



# THE HISTORIC COUNTY

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NEWSLETTER OF THE  
PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## FROM OUR COLLECTION: A PIECE OF LEATHER WITH A LINK TO THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

By Heather Garside

During the course of our digital cataloging initiative, our team of staff and volunteers has uncovered countless items which seem insignificant at first glance. Often, with a little research, these items turn out to be diamonds in the rough and provide a glimpse into the past. One such item was recently found. The object is a small scrap of brown leather, which is roughly rectangular in shape. On one side, painted in yellowish-gold, reads the following: "S. McBlain, Co. E, 44th Regt., N.Y.S.V."

As is often the case with military units, particularly from the American Civil War, the internet quickly provided a wide breadth of information regarding the 44th Regiment of New York Volunteers, also known as the Ellsworth Avengers. This regiment began mustering in August of 1861. As the nickname implies, the regiment was formed in reaction to the death of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, a New Yorker and the first casualty of the Civil War. The original intention for the regiment was to include one man from every ward and town in New York State. However, the regiment quickly grew to include more men as New Yorkers responded to the call. During the war, the Ellsworth Avengers were involved in the battles at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Cold Harbor (to name only a few).

After about a year of heavy fighting, the original Company E (which had formed in 1861) was merged with Company C, making way for a new Company E to be formed in 1862. The new Company E was referred to as the Normal School Company because its members were all students or teachers of the Albany Normal School. The Albany Normal School was the predecessor of today's University of Albany.

S. McBlain referred to Samuel McBlain (1836-1919) of Seneca, New York, the son of Irish immigrants. He graduated from the Normal School in 1861 and enlisted in August of 1862, alongside his younger brother George (1840-1863). Samuel was promoted to the rank of Sergeant in March of 1863 and saw the war to its conclusion, being present at Appomattox. At the close of the war he held the rank of Captain and was now a member of the 140th New York Volunteers. During his service, Samuel McBlain had been involved in sixteen engagements.

After the war Samuel bought a farm near Geneva, New York where he raised cattle and sheep. He married his sweetheart in 1866 (having carried her picture with him throughout the war) and they had four children together. Samuel spent much of his postwar life involved in town politics, holding several positions including Justice of the Peace and Postmaster. He died in 1919.

As is so often the case, an object originally dismissed as unimportant had an interesting story just waiting to be uncovered. But there is more to the story than Samuel McBlain and the Ellsworth Avengers. Accession records indicate that this leather, probably a piece of a haversack, knapsack or cartridge box, was "found on the battlefield at Gettysburg on July 9th, 1863." How did a piece of leather carried into battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania find its way into the collections of the Passaic County Historical Society in Paterson, New Jersey?

This scrap of leather is actually part of a larger collection of Civil War battlefield souvenirs, known as the Weishampel collection. Besides the leather in question, the collection also includes bullets, a belt buckle, uniform buttons and a regimental insignia.

All of these items were donated together to the Society in its early years of collecting (1926-1934). As a result, our accession records provide minimal information about the donor.

What we have determined is that the donor, Eugene Weishampel (born 1867) was living on East 26th Street in Paterson with his brother in 1930 and working as an upholsterer. He donated the "military relics found by [his] father" to the Passaic County Historical Society around that time. Eugene's father, Benjamin Franklin Weishampel (1837-1922), was born in Shippenberg, Pennsylvania before his family moved to the Baltimore, Maryland area. His name is associated with several patents related to dress fittings. His obituary indicated that he owned a retail business and later worked for Armstrong, Cator & Co., which sold silk and millinery goods. Based on our research, it seems unlikely that Benjamin served during the Civil War for either the Union Army or the Confederate States. Nor could we find any indication of his involvement with the United States



*Continued on page 3*

## PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Lambert Castle, a picturesque 1892 Victorian mansion located on the Garret Mountain Reserve, is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Castle is operated and managed by the Passaic County Historical Society, a not-for-profit 501(c) educational institution.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It is a great honor for me to serve as the President of PCHS and a privilege to work with the dedicated members of the Board of Trustees to continue the mission of our society. I have had the pleasure of meeting many of the members and volunteers and I look forward to meeting many more of our members as my year as President continues. I also look forward to exploring new initiatives, as well as continuing the work of my predecessors.

In January of 2013, PCHS launched the Federici Restoration and Exhibition Project. The goal of this ambitious undertaking is to showcase the work of the Paterson sculptor Gaetano Federici and to provide insight into his creative process using a variety of materials including documents and photographs. Statues and plaques created by Federici as models for his finished works will also be included. Since several of the plaques and statues in the collection were in need of repair, it was necessary to raise funds to pay for the conservation. This was accomplished by listing each item on the PCHS website along with the amount needed for the conservation and inviting groups and individuals to sponsor a specific statue or plaque or make a donation for the project.

