

The Wall's Station proving ground operated at this location into the late 1870s when in 1878, the remaining interests held by the Knap family in the Fort Pitt Foundry were sold to the Mackintosh-Hempfield Company.<sup>25</sup> Today, the parcels of land that make up any past remnants of the proving grounds have generally been wiped away during the construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Eastbound Classification Yards as referenced earlier by retired conductor John Routh. The hillside and adjacent parcels are located on private property and most remnants of the proving grounds are believed to have been obliterated. In 2006-2007, the Mossie Bridge that was originally built in the 1930s was replaced with a four-lane bridge.<sup>26</sup> To reduce the impact of traffic during this project, a large portion of the hillside near Mossie Boulevard was removed in order to build the new bridge next to the old bridge in order to keep the traffic moving. A new tunnel was also added under Route 48 that is used by Norfolk

Southern Railways to gain access to additional land used for storage of shipping containers and semi-trailer trucks as part of their intermodal freight operations. Perhaps the only remaining physical evidence that a proving ground existed in this area is the solemn tribute that sits on a pedestal in Westmoreland Park as a tribute to the ancestors who helped save this local history.

Growing up in Trafford, **Andrew Capets** discovered an early interest in family and local history. Wanting to share his interest with others, he created the website TraffordHistory.org, which later led to the establishment of the Trafford Historical Society where he serves as president. He co-authored the book *Images of America: Trafford* released in 2017 by Arcadia Publishing. Andrew is employed as a State Farm Agent in Monroeville and lives in North Huntingdon Township with his wife Mariann and their sons Joshua and Jacob.

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<sup>1</sup> "Proving Grounds in Court." *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*. Apr. 6, 1871.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Carving Away the 'Old Walls Hump.'" *Pittsburgh Daily Post*. July 22, 1906.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> "Senate Historical Biographies." s.v. "John P. Penney," *Pennsylvania State Senate*. Accessed August 1, 2021.  
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