

Joseph Trax & The Custer Cannon

By Linda Cunningham Fluharty
© May 2006



REUNION OF G.A.R., WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA, AUGUST 1907
[Image owned by Linda Fluharty.]

For a complete account of the 1907 Reunion at Wheeling, see
<http://www.rootsweb.com/~wwwags/GAR1907.pdf>

Joseph Trax (also Tracks) was born in Troy Hill, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania April 1, 1847. He initially stated in his application for a government pension that he was born in the year 1845 but the government Pension Office concluded that his birth year was 1847. His brother, William, also a soldier, was born in 1845.

The parents of Joseph Trax were Samuel and Eliza Tracks. His siblings, named in the 1860 census of New Castle, Lawrence County, Pennsylvania, were William, Rebecca, Kate, Mary and George.

During the Civil War, Joseph Trax served in Company "B" Second West Virginia Cavalry. He enlisted on August 26, 1863 at Camp Piatt, (W) Virginia to serve for three years. At that time, he was a laborer, 5 ft. 5 inches, with light complexion, blue eyes and light hair. He mustered out with the company on June 30, 1865.

The 2nd Cavalry, along with the 1st and 3rd West Virginia Cavalry regiments and the 1st New York Cavalry, were part of Colonel Henry Capehart's cavalry brigade. In December 1864, Capehart's brigade was transferred to the cavalry brigade of Major-General George Armstrong Custer. Under Custer, they helped to defeat the Confederate army at Five Forks, Saylor's Creek and Appomattox.

Joseph Trax stated that he served as General Custer's orderly.

According to a record of the Surgeon General's Office, contained in Trax' pension file at the National Archives, he sustained a gunshot wound at or near Lynchburg. The incident occurred on 17 June 1864 and "took off the point of 2", 3rd and 4" toe." He alleged in his pension application that in the same battle he was "wounded in the right thigh by a minnie ball." He was returned to duty September 26, 1864.

On October 30, 1879, Joseph Trax married Elizabeth A. Reed at New Castle, Pennsylvania. The ceremony was performed by Rev, William F. Cowden. – They had no children.

After the war, Joseph worked, but in 1881 he applied for a pension, based on the residual effects of the wounds incurred during the war. He said he had only been able to work for half the time since he was discharged and could only follow light work that did not require him to stand on his foot.

In a declaration, dated April 11, 1881, Joseph Trax made the following statements about postwar employment:

"...He has resided at New Castle aforesaid from the 30th June 1865 to the 22^d day of December 1871 and his post office address was New Castle aforesaid and his occupation was that of a laborer and he resided in Allegheny City Pennsylvania from the 22^d of December 1871 to the 22^d day of October 1879 and his post office address during all of said time was Allegheny City aforesaid and his occupation was that of Shoe making and Segar making and from Oct 1879 to the present time his residence and post office address has been New Castle, Lawrence County aforesaid and his occupation has been since 1879 a laborer & repairing Sewing Machines....." "....

Joseph gave the following deposition, dated August 1916, in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania:

"Before me the undersigned authority personally appeared Joseph Trax, who being duly sworn according to law deposes and says in reference to his claim for increase of pension as passed on by the Board of Reviews, that he lives at 710 West Washington Street,

New Castle, Pennsylvania. That he was born April 1st, 1845 [later proved to be 1847], at a place then known as Troy Hill, in Allegheny County, which he believes was a part of the City of Allegheny prior to its consolidation with the city of Pittsburg. That he lived in Allegheny County and that he believes he lived in the City of Allegheny when the census of 1850 was taken. That when he was a boy of about six years of age his father lived at Ohio Street, which street still bears the same name and one of the streets of the North Side, in the City of Pittsburg, formerly Allegheny and they lived at the corner of what was then Ohio and East Lane Streets. That cholera broke out on that vicinity and that the neighbors on all sides of them were dying, and there were deaths in the houses to the right and to the left of the home of your affiant and across the street. Then the father of your affiant's mother lived in New Castle, then Union Township, and on account of cholera the affiant's father left Allegheny and came to New Castle. If the Board of Review, or the Census Bureau or any other authorities can find the year of the cholera scourge of Allegheny City they can determine the year that your affiant moved to New Castle. He also believes that the census records of Troy Hill will show the date of his birth. He is unable to find these records himself and asks the Board of review to secure them from the Census Bureau.