Through the generosity of several groups and individuals, our goal has been met. I am delighted to announce that all twenty-seven pieces listed on the website have been conserved and are now ready to be displayed. Phase 2 of the project, which involves planning and seeking funding to install the exhibit is well underway and all involved in this initiative are anticipating the opening of the exhibit in the near future. With the opening of this exhibition and the many other presentations planned, this promises to be an exciting year at Lambert Castle.

Catherine Cavallo

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- August 5, Wednesday** **Quarterly Meeting.** 7 p.m at Lambert Castle. Business meeting of the Society followed by *Ere the Shadows Fade: New Jersey's Civil War Era Photographers*, presented by Gary D. Saretzky, archivist, educator, and photographer. This program is funded by the Horizons Speakers Bureau of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Free admission.
- August 12 – October 4** **Exhibit: Reflection on Visual Beauty.** View photographs of Eastside High School students participating in the Real Beauty: Uncovered Project. 3rd floor gallery at Lambert Castle. Regular admission. Reception details TBA
- September 12 Saturday** **Destination: Pearl Harbor.** 10 a.m. PCHS Genealogy Club meeting at Lambert Castle. After the business portion of the meeting, local actor Mark Simmons will give a moving one-man presentation and tribute to the soldiers and sailors who were witness to the terrible attack of December 7th, 1941. No charge.
- Oct 5 – Nov 5** **Castle Closed** to set-up for the Lambert Castle Holiday Boutique
- October 6, Tuesday** **PCHS Annual Beefsteak and Tricky Tray Fundraiser**
- November 6 Friday** **Lambert Castle Holiday Boutique – Wine and Cheese Preview Night:** 5pm-10pm at Lambert Castle. Usher in the Holiday Season with us. Enjoy wine and snacks as you preview the goodies at this year's Holiday Boutique. Tickets are \$15 (includes two return visits). Reserve tickets to guarantee admission.
- November 7 – 8 Saturday & Sunday** **Lambert Castle Holiday Boutique-Opening Weekend:** 10am-5pm at Lambert Castle. Be one of the first shoppers to have access to this popular holiday event. Admission is \$7 (includes two return visits). No reservations.
- November 10 Tuesday** **Quarterly Meeting:** 7 p.m, at the Louis Bay II Library in Hawthorne (located at 345 Lafayette Ave). Business meeting of the Society followed by *The Garden State: Where Things Grow* presented by author Linda Barth. New Jersey is truly the land of inventions. M&M's, solar panels, transistors, flexible film and Graham crackers; Learn about the many inventions and innovations that came from the minds of Garden State people. Free admission.
- November 10 – 29** **28th Annual Lambert Castle Holiday Boutique**  
Open Wednesday through Friday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 pm. (Closed Thanksgiving Day). No strollers or carriages, please. Admission is \$6 and includes two return visits.

Visit [lambertcastle.org](http://lambertcastle.org) for the most up-to-date event information.

## CIVIL WAR *cont. from page 1*

Sanitary Commission or a similar relief effort. So how was it that Benjamin was at Gettysburg, collecting souvenirs six days after the battle?

Benjamin's father, Rev. John Frederick Weishampel, was a Baptist Minister and author. We began to think it was possible that Benjamin accompanied his father to Gettysburg to assist with relief work, such as tending to the dead and wounded. However, there was no evidence that any such trip ever took place. We were lucky enough to discover the *Journal: John Frederick Weishampel, Jr., Baltimore, MD, 1858-1895*, which did provide some insight into the Weishampel family.

John Jr., Benjamin's older brother, was a printer in Baltimore. Unfortunately, his journal was not printed in its entirety. Instead excerpts have been selected, which highlight events in the American Civil War or the Southern Baptist Convention. In the published entries John does refer to his brother occasionally. His journal confirms that Benjamin was part owner in a store (July 26, 1861). On October 19, 1862 John mentions the draft saying, "only 46 men were required from this city [Baltimore], and I was not one of them, nor were any of my friends." John mentions the draft again in 1865, indicating that he paid for a substitute, but he makes no mention of his brother Benjamin doing the same (March 16, 1865). These entries seem to confirm that Benjamin did not serve.

