

Fired Bullet found on Franklin Battlefield

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I just added this new photo of a fired bullet photographed on my card advertising myself as an Historian and relic hunter.



The fired bullet on my advertising business card.

I know people who have been able to dig on private property on the Battlefield at Franklin, but strangely, I have never really had that opportunity! But recently I happened to stumble across the opportunity to do so.

In April of this year, (2022) a friend of mine who is restoring a house on Columbia Pike in Franklin Tennessee, in the area of the Civil War Battle of Franklin gave me permission to metal detect the yard seeking relics. He *knows* that I am *always very neat*, and it is nigh impossible to see where I have worked. I do not kill the grass or destroy the landscaping, but I do find the *History Beneath our Feet!*

I discovered long ago that every relic recovered tells a story. They are like pieces to a puzzle that add one more part to the whole.

While I was working on his property – finding mostly junk aluminum items that can juke even the best discriminating metal detectors, items of which I properly dispose – another builder drove by and invited me to come hunt a property on which he had just torn down an old house. The lot was much closer to the main battle site and had been scraped bare – at least it looked that way – but it was not as barren as one would think.

A couple of days later, on the weekend, my son, Tom, and I went to the lot and did our best to scour it with our metal detectors.



The lot with hole in the foreground and the Bounty Hunter.

It was a nightmare hunt. There was *a lot of junk* and all of it made the metal detectors “happy,” singing a lot, usually yielding disappointment. It almost invariably was junk like aluminum, large hunks of rusted – but recent – ferrous hunks of metal – like parts of car frames – and a few Lincoln Head pennies with the memorial on the back – no “Wheaties.” A Metal Detector (capitalized-how I describe a person who uses a metal detector to find relics) must be *very patient* and *very persistent!*

After initially hunting with my “good,” *expensive* Garrett metal detector it began to frustrate me. It was overwhelming me with a plethora of sounds and meter readings all over the place. The Garrett was making things far more confusing than need be. I tried to dial the sensitivity back, and it helped a little, but not much. I took it back to the car and picked up my \$90.00, sound only, discriminating Bounty Hunter metal detector. I have owned it for years.

I started metal detecting at the age of twelve hunting with the only metal detectors I could afford back then – Bounty Hunters. Then I could not afford the more expensive ones with the meters that tell you what the metal detector *thinks* is beneath your search coil. I guess I was raised a “sound only” kind of Metal Detector, and once you are familiar with the fine nuances of the sounds of your detector, you often know better what’s there than a meter can tell you.

I took the Bounty Hunter out across the lot with my knobs dialed just right and immediately found more pennies among the trash. I then ran across a very promising tone which I tested, the various ways the simple Bounty Hunter allows, and decided to dig. The target was under what must have at one time been a greatly compacted limestone gravel driveway, but after a bit of effort with my special “rooter cutter,” shovel I gouged my way as carefully as possible through about 6 inches of tough digging. Then a shape popped up among the gravel that caught my eye. I stopped, bent over for closer inspection, and there lay a fired bullet.



I am used to digging up dropped bullets of all kinds, usually .58 caliber Minie balls. It is like my father used to say, “they must have been the ‘droppigest’ army there ever was.” He was forever finding them just walking around in plowed fields. I found them, too, laying all about our farm that lay around the base of Roper’s Knob before it was developed into subdivisions and a golf course. Plus, we found hundreds of arrowheads on either side of Spencer’s creek that

bisected it. I remember looking aside and picking them up while riding a tobacco setter. Arrowheads were everywhere in the bottom by Spencer's Creek.

This bullet is significant because in all probability it was fired during the Battle of Franklin. Just holding it and considering that sends a bit of chill up the spine.

Another matter that runs chills up my spine is the deformation of the bullet.

I have dug many fired bullets particularly when I was young on top of Roper's Knob where there was a Federal Signal fort during the federal occupation of Middle Tennessee. Apparently, soldiers would stand on the flat ring around the base of the knob itself and fire into the knob perhaps practicing shooting. But this bullet I am having some trouble identifying.

This find is smaller than the predominant .58 Caliber Minie Ball one most frequently finds. It is more in the range of .54 caliber. I suspect that it is a .54 caliber Burnside bullet, many of which I have dug up and can compare it to, though one of the cannellures seems closer to the flat base than normal. That may be due to being fired and the resulting deformation.

Next, it is deformed in a way that does not look like it was fired into the ground, and that is chilling. It has flattened – “mushroomed” – like it struck flesh.

When I was studying Political Science and History at The University of Mississippi – Ole Miss, one course I took – and particularly enjoyed – was two full semesters of Criminalistics. It was extremely fascinating! We studied all sorts of investigative techniques like tool marks, footprints, tire marks, blood splatters, wound tracks, identifying the gender of dismembered corpses, and went to Memphis to watch an autopsy demonstrating the various techniques. I was supposedly “certified” as a fingerprint expert. One part of particular interest, having been raised shooting modern and black powder firearms, was ballistics. We learned to match fired bullets by comparing rifling striations on fired projectiles with a comparison microscope. This can match fired bullets identifying the weapons they were fired from.

