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A Man's Blast from the Past

One wore blue and the other wore grey. But today they're both resting in John Morris' driveway in Cardinal Forest.

Cannons, we're talking about. Ten feet long, painted flat black, each weighing three tons. They were made to defend the

coast line, firing 24-pound cannon balls, and both were cast in a Pittsburgh foundry, one in 1837, the other in 1838.

One guarded a fort on Florida's Gulf coast until the Confederates pressed it into service for the Civil War. The other stayed at the Allegheny Arsenal in Pennsylvania and was sent to help Union General George McClellan at the beginning of the War Between the States.

"One fought on the side of the Confederates, and one fought on the side of the Union," says John, 41. "The strange thing is that they were discovered together again." Indeed, after their wartime peregrinations, both seacoast defenders ended up in Mississippi. Last year John bought them, and their light green, reproduction carriages, at a New Orleans auction. Today, the Civil War veterans rest in his driveway.

They're not the only big guns owned by the six-foot-seven former Navy surface warfare officer. The Massachusetts native began collecting cannons in 1971. His first find was a bronze, Malaysian cannon in an Indonesian antique shop. "I found



out later, through research, that [such cannons] were used as weapons but probably more so as currency and for making noise during ceremonies," says John. He adds that the late Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos collected these cannons, too.

John also has a merchant ship's cannon, dating to about 1820, squatting at his front door. Before Lloyd's of London would insure certain vessels, they required that the ships carry such weapons for self-defense. Thus the cannons' nickname: an insurance gun.

Standing guard in John's front yard is a rapid-fire Maxim Nordenfolt gun. Its slim, tapered barrel, painted in copper and white camouflage, juts out aggressively, daring trespassers to give it a chance to fire off a 42 millimeter round. It's English, made in 1896, and John has determined that it was once aboard a Spanish ship in the Spanish-American War. But he isn't sure which vessel.

Such uncertainty bothers John, a program manager with the Naval Sea Systems Command. "I like to research every one of my cannons,"

he states. "I like to know exactly how they were used." He enjoys the challenge of tracing a cannon's history from its casting, to its movements across time and place, into his possession.

To do this, he digs in the Library of Congress and the National Archives, even going as far as the Tower of London to learn the background of his treasures. "I find the original record of manufacture, listing the cannon of mine specifically," he says. Quality assurance procedures make this possible. "They had aversion of it way back then," explains John. The weapons had to meet government standards, so each was inspected, test fired, and had its vital statistics recorded, including serial number, weight, date and place of manufacture, even the name of its approving officer.

Because of this record keeping, John claims, "There's almost no speculation involved" in tracing a cannon's background. He has micro-filmed 1,000 pages of these records for his own use and has voluntarily researched every cannon in the Washington Navy Yard, the Norfolk Naval Ship Yard, and the Naval Academy. He even found one at West Point that had once been aboard the Union ship Merimac before the Confederates took over the frigate and iron plated it.

John calls his research "motivating in itself" but confesses, "I don't know why I do it except that it's interesting."

—FRANCES MCKENNEY



PAUL E. ALERSTHE CONNECTION

John Morris boasts one Union, one Confederate cannon.