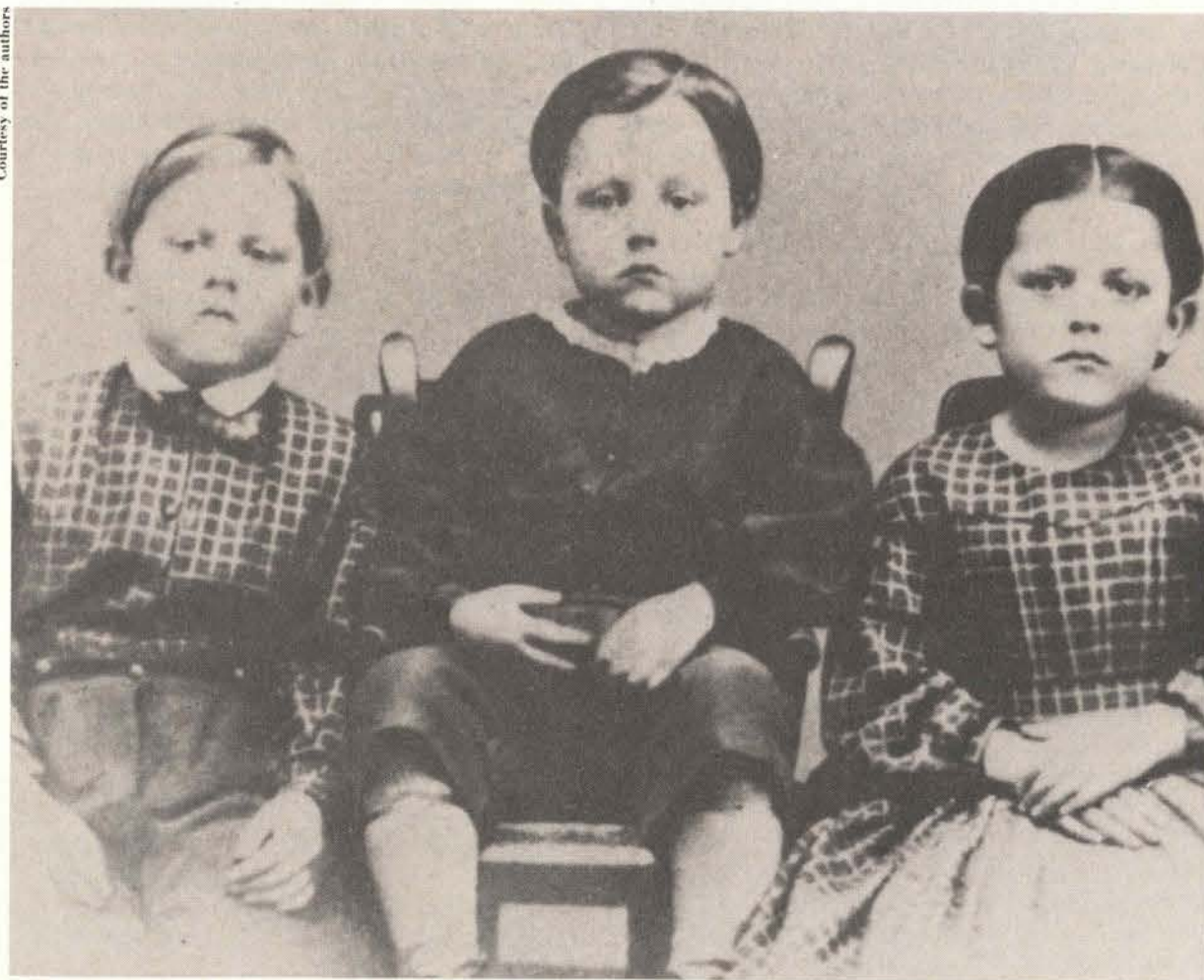


Once Unknown

# THE HUNT FOR SERGEANT HUMISTON



The children of Gettysburg's unknown soldier.

By  
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In November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his eulogy for the dead of the great Battle of Gettysburg at the dedication of the National Cemetery there. That same month a mystery involving one of those dead was solved, and the story of that soldier and his family became well-known in the North. It was a story that led to the establishment of a national charity and a home for children orphaned by the war. Since then the fame of Lincoln's address has endured, while the story of the soldier has faded into obscurity. But in late 1863, while the president's speech was receiving scant attention, many Northerners were showing a heartfelt response to the story of the "unknown soldier" of Gettysburg.

The incident began with a burial squad's discovery of a dead Union soldier. The men in these interment details were inured to the sad sights of their job, but among the masses of corpses in the aftermath of the battle at Gettysburg, this man was special.

They found him on Stratton Street, near York Street, in the town. His sightless eyes were fixed on an object in his hand. It was an ambrotype of three children. The little memento had been the last thing seen by the dying father. A search uncovered no identification, so the soldier was buried in a marked grave in the nearby lot of Judge S.R. Russell. A member of the burial squad kept the picture, and word of the pathetic scene began to spread.

The story became known all over the Union through the efforts of Dr. John Francis Bournes of Philadelphia. Touched by the devotion of the father and the sad fate of the children, he determined to see whether the family could be located and the soldier identified. Bournes borrowed the ambrotype and had thousands of cartes de visite made and circulated throughout the North, prompting many newspapers to publicize the incident and the search. Soon after, letters began arriving from anguished wives and mothers, and Dr. Bournes, in return, sent them copies of the picture. But for months the mystery remained unsolved.

Finally, in November 1863, a letter arrived from Portville, Cattaraugus County, New York. A soldier's wife had seen an account of the picture in the *American Presbyterian*, published in Philadelphia, a single copy of which was received in Portville. She had sent a picture to her husband like the one described, and she had not heard from him since the Battle of Gettysburg. She anxiously awaited a reply and a copy of the picture. When the copy came, Phylinda Humiston learned she was a widow, and her children Franklin, Frederick, and Alice were fatherless. And the soldier, whose dying act had "so touched the heart of the nation,"

was identified as Sergeant Amos Humiston of Company C, 154th New York Infantry Volunteers.

He was a hero to the North, and as people pointed out, he was typical of the common soldiers in the Union army.

Amos Humiston was born in 1830 in Oswego, Tioga County, New York. Phylinda Betsey Smith, born a year later in neighboring Chemung County, married Amos on July 4, 1854, in Tioga County. Their first child, Franklin, was born there on April 10, 1855, as was Alice E., on March 30, 1857. Then the family moved to Portville in western New York, where Frederick was born on January 17, 1859. Amos was a harness maker by trade, and a coworker, George Lillie, lived with the family. The Humistons' minister, the Reverend Isaac Ogden of the Portville Presbyterian Church, recalled Amos as "a quiet citizen, a kind neighbor, and devotedly attached to his family." When the war began, Amos wanted to enlist but decided not to for his family's sake. But after the failure of the Peninsula Campaign and President Lincoln's call for 300,000 volunteers, Amos changed his mind. He did so only after being assured his family would be cared for while he was away.

He enlisted on July 26, 1862, at Portville, to serve three years in the newly formed 154th New York. After mustering in as a corporal for Company C, on September 24, 1862, Amos, along with the rest of the regiment, went to Washington and northern Virginia where they spent seven months before they were involved in their first battle. During this period, Amos was promoted to sergeant on January 25, 1863, and spent some time sick in the division hospital in April. Amos was with the regiment when, as part of the 1st Brigade, 2d Division, XI Corps, it made a forlorn stand and was brutally beaten and routed by "Stonewall" Jackson's famous flank attack at the Battle of Chancellorsville, May 2, 1863.

So Sergeant Humiston knew what he was facing on the afternoon of July 1, 1863. He and the rest of the brigade had been watching from Cemetery Hill as two divisions of the XI Corps retreated under the heavy attack of Major General Jubal Early's Confederate division. Once again Sergeant Humiston and the rest of the brigade were to form a rearguard to cover a Union retreat. Under command of Colonel Charles R. Coster, the brigade marched through the town, left the 73d Pennsylvania near the railroad station, and filed into Kuhn's brickyard on the northern outskirts of Gettysburg. There Coster's three regiments (positioned facing north, left to right: 27th Pennsylvania, 154th New York, 134th New York) barely



The popular *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* woodcut "An incident at Gettysburg—the last thought of a dying father."

had time to align themselves behind a fence when two of Early's brigades hit them. The Union stand, though a stubborn one, did not last long. The Confederates (five Louisiana and three North Carolina regiments) acknowledged the outnumbered Yankees did not run until Early's men climbed over the fence into Coster's line. By that time the brigade had been outflanked and almost surrounded. In a confusing foot race through the town, a good portion of Coster's force was shot down or captured. In the 154th New York only eighteen members were still present at that evening's roll call on Cemetery Hill, a loss of over 200. Sergeant Humiston was reported as missing. The regimental muster rolls continued to record him as missing until the ambrotype, the single sad clue, solved the mystery.

The Humiston incident did not fade from Northerners' memories after the family was located. Again Dr. Bournes was responsible. He had

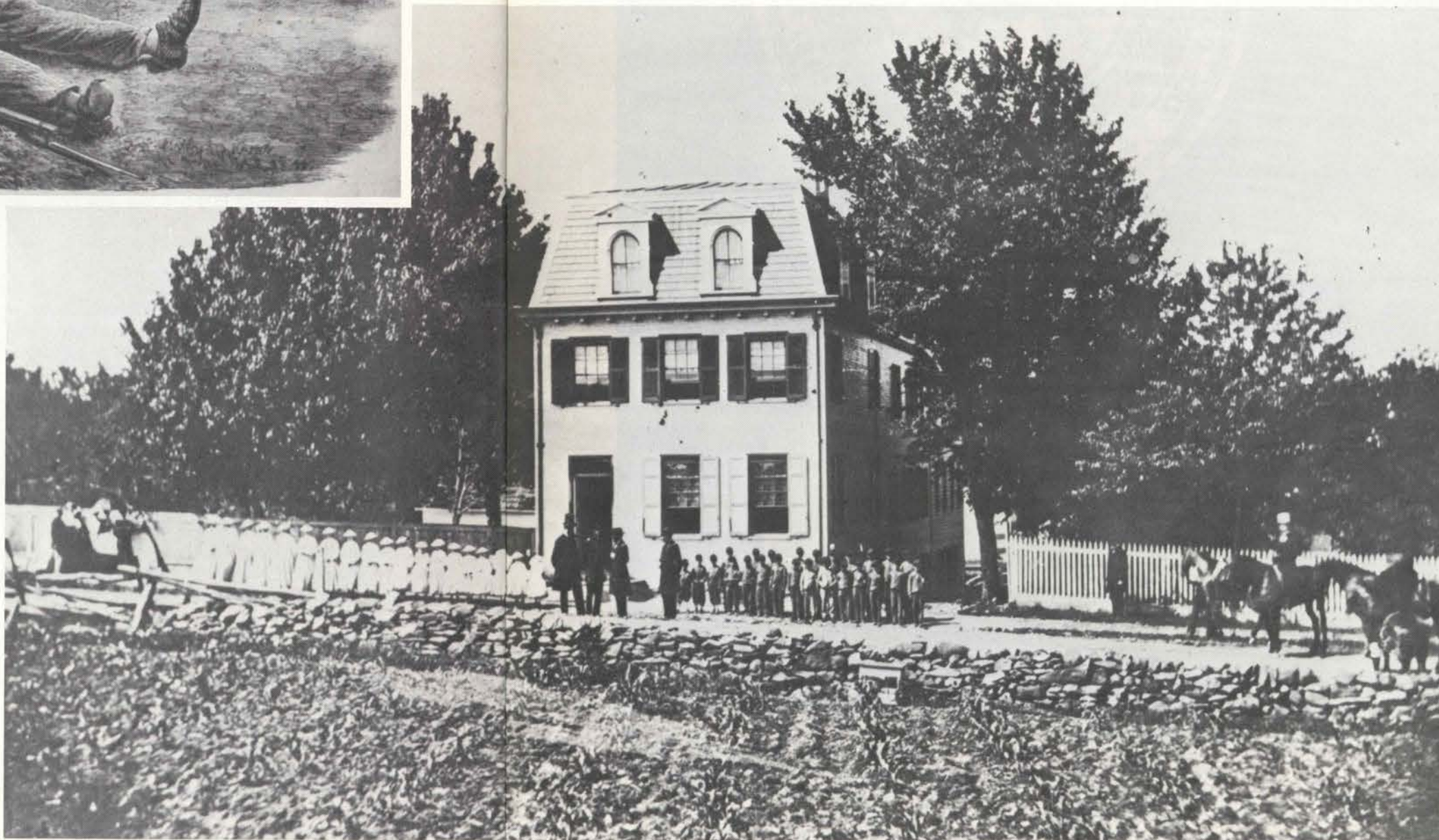
The Soldiers' Orphans Home of Gettysburg. It operated as an orphanage until 1877 when it was closed under a cloud of scandal; it was far behind in its financial obligations, and Rosa J. Carmichael, Mrs. Humiston's replacement, was convicted of assaulting her young charges. Today it is a popular tourist museum.

planned that proceeds from the sales of the photographs of the sergeant's little ones go to the support and education of the Humiston children. But now he realized the attention raised by the incident could be used to start a national charity, and he acted.

In January of 1864 Bournes journeyed to Portville to return the ambrotype to Phylinda. While there he announced his plans at a charity meeting at the Presbyterian church, and offered copies of the picture for sale. Once again the newspapers took up the story; *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* included an artist's depiction of "The Last Thought of a Dying Father." The *American Presbyterian* held a contest for the best poem on the incident, and the winner, James G. Clark of Dansville, New York, set his verses to music. "Children of the Battle Field" appeared as sheet music, dedi-

cated to Dr. Bournes, with a lithograph of the famous picture on the cover. Sales of the music went to the orphans' support. Clark also performed the song in his "ballad entertainments."

The result of this charitable work was the establishment, in 1866, of the Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Gettysburg. It was located in the Baltimore Street building used by Union Major General Oliver O. Howard as his headquarters during the battle. Phylinda Humiston was the first matron of the institution, and there she and Fred, Frank, and Alice lived until 1869. In that year, on October 26, Phylinda married Asa Barnes in Gettysburg and moved with the children to his home in Becket, Massachusetts. Left behind on Cemetery Hill was Amos Humiston. He had been reburied in Grave #14, Row B, in the New York section of graves in the National Cemetery.



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## MOBILE SURRENDERS

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An Unknown Soldier

A Relic Of The Cause