He further says that they came to New Castle by canal boat and he was then a boy of five or six years of age. The family continued to reside there until the death of various members of the family, and your affiant has continuously resided ever since except during the time he was in the Service, but his mother was unable to read and write and if she gave any other date to the census enumerator taking the census in 1860 as to his birth he believes it was in error, but hopes the Bureau of Pensions may find the census report of 1850 appertaining to his age.

The name was formerly Tracks and is on the medal given to him by the State of West Virginia, "Tracks'....." That he files herewith a certified copy from the recorder's office of Lawrence County of his discharge, in which his name is spelled Tracks, which shows that he was eighteen years of age in 1863. If eighteen years of age in 1863 then the discharge would show he was born in 1845. Your affiant was wounded on June 18th, 1864 in front of Lynchburg and has been pensioned on that ever since."

At some unknown time after the Civil War, Joseph Trax had a cannon made of relics from Civil War battlefields. It became known as the "Custer Cannon" and Trax took it to G.A.R. reunions and other military events all over the country.

The following excerpts mention the Custer Cannon:

Wheeling Intelligencer - August 28, 1907 - A RELIC OF WARS - The Famous Custer Cannon Is Here and is Attracting Much Attention -- The famous "Custer Cannon" was an arrival yesterday for the reunion. It was brought here by Joseph Trax, of New Castle,

Pa., who is its owner, and is justly proud of the relic of many battles of the late war. He had the cannon cast at the Fort Pitt works, Pittsburgh, and it is composed of bugles, shells, badges, sabres and relics from various battlefields from all parts of the country. Trax was an orderly under Custer during the civil war, and named the cannon for him, while on it is engraved the shoulder straps of Custer, also flags, eagles and various other designs. In all, there are in its composition 118 relics of the Blue and Gray. The cannon has been exhibited at 24 national encampments, 24 reunions, 9 state encampments, and many other affairs. Mr. Trax was in Co. B., Second West Virginia Cavalry, and has also with him a flag, well preserved, which was presented to the Second West Virginia by the ladies of Wheeling in 1865.

The relics are in the window at headquarters on Twelfth street, but the cannon will be in the parade on tomorrow morning, and it will be halted at the Fort Henry monument, on Main street hill, during the parade, and a salute fired.

The Mansfield News, Sept 2, 1908: *“Trax, with the assistance of his comrades dragged his unique “Custer” cannon through the parade, firing it repeatedly. Trax was General Custer’s orderly in West Virginia and collected a vast amount of articles on battlefields which he afterward moulded in his cannon. The gun contains among other things four pounds of brass buttons, four regimental and three division bugles, eighty buckles, two brass door keys to the Ford theatre, Washington; five eagles from flags, 23 spurs, 16 army spoons, one cow bell and 24 copper pennies captured at Lexington. – The men of Custer’s command in the parade were easily distinguished by the streaming red ties which they wore. It is related by Mr. Trax that when marching up Pennsylvania avenue after the war, Mrs. Elizabeth Custer, wife of the general, threw a long piece of red flannel at her husband’s command, the same being caught by Mr. Trax. It was torn up on the spot and made into neckties by the men and has since then been their distinguishing mark at encampments and reunions. Some fifteen of these ties were visible in today’s parade.”*

Fitchburg Daily Sentinel, July 5, 1913 – JOE TRAX’S CANNON
- *“Joe Trax of New Castle, Pa., brought a cannon with him to the celebration the like of which is seldom seen. As Trax himself said, he wouldn’t trade it for one of the modern artillery guns in the regular camp even if something were given to boot. When asked why, he explained that it was composed of melted brass buttons from Federal and Confederate uniforms, field spoons, a key from Ford’s theater, Washington, where Lincoln was assassinated; twenty-five pounds of regulation silver watchcases and – he*

couldn't remember just what else dropped into the melting pot. "Junk but historic junk," he laconically asserted.

"Trax was a trooper in Company B West Virginia cavalry. He was wounded at Lynchburg, and to top his story concerning the composition of the cannon he said the bullet which lodged in his right thigh was a part of the glistening muzzle."

