Unplanned Discovery Corrects Source of Historic Quote

Researchers Seek Source Of Historic Quote

Visit Historic Battlefield

Gettysburg, PA, January 4, 2014—Researchers from the Penn State University Libraries are seeking the source of an historic quote inscribed on a mural at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center.

“The quote, “Every name...is a lightning stroke to some heart...and breaks like thunder over some home...and falls a long black shadow upon some hearthstone.” was attributed to the Gettysburg Compiler of July 7, 1863 on the killed and wounded at Gettysburg.

The search was prompted by a call to Sue Keiffer, Head, Digitization and Preservation Department, from a Civil War historian, who asked Keiffer to confirm the source of the quote. The historian felt confident that the Compiler was the source of this heartfelt sentiment published following the Battle of Gettysburg. “When a researcher called to verify the existence of a quote from a Civil War era newspaper,” said Keiffer, “I had no idea the journey I was about to begin.”

Searchable Text Opens Door To Discovery

Optical Character Recognition (OCR), a technology that enables the conversion of different types of documents, such as scanned microfilm or paper documents, PDF files, or images captured by a digital camera into editable and searchable data, has sparked the door to new research discoveries. When confronted with the challenge of confirming the source of an historic quote, Keiffer immediately logged into Penn State’s digitized newspaper repository with its OCR enabled keyword search capabilities.

This repository, Pennsylvania Civil War Era Newspapers, was first launched in 2003 and serves as the most comprehensive source of digitized Pennsylvania newspapers from the Civil War era - pre-war, war time and post-war covering 1830 to 1870. Today, the repository contains over 80 Pennsylvania newspapers titles with hundreds of thousands of key searchable newspaper pages from small-town rural areas to major centers.

By typing the exact phrase “lightning stroke to some heart” as the search query in the advanced search function, Keiffer found six newspapers that had published the quote. The Compiler published it on October 19, 1863, but the July 7, 1863 issue was not found. The earliest newspaper found with the quote was the July 10, 1862 issue of the American Presbyterian published in Philadelphia — a full year before the Battle of Gettysburg. The American Presbyterian cited the Home Magazine as the source of the quote which was emboldened in an editorial entitled “Wounded and Killed”.

Quote Went Viral

A map showing the source and distribution of the newspapers that carried the quote.

Quote Found In Editorial - “Wounded and Killed” - Attributed to Home Magazine

Published in Philadelphia, May 1862 — Three weeks after the Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862

Battle of Shiloh

April 6-7, 1862

Pittsburg Landing, TN

“Wounded and Killed”

Editorial Repinned By Weebly Wisconsin Patriot

September 8, 1862

citing Home Magazine

The infamous quote “lightning stroke to some heart” emboldened in the editorial was penned by the 26 year old editor of Arthur’s Home Magazine. Beginning in 1856 as the magazine’s editorial assistant at age 19, Townsend along with publisher Timothy S. Arthur, who described her as his “very capable assistant,” wrote most of the serials and many of the short stories.

Her editorial mentions the lists of wounded and killed that had been published in the newspapers for the past year. This led researchers to seek out the papers Townsend may have been reading from which she drew inspiration. The source of the quote was traced to Arthur’s Home Magazine.

Quote Traced To Arthur’s Home Magazine

Philadelphia, PA

May 1862

University Park, PA—With the realization that a historic quote was embedded in an editorial in Home Magazine, researchers at the Penn State University Libraries hopped on to finding the magazine. A search of Google, Wikipedia, and ProQuest’s American Periodicals online database, lead to Arthur’s Home Magazine published in Philadelphia by Timothy Shay Arthur from 1852 to 1898. The magazine was designed for women and children with the inclusion of patterns for fancywork, puzzles for children, poems, and literature that espoused high moral values.

The entire “Wounded and Killed” editorial was printed in the May 1862 issue, volume 19, page 320 and was penned by V.F.T. On closer examination of the editorial, it becomes apparent that newspapers did not reprint the last two paragraphs in which V.F.T. expressed hope that the war would soon be over and the nation “unbroken, united and free!”

But who was V.F.T.?

Author of Quote Identified

Virginia Frances Townsend

University Park, PA—Virginia Frances Townsend was identified as the author of the editorial “Wounded and Killed” by researchers at the Penn State University Libraries.

Historic Quote Went Viral

A map showing the source and distribution of the newspapers that carried the quote.

Quoted on a mural at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum & Visitor Center

“Every name...is a lightning stroke to some heart...and breaks like thunder over some home...and falls a long black shadow upon some hearthstone.”

Quote attributed to the Gettysburg Compiler, July 7, 1863, on the killed and wounded at Gettysburg

Researchers Cheri Banks at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center.

Researcher Cheri Banks at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center. Librarian Sue Keiffer considers the quote inscribed on the mural."