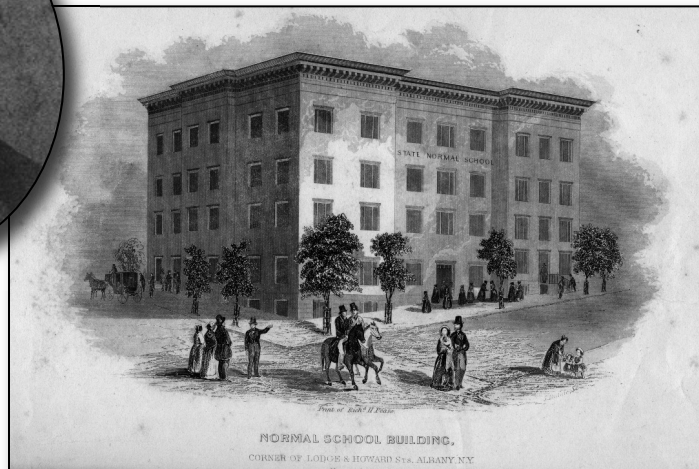
John's journal also offered an alternative explanation of how Benjamin may have acquired battlefield souvenirs without setting foot on the battlefield. In one entry John mentions that Ben brought two Massachusetts soldiers "home with him" (August 14, 1861). The entry goes on to explain that the soldiers stayed the night and were good company. Over a year later, John mentions meeting and talking to several Confederate prisoners of war and in the same entry he also mentions Union regiments marching by his home (October 12, 1862). While both these entries occurred before the battle of Gettysburg, they do present the possibility of a pattern. Residing in Maryland, Benjamin and all of his family would have interacted with soldiers regularly. Both armies marched through Maryland often throughout most of the war. With the presence of soldiers and the interest the Weishampel family seems to have taken in talking to them, (as indicated in the journal entries mentioned), it seems possible that some soldier may have bestowed some of his souvenirs on Benjamin, as a gesture of thanks or friendship.

Alternatively, Benjamin may have purchased the artifacts. The idea of such souvenirs is a very Victorian notion, and would not have been seen as gruesome or unusual. This can be seen in John's journal when on June 20, 1861 he shares: "yesterday, a curiosity hunter left me with a piece of the stair case [sic] upon which Col. Ellsworth was shot at Alexandria. He says that nearly the entire staircase for the space of two stories has been taken away by curiosity hunters." By coincidence, the very event in John's journal which establishes an interest in war souvenir collecting leads us back full circle to the 44th New York Regiment, formed to avenge this very same Colonel Ellsworth. Nor is it out of the question that Benjamin



travelled to Gettysburg after the battle with the intention of souvenir hunting for himself. Baltimore is approximately 60 miles from Gettysburg. The specific indication of the date July 9th in the accession records, which tend to air on less rather than more detail, seems to indicate that Benjamin's son emphasized this information for some reason at the time of the donation. Perhaps as part of a larger story of his father's visit to the battlefield, but unfortunately all that was recorded was the date.

Other than the few pieces of information mentioned in his brother's journal, most of the details of Benjamin Weishampel's life are unknown to us. We do know that Benjamin died in Rutherford, New Jersey at the age of 85, leaving his widow, five children and several grandchildren. We will probably never know exactly how Benjamin



**Samuel McBlain (1836-1919) & The Albany Normal School, formed in 1844.**

(Images courtesy of M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University at Albany, SUNY)

obtained his Civil War souvenirs, but trying to learn more about them has allowed us access into the lives of both American soldiers and civilians who experienced the American Civil War one hundred and fifty years ago.

The majority of the sources consulted for this article were digital. I would like to thank Robert Hazekamp Jr. for assisting me with the genealogical research. I would also like to thank Dennis Buttacavoli for consulting with me on Civil War uniforms and accessories and Brian Keough, Head of M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archive at the University of Albany for helping me local images for this article.

### Sources Consulted:

The accession records of the Passaic County Historical Society;

The Normal School Company: [www.albany.edu/faculty/aballard/civilwar/](http://www.albany.edu/faculty/aballard/civilwar/)

The 44th Infantry Regiment: [dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/44thInf/44thInfMain.htm](http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/44thInf/44thInfMain.htm)

The 44th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/44th\\_New\\_York\\_Volunteer\\_Infantry\\_Regiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/44th_New_York_Volunteer_Infantry_Regiment)

*Biographical Sketches of Selected Men of the Normal School Company* by Cory E. McClain found at: <http://www.albany.edu/nystatehistory/44/afterwar.HTM>

John Fredrick Weishampel: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Fredrick\\_Weishampel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Fredrick_Weishampel)

*Journal: John Frederick Weishampel, Jr., Baltimore, MD, 1858-1895*, Transcribed and Edited by A.E. Weishampel and C.V. Weishampel, Ed.D.

US Census 1930

Baltimore Sun, May 3 1922 edition

## In Memorial

The Passaic County Historical Society is deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Mr. Joseph Ponte, Assistant Director of Buildings and Grounds for the County of Passaic, on June 12th. Joe, who had worked for the County for over two decades, was a tremendous asset and friend to the Society. He will be greatly missed.



**PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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