

Bibles, other artifacts tell brothers' Story of Civil War Experience

NOTE: This is the first of a series highlighting artifacts from the permanent collection of the Reece Museum. The museum plans to produce an article in this series each quarter, and the items featured will be on display at the museum at the time of publication. This article was written by Andrew R. Seats, Reece Museum graduate assistant.

Over 150 years ago, our nation experienced one of its most difficult tests. Even before Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as President, many Southerners expressed their outrage for an administration that had campaigned against the expansion of the institution of slavery.

And following the secession of several Southern states in the spring of 1861, hostilities erupted in Charleston, S.C., at Fort Sumter. All across the Northern and Southern states, men and boys began joining local units by the thousands. North Carolinians were just as eager as citizens of other Southern states to fight against what they considered Northern aggression. In May of 1861, less than one month after the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, the 1st North Carolina Volunteer Regiment was formed. Two young brothers, Larkin Junius Curtis and Finley

Patterson Curtis, both from Wilkesboro, N.C., felt compelled to join the unit and defend their Southern lands. Before the brothers left Wilkesboro to fight in the war, their mother — like most mothers who experienced seeing their sons off to war — gave each one something to remind them of home. She gave half of a coverlet she had woven for them to Larkin and the other to Finley, not knowing that she would never see one of her young boys again.

In addition to their coverlets, each brother also carried a personal Bible. Larkin had a bookmark in his Bible — which had been printed in 1845 — that had been stitched by “a friend” and simply stated “My Bible,” along with a four-leaf clover. Finley’s, on the other hand, had a lock of hair tied at one end and placed on the first page of the Book of Deuteronomy. One can only imagine whether this lock was from a lover back home.

Larkin Curtis became a lieutenant in Company B of the 1st North Carolina Regiment, while Finley remained a private until he was discharged. A short time after the unit was organized, it was reformed into the 11th North Carolina Regiment. The unit saw extensive service throughout the war, but 1863 and 1864 were by far the

bloodiest years for the regiment, and for the brothers. In early May of 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Finley was wounded by a Union bullet in his neck and shoulder.

Consequently, the strap that held his Bible in its leather case around his neck was also severed by the gunshot. His Bible fell to the ground, and was discovered later by a fellow Confederate soldier. It was then sent home to his parents who, for some time, thought he was dead. According to the Curtis family oral history, the dark spots within Finley’s Bible are said to be blood stains.

Almost one year later in May of 1864, Larkin’s unit was stationed on the Virginia front near Spotsylvania. The battle raged for several days around a series of breastworks near the Spotsylvania courthouse. On May 10, Lt. Larkin Curtis led a Confederate charge on the breastworks and was shot in the face and killed by a Union minnie ball.

He also carried his Bible around his neck in a leather case along with a pocket watch; and both items were eventually sent home to his family.

Following the war, Finley Curtis moved to Butler, Tenn., where he co-owned a hardware store for many years. Most of the information about the Curtis brothers’ service in the 1st North Carolina was written down in the back of the Bibles by Finley’s son around 1930. The Bibles, Larkin’s pocket watch, the minnie ball that pierced Finley’s shoulder and neck, and the coverlet pieces were all saved and passed down to later Curtis generations.



These Bibles accompanied the Curtis brothers, Larkin and Finley, into battle during the Civil War. Also pictured are Larkin’s pocket watch and the minnie ball that injured Finley’s shoulder and neck.

In 1980, Mrs. Finley Curtis Jr. donated all of the aforementioned artifacts to East Tennessee State University, as well as a collection of papers and documents concerning .Finley's business. The artifacts are now being held at the Carroll Reece Museum, where they are on display during March.

The museum is free and open to the public. Regular hours are 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday and 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday. For more information, call 439-4392.

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