The Daily Northwestern – September 28, 1915 - THE CUSTER CANNON SALUTES OLD SOLDIERS. – Historic Piece of Ordnance Taken to Washington to Perform ----? – The Wisconsin Delegates. (Special to *The Northwestern*.) – Washington, D. C., Sept. 28. – *"A Grand Army encampment without a salute from the celebrated Custer cannon would hardly be a regular Grand Army encampment. At least it would not so rank in the minds of the surviving union soldiers of the civil war. Therefore, the Custer cannon has been brought to Washington that from its throat again may roar the welcome that has been a feature for more than thirty national gatherings of the boys who wore the blue during the great rebellion.*

"The Custer cannon was cast at Fort Pitt, Pittsburg, Pa., after relics from practically every state in the union had been melted for its composition. It consists of one B & O brass lock from Harper's Ferry, one cow bell, two brass drum rims, two brass door keys from Ford's theater, Washington, D.C., where Lincoln was killed; two eagles from division flags, three gold dollars of war times, three division bugles, four pounds of buckles from artillery harness, five spears of infantry flags, five sleeve buttons, five white metal watch cases of army service, nine pairs of spurs (confederate), thirteen brass caps from shells, fourteen United States buckles from infantry, sixteen army spoons, twenty-pound piece of a bell picked up at Charleston, twenty-four pairs of union spurs, twenty-four copper cents captured at Lexington, thirty-six United States cavalry buckles, 104 Spencer carbine cartridges. The weight is 252 pounds, and it is polished, General Custer's shoulder strap is engraved upon the band. The cannon is named for General Custer.

"It is the property of Joseph Trax, a member of Company B, Second West Virginia cavalry, who resides at New Castle, Pa. Mr. Trax will wear the same red necktie he wore when he marched down Pennsylvania avenue fifty years ago in grand review. He will have with him his little granddaughter, who will carry the silk flag which belonged to the Third Cavalry division, and which was in the review fifty years ago." [Note: He said he had no children and none was found in census records.

Syracuse Herald, (N.Y) – **August 20, 1917** – Boston, Aug. 20. - *"Joseph Trax of Newcastle, Pa., carefully guarded the 150-pound Custer cannon, which has been exhibited at their grand*

encampments. The cannon is made of relics collected during the Civil war, and will be hauled in the parade tomorrow at the head of troops who fought under General Custer.”

The Indianapolis Star, September 29, 1921. – ANNUAL PARADE OF VETERANS INSPIRES CITY – *“A division almost all to himself was Joe Trax, once Gen. Custer’s orderly who had a little brass cannon made of various war trophies. Mr. Trax himself was draped with a flag flung toga-wise about his form, and ever and anon he would stop and fire his cannon, which let out a roar that set the pigeons that next in the buildings about the Circle soaring skyward in startled flocks.”*

Joseph Trax attended the 1922 G. A. R. Encampment, May 16-18, 1922 at Moundsville, West Virginia.



MOUNDSVILLE, WEST VIRGINIA, MAY 1922.

New York Times – Sept 6, 1923 – CIVIL WAR VETERANS IN ANNUAL PARADE – *“Uncle Joe Trax, who came from Newcastle, Pa. with his famous Custer cannon, had a great time along the line of*

march. With coat off, he loaded rammed and fired the cannon as several young women from Maryland hauled it through the streets."

Joseph Trax died of "Chronic Valvular Heart Disease" on 22 February 1927 at New Castle. He was interred at Greenwood Cemetery two days later.

Thanks to Richard A. Wolfe for identifying Joseph Trax in the 1907 picture.

The *New York Times* online store is selling costly reprints of a reunion photo taken in New York in 1919. In April 2006, the caption said, "*Custer's Command 1919. - The last members of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's command gather for their 43rd annual reunion in September 1919. The cannon was forged from bits of brass found on the battlefield at Custer's Last Stand.*"

Joseph Trax is in the *New York Times* picture with his cannon and Richard Wolfe verified that the cannon is indeed the one owned by Trax.

A message to the *New York Times* store resulted in a change in the description: "*Custer's Command 1919 - The last members of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's command gathers for their 43rd annual reunion in September 1919. The "Custer gun" was a "composite souvenir." Cast at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with relics contributed by every state in the Union.*"

Missing is the fact that it was made from CIVIL WAR relics and was owned by a CIVIL WAR soldier, not Custer's men from the Indian Wars.