From my own experience as a hunter in my youth, and reinforced by such studies, I know the difference between bullets that have struck the ground, hit a tree, or impacted flesh. That is the most chilling aspect of this found bullet. It deformed like it hit flesh.

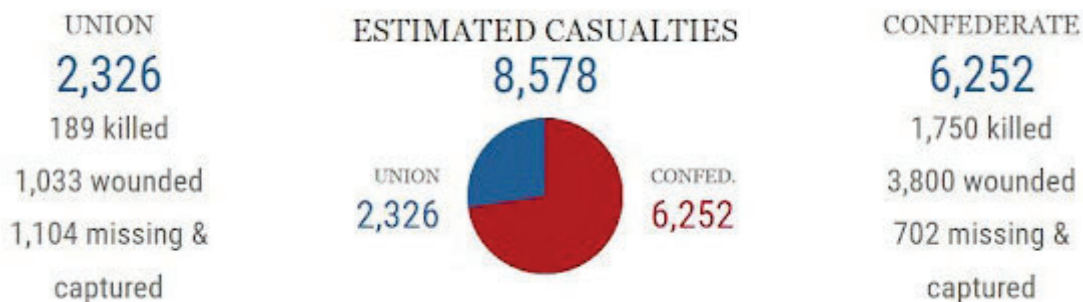
Standing there amid all the houses that now cover the Battlefield at Franklin, I could look northward and estimate the distance to the main line of the Federal entrenchments. Certainly, this could be a round that struck the ground, but it just does not have that shape that would have resulted from striking the ground at an obvious flat angle, or the inevitable grainy markings left by small stones and soil. It hit something perpendicular like a tree, or possibly a person.



Photo from The Franklin Battlefield Trust shows an out building and the Cotton Gin.

I am familiar with period pictures taken when the Carter cotton gin was still standing, and it is plain where I found this bullet, it was an open crop field at the time. The probability of hitting a tree or even a fence post is small. Trees and wood leave distinct markings on bullets as well. This hit something soft.

In the aftermath of a horrid battle, like that at Franklin, there were plenty of dead, but there were as many or more wounded as was the case. They are usually listed together as “casualties.” Fortunately, the American Battlefield Trust Website on The Battle of Franklin breaks them down in estimated, but more realistic numbers.



Courtesy of the American Battlefield Trust [1]

The American Battlefield Trust website shows there was approximately 63,000 men on both sides engaged in the Battle of Franklin, 30,000 Union, and 33,000 Confederate. The total estimated “casualties” for both sides together is 8,578 with 2,326 Federal casualties and a staggering 6,252 Confederate casualties. Assuming the Federal army took care of their own wounded and using the Trust’s figures for Confederate casualties there were an estimated 3,800

wounded Confederates left to be tended to after the Federals had vacated their works! Once the Federal forces left Franklin that night traveling northward on Franklin Road to join up with General Thomas at Nashville, the Confederates and the citizens of Franklin were left to tend to an estimated 5,550 Confederate dead and wounded soldiers! I have read stories and heard eyewitness testimony that descended to me from my father's family of the awful, indescribable sights and sounds of the wounded on the battlefield. The dead lay in piles several men deep at the entrenchments and often wounded had to be pulled from beneath them. Blood was said to run in the road drainage ditches. The entire area was literally, in several significant places, carpeted with grotesquely torn dead and moaning, imploring wounded. This placed an overwhelming burden literally at the very doorsteps of the citizens of Franklin to nurse the wounded and bury the dead.

Certainly, the Confederates had Doctors, rudimentary medics, and I have read of local area Doctors that joined in the gruesome task of tending to these wounded. They were overwhelmed. To acquire an impression of that experience, a tour of The Carnton House in Franklin with its blood-stained floors will produce a lasting impression. I do not think it possible to understand at our time what the townspeople of Franklin experienced at their time in history. But they had no choice.

The Battle of Franklin had set a ghastly Civil War record of six Generals killed in the battle. [2] The viciousness of the Battle exceeding that of Picket's Charge at Gettysburg in the length of the charge, time, the total numbers involved, and numbers killed. [3] The long back porch had the bodies of four of those Generals laid upon it for viewing.

All this considered, as I stood there that day with that deformed bullet lying in the hole at my feet, I imagined the scene of the ravaged crop fields leading up the hill toward the Carter House strewn with dead and wounded. I could only consider that whatever medics, nurses, or Doctors present that day were facing a devastating task. The bullet may have been extracted from the wound on the spot by medical personnel. We found no other items to indicate this was a battlefield medical area. It could also be that the bullet passed through its victim and with its velocity lessened simply fell to the ground.

I do not know any of this for sure. It may have impacted soft earth, or a person. All I do know is the greatest probability is that it was fired in anger, or in fear and dread. All I can do is speculate.

FFB

[1] See the American Battlefield Trust Site, Aftermath: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/franklin>

[2] See the American Battlefield Trust Site, Fact 8: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/10-facts-battle-franklin>

[3] *ibid*, Fact 4.

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