

# Hot Springs school connected to Civil War history

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |


HOT SPRINGS — Tucked into the corner of a shelf is an iron reminder of the Civil War in this city.

By itself, the six-pound ball-shaped object in the Garland County Historical Society has a rusty brown color that contrasts with the darker wood color of the shelf. There is pitting on the entire surface from years of resting in the ground.

The ball may have stayed in the ground, too. However, it came to light years ago during a construction project under what now is St. John School.

In recent weeks, Hot Springs residents have started to increase their interest in the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Signposts have appeared that draw attention to Malvern Avenue as a route used by soldiers during the war. A downtown plaque still marks the location of the state capital in 1861.

But none of the objects holds the fascination like the cannonball.

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Orval Albritton of Hot Springs worked at the Garland County Historical Society on the day the cannonball was donated to the organization. He recalled how the cannonball was found while workers for Ed Mooney Construction of Hot Springs during the excavating of footings for an addition to the St. John School.

“Years later, there was an employee of that construction company who brought it up there to the archives and gave it to (past Executive Director) Bobbie Jones McLane,” he said.

“I remember hearing about this,” Judy McRae said, confirming the story as true. McRae is a longtime member of St. John. Her late husband’s grandfather was the Ed Mooney of the construction company name.

However, it has been so many years since the story has been recalled that the exact location of the find or who found it has been hard to learn. Sister Noeline Banks, RSM, of St. John School said there have been several additions over the years, too.

What is known is that there likely was a military engagement that blasted the cannonball into the hillside.

“It’s more than just folklore,” said Larry Rhodes of Hot Springs, an amateur historian who has done much to learn the exact events of the Civil War in the Spa City.

The town of Hot Springs of the 1860s was a very different looking place than the city of Hot Springs today. The southern edge of town was at present-day Hill Wheatley Plaza. The plaza parking lot was the location of a “Y” in the road. One leg of the “Y” continued to Rockport. The other leg of the “Y” continued to Mount Ida and right past the very tall hill that supports St. John School and Church today.

“There had been an antebellum cemetery on top of that hill,” Rhodes said. “It was a pauper’s cemetery, not used except by people who couldn’t be buried anywhere else. It overlooked the road. It most likely became a position of ambush.”

A “home guard” used trails around the bottoms of hills in the area. It used these trails to observe movements of federal soldiers.

"It could well be that the hill where St. John's Church is now was used as a hillpoint of observation and ambush, and the federal fired back with artillery," Rhodes said. "Now that's a little bit of speculation but it's not too far off the mark. It's quite conceivable it was an outpost."

Military records list a skirmish in the area, too. The 3rd Missouri Union Cavalry in Hot Springs had a firefight in Hot Springs on Feb. 4, 1864. Further, cavalry units were known to carry mountain howitzers.

The cannonball discovered under St. John School has the same size and weight of a single piece of solid shot ordnance that Civil War soldiers fired from howitzers.

Rhodes' great-grandfather served in the 3rd Missouri Union Cavalry. He knows his ancestor served on patrols between Benton and Hot Springs. However, no family stories survived about any participation in the 1864 skirmish.

Until more information can come to light, it is good fortune that the cannonball has been found and it is where it should be — in the permanent holdings of a historical society.

"We feel very fortunate to have this in our collection," said Liz Robbins, executive director of the Garland County Historical Society.

Public viewing of the cannonball is possible during the society's business hours of 8 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday. For more information, call (501) 321-2159 or visit [www.garlandcountyhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.garlandcountyhistoricalsociety.com).

#### Civil War sites in Arkansas

Be sure to check out these major Civil War battlefield locations in Arkansas. Make a weekend of it and also plan to visit a Catholic church near them. Find a complete list at [www.dolr.org/parishes](http://www.dolr.org/parishes). A listing of National Park Service locations in Arkansas may be found at [www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/ar010a.htm](http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/ar010a.htm).

Arkansas County: Fort Hindman/Arkansas Post National Memorial, Jan 9-11, 1863

Benton County: Pea Ridge or Eklhorn Tavern, March 6-8, 1862

Grant County: Jenkins' Ferry, April 30, 1864

Phillips County: Helena, July 4, 1863

Pulaski County: Bayou Forche, Sept 10, 1863

Washington County: Prairie Grove, Dec. 7, 1862