

## Stearns' Cannon (Amherst, MA)

By Kristen Treen

In Spring of 1862, an unusual object arrived unexpectedly in the small town of Amherst, Massachusetts alongside the body of Adjutant Frazar Stearns. The war had been raging for almost a year when the tight-knit Amherst community found itself reeling at the news of Stearns' death. Son of Amherst College President William Augustus Stearns, pride of his class and the Twenty-First Regiment of the Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry (which was largely comprised of his classmates), Stearns had become an emblem of youthful promise to Amherst long before he was fatally wounded at the Battle of New Bern, North Carolina on 14 March 1862. Yet the young adjutant's sudden death and the Union's ultimate victory at New Bern provided his regiment with the opportunity to honour his soldierly virtues, and inspired a unique act of commemoration before he had even been buried.

General Ambrose Burnside, who had been leading the expedition when Stearns fell, presented the Twenty-First Regiment with a 'six-pounder brass gun taken in the battery where Adjutant Stearns [...] met his death'. This token of respect, he hoped, would provide Stearns' folks back home with 'a monument to the memory of a brave man'. While Union troops carried out hasty burials of their rank-and-file comrades on the battlefield, Stearns was returned to Amherst with the reverence due an officer, accompanied by an extraordinary memento which, draped in the U.S. Flag for its dedication in April 1862, must have seemed like a surrogate for Stearns' own shattered body — which was so damaged that even his family were not permitted to view it before burial. For many of his comrades and friends, though, the cannon seemed an apt representative of the comrade they had lost: his noble character, one professor remembered, 'shone in every feature of his tall, erect, and manly form', not unlike the cannon that now stood for his memory.

The Stearns cannon may resemble a lot of the battlefield and military park monuments we know today, those which include ordnance such as cannons and cannon balls. But when Burnside gifted the cannon to Amherst in 1862, the likes of this object had not been seen before — in fact, the subtle resemblances between the soldier and the cannon didn't rest easily with everyone in Amherst. This was because, until this point — and throughout the war — personal possessions, locks of hair, or pieces of foliage plucked from around a loved one's grave were traditionally used to memorialise the dead. These intimate memory objects enabled the bereaved to preserve the essence of their loved ones, and the location of their final resting places; they were particular mementos of beloved individuals, both before the war and as

civilians looked for ways to commemorate those who had fallen and even disappeared in battle. But the cannon was different, and even troubling to the Amherst community because it wasn't a personal memory object in the same way. While many of Stearns's own comrades had been his classmates, and knew him intimately, the inscription the cannon was emblazoned with for its dedication maintained a military tone. 'He was an honest man, a true Christian, and a model soldier,' it read, casting his character in a soldierly mould, 'faithful, active, intelligent, and brave among the bravest'.

In presenting Amherst's civilians with one of the country's first public monuments to the war dead, the cannon required this community to feel in ways it had never felt before. We can see the incompatibility between the community's local mourning traditions and the feelings the cannon seemed to demand in the speeches given to dedicate it that April at Amherst College — where it was to be housed. As one newspaper account of the day reported, this extraordinary commemorative object was variously termed a 'trophy', 'memento', and 'gift' throughout the ceremony: it seemed to elude definition. If 'trophy' brought triumph to the proceedings, using Stearns's memory to celebrate a victory over the Confederates from whom the cannon had been won, 'memento' recalled intimate memories in the same way one College spokesperson's declaration of sorrow did. 'The deepest emotions are always the most silent,' he told the large crowd of students, Amherst citizens, and members of the public; 'we, as a faculty and a body of students, are too deeply moved for words: our feelings are too sacred for a public meeting.' Some larger statement of public value was in order, but the orators of the day didn't know where to begin. Even the Hon. Edward Dickinson, Treasurer of Amherst College and Chair of the proceedings, turned to intimate, private feelings in his attempt to explain this new formal ritual the community was expected to participate in: 'Our bravest have gone forth and some of them are fallen. And we rejoice that by this ceremony we have an opportunity of testifying our tender remembrance of them. The Trustees of the College will treasure this, a monument more enduring than brass, of the young men of our number who have fallen with their feet to the foe.' If 'tender remembrance' enacted by the crowd present that day would outlast the cannon itself, what use would this monument fulfil over the coming decades?

Dickinson's speech articulates one of the main problems that would lie at the heart of remembering the war for more than a century. There is a huge difference between testifying a 'tender remembrance' and participating in a commemorative act. The difference is between private and public forms of remembering; individuals remembering individuals, and citizens remembering soldiers fighting for an unprecedented 'national' cause. Stearns's monument and its dedication are worth

looking closely at because they reveal a rift between two kinds of remembering: one long-established, intensely local way of treating the dead, and another that would emerge with the erection of more and more monuments across the States in the decades following the war. Objects such as these didn't just set history or battle narrative in stone. They prompted diverse communities to consider what it was about the war needed remembering, how that remembering should take place, and the kinds of feeling and action it should encourage in the living.

There were no easy answers, as the poet Emily Dickinson realised when she caught a glimpse of Frazar Stearns's memorial cannon. As her letters reveal, Dickinson had noted the closed casket at Frazar's funeral, and had probably been present for her father's dedicatory address at Amherst College. Several of her poems also suggest that she spent some effort weighing up the matter of this brass surrogate for one of her family's close friends. One of these, 'He gave away his Life —' — thought to have been written in 1863 and commonly agreed to refer to Frazar's death — caused Dickinson to question what commemoration meant for those used to mourning their dead individually, and according to private, domestic customs.

He gave away his Life —  
To Us — Gigantic Sum —  
A trifle — in his own esteem —  
But magnified — by Fame — (lines 1-4)

Like her father, Dickinson stumbles here over the same equations of feeling with which the cannon had bewildered the college community. The soldier's sacrifice is calculated to be a 'Gigantic Sum' from the speaker's perspective. Yet it is estimated by Stearns, the giver, as a 'trifle' — a measure fit for sacrifice in the name of a greater cause. From the speaker's perspective, this makes the value of sacrifice incalculable, especially since 'Fame' — won through heroism, remembered in the bronze cannon — 'magnifies' sacrifice even more. Struggling to work out a standard by which she can measure sacrifice, and an expression of remembrance or gratitude equal to it, the speaker struggles to find value in her own private sense of sorrow:

'Tis Our's — to wince — and weep —  
And wonder — and decay  
By Blossom's gradual process —  
He chose — Maturity — (lines 9-12)

Here, Dickinson seems to lament the distance between the mourner and the

mourned, just as the Amherst College orators had struggled to find the right words and feelings to appreciate the memorial cannon and the soldier it stood for. She compares the 'gradual process' of personal mourning and sadness, which will ultimately 'decay' like the blossom, with the soldier's time-defying 'Maturity'. Dickinson's frail, changeable feelings cannot match the immortality that Frazar has gained; wincing and weeping cannot vie with the enduring, shining object that represents his heroic, immortal state. For Emily Dickinson, as for millions of civilians across the United States, the rise of Civil War monuments prompted difficult questions about how to feel for the dead, and how to honour their memories. What did it mean to stand in front of a monument and 'commemorate' untold masses? How did it transform loved ones into something larger and more distant? What kind of community did these objects invite onlookers to join? These questions haunted Emily Dickinson's poems during the war. They also shaped the monuments that would spring up afterwards, in their tens of thousands.

## Resources and Further Reading

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