

KEY to a Mystery

BY MARK H. DUNKELMAN *Mortally wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg, Union soldier Amos Humiston died clutching the only clue to his identity: an ambrotype of his three small children.*

OF ALL THE FALLEN HEROES of the epic, three-day Civil War Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, this Union soldier was unique. He had not led a charge, nor captured an enemy flag, nor rescued a comrade under fire. Instead, his fame rested on his dying act of devotion and love; his death pose made his story special.

Found after the battle, in a secluded spot in the town near the intersection of Stratton and York Streets, the soldier bore nothing on his person to identify him. But clutched in his hand was an ambrotype photograph of three young children. In his final moments, he had fixed his gaze on the image of his beloved little ones, and carried the sight with him into death. The picture was freed from his frozen grip, and he was buried in an unknown's grave.

The girl who found the dead soldier—the daughter of a local tavern keeper named Benjamin Schriver—gave the small glass-plate photograph to her father. Before long, the touching picture became a conversation piece at his tavern in Graeffenburg, a village about a dozen miles west of Gettysburg. There the ambrotype likely would have passed into obscurity, a forgotten barroom curiosity, had it not been for a fortuitous accident.

Four men on their way to Gettysburg to care for the

An untold number of children were left fatherless when thousands of men died in the three-day Battle of Gettysburg (right) in July 1863. The photograph of three of those children (above, left), found clutched in the hand of their dead father, triggered a search for his identity and helped to raise funds to establish an orphanage for the innocent, young victims of the Civil War.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



THE GRANGER COLLECTION

wounded in the aftermath of the battle were forced to stop at Graeffenburg when their wagon broke down. On a visit to Schriver's tavern, they heard the tale of the fallen soldier and saw the ambrotype of the children. One of the men, a Philadelphia physician named John Francis Bourns, immediately realized that the photograph was the single, sad clue to the soldier's identity. Intrigued, Bourns convinced Schriver to give him the photograph so that he might attempt to locate the dead man's family.

After seeing to it during his stay in Gettysburg that the soldier's grave was well marked, Dr. Bourns returned to his Philadelphia home, where he put his plan into action. First, he had the ambrotype copied by several photographers, producing hundreds of inexpensive duplicates in the *carte de visite* format. (Such paper photographic prints, mounted on Bristol board about the size of a calling card, had become popular during the early 1860s, and albums filled with the small pictures were a common sight in American parlors.) Having a ready supply of copies of the image was an important part of the doctor's plan because photographs could not be reproduced in newspapers of the day, and it was through newspapers that he planned to spread the story of the dead soldier and his ambrotype.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* carried such an account on October 19, 1863, under the headline, "Whose Father Was He?" The article began by describing the final act of the unknown soldier. "How touching! how solemn!" the anonymous writer declared. "What pen can describe the emotions of this patriot-father as he gazed upon these children, so soon to be made orphans!" The column continued with a detailed description of the children's appearance, Dr. Bourns's address, and a request for newspapers throughout the country to spread the story.

Many papers across the North reprinted the *Inquirer* article verbatim; others published their own versions. A Philadelphia religious journal, the *American Presbyterian*, ran the story on October 29. Several days later, a single copy of that paper made its way to a subscriber in Portville, New York, a small town on the Allegheny River in the western part of the state. The issue's owner passed the paper on for others in the community to

read, and eventually it reached Mrs. Philinda Humiston, the mother of eight-year-old Franklin, six-year-old Alice, and four-year-old Frederick.

In early November, Dr. Bourns received a letter from Portville's postmaster, written on behalf of Mrs. Humiston. Several months earlier, the letter said, she had sent her husband a photograph of their three children, just like the one described in the *American Presbyterian*, and she had heard nothing from him since the Battle of Gettysburg.

In response, the doctor rushed a *carte de visite* to Philinda Humiston in Portville. When the picture arrived, she stared at the three familiar faces and realized that she was now a widow, and



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COURTESY OF DAVID HUMISTON KELLEY

that little Frank, Alice, and Fred were fatherless. And so Gettysburg's mysterious, unknown soldier could now be identified as Sergeant Amos Humiston of the 154th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The *American Presbyterian* broke the news on November 19, 1863—the same day that President

Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal address at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg.

Soon after news of Sergeant Humiston's identification passed from newspaper to newspaper across the North, it was announced that Dr. Bourns would travel to Portville to return the ambrotype to the Humiston family and to present them with the proceeds from the sale of hundreds of copies of the *carte de visite*.

On January 2, 1864, Bourns, accompanied by the Reverend Isaac G. Ogden of the Portville Presbyterian Church and a small group from the town, visited the Humiston home. When the doctor handed the bloodstained ambrotype to Philinda, Ogden noted, "her hands



The identity of the dead Union soldier and father, depicted in Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* (above), was determined when Philinda Humiston (left, bottom) read a story in the *American Presbyterian* and suspected that the man described might be her husband, Amos (shown in a retouched photograph at left, top).

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

shook like an aspen leaf, but by a strong effort she retained her composure." After giving the children some presents and visiting with their mother for a while, the visitors knelt with the family in prayer, little Fred next to his new friend, the doctor. Before leaving, Bourns presented Philinda with the profits from the sale of copies of the picture.

The following day, at a meeting held at the Portville Presbyterian Church, Rev-

erend Ogden recorded a few biographical details—no doubt provided by Philinda Humiston—which were published in the *American Presbyterian* and reprinted

for example, the popular *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* ran a fanciful woodcut, complete with dead horses and circling vultures, which was entitled, "The Last Thought of a Dying Father." The brief, accompanying article described what the paper called "one of the most touching scenes of the battlefield of Gettysburg," but it neglected to name the devoted father, referring to him simply as "a volunteer from New York."

EVEN AFTER HIS IDENTITY WAS KNOWN, Amos Humiston remained only a dead soldier, locked by time and rigor mortis on a Pennsylvania battlefield, an ambrotype of his children in his hand.

Throughout the subsequent decades, as his touching tale was told and retold, Humiston remained only a dead soldier, locked by time and rigor mortis on a Pennsylvania battlefield, an ambrotype of his children in his hand. Only in recent years have details of his life emerged. While Amos Humiston will always be remembered for the way he died, today we can also remember the life of the man who was destined to personify familial love and devotion.

Born in Owego, Tioga County, New York, on April 26, 1830, Amos spent his boyhood in that Susquehanna River town. Like his own children, he and his older brother and sisters lost their father while very young, Ambrose Humiston having died in 1837. Their mother Mary rewed, and the children grew up in the home of Philander Boice. Tragedy struck Amos again when his sister Maria drowned in a mill pond.

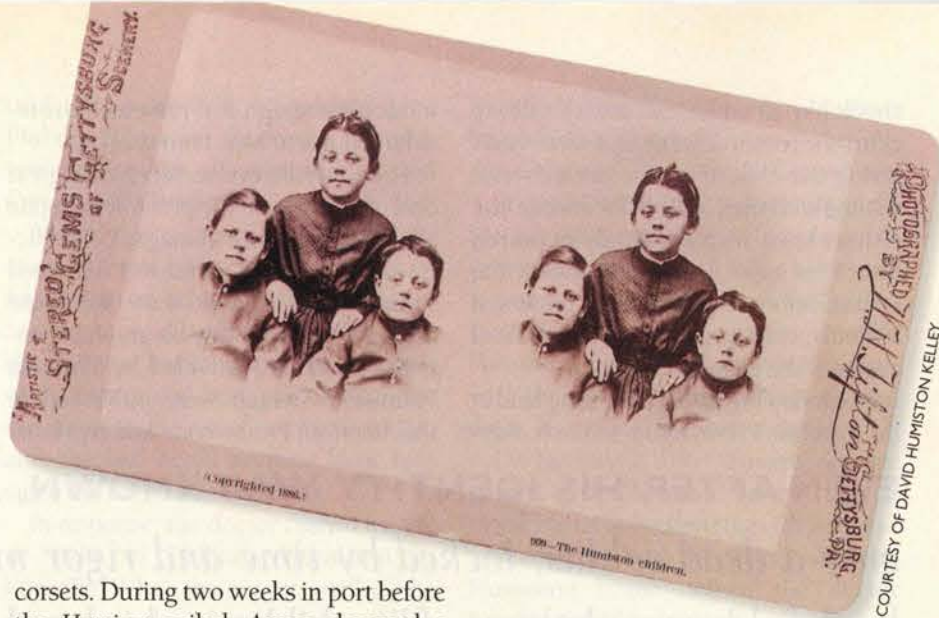
After attending the local school, Amos followed his brother Morris into an apprenticeship as a harness maker. For years, the Humiston boys studied the craft of cutting, finishing, and stitching leather to fashion harnesses. When Morris completed his apprenticeship in 1848, he opened a shop in the nearby town of Candor. Amos apparently finished his apprenticeship two years later, at age twenty. But when the younger Humiston pondered the prospect of spending the rest of his life as a harness maker, he had second thoughts. Instead of joining Morris's business or opening his own shop, Amos left Tioga County and embarked on his first great adventure.

erend Ogden and Dr. Bourns were among those who addressed a packed house. The doctor read a poem titled, "The Unknown Soldier! Who Is He?" by William H. Hayward, the first of many versions of the story that would be told in verse. Before the meeting closed, Dr. Bourns sold additional copies of the fa-

elsewhere. A brief sketch of Amos's life, published in the *New York State Bureau of Military Statistics' Annual Report*, also found its way into the newspapers. But most accounts ignored Amos's earlier life, choosing instead to present him only as a corpse on the Gettysburg battlefield. In its January 2, 1864, edition,



COURTESY OF MARY RUTH COLLINS



COURTESY OF DAVID HUMISTON KELLEY

In November 1850, he signed a whaleman's shipping paper in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and committed himself to sail as a "green hand"—a man who had never been to sea—aboard Captain John Keen Hatheway's ship, *Harrison*. Amos and the ship's thirty other crewmen were among the approximately 19,000 seamen manning American whalers that year.

It was the golden age of whaling in the United States, and New Bedford was the trade's capital. Whaling ships sailed from the bustling port to all points of the compass, returning with the oil of sperm and right whales to light the country's lamps and lubricate its machines, and "whale-bone" to shape its hoops, umbrellas, and

A poem recounting the sad story of the Humiston children was set to music and sold (above, left), along with stereo views (above, right) and other mementos, in order to raise money for a home for war orphans that was opened in Gettysburg in 1866 (below).

corsets. During two weeks in port before the *Harrison* sailed, Amos observed a town filled with the whaling industry's colorful characters, including the notorious "landsharks," who often impressed reluctant recruits into signing on to a ship.

The *Harrison* weighed anchor on December 12, 1850, and almost three-and-a-half years passed before she returned to her home port. Amos and his fellow crewmen endured month after month of bad food, raging storms, backbreaking labor, and the dangers associated with hunting whales. Days and weeks sometimes passed with nothing in sight but the boundless blue. Then came flurries of activity—encounters with other ships, sightings of whales, the lowering of whaleboats, and the chase: often successful, but sometimes resulting in smashed boats and injured men.

Following the typical pattern of New England whalers, the *Harrison* spent the

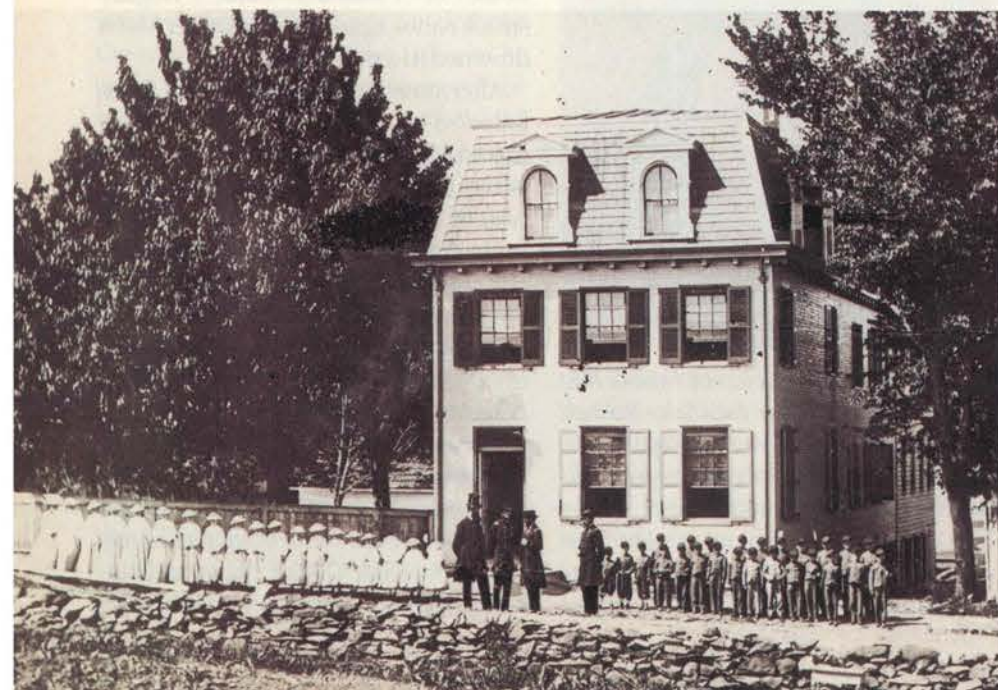
summers cruising the whaling grounds of the North Pacific, and the winter months along the equator and in the South Pacific. Captain Hatheway and his crew had only moderate success until the summer of 1853, when the *Harrison*, passing through the Kuril Islands off Russia's eastern coast into the frigid Sea of Okhotsk, found a bountiful supply of bowhead and right whales. Amos and the rest of the crew took 18 whales between late May and early September. It was a summer of ice and fog and blood and oil, and the ship left the Okhotsk waters with a full load. After a final stop in the Sandwich Islands, as the Hawaiian Archipelago was then called, the *Harrison* and her crew sailed for home in November. They reached New Bedford five months later.

The *Harrison's* cargo of oil and whalebone was worth approximately \$65,000, of which three-quarters went to the ship's owners. Captain Hatheway and his men divided the remainder, with lower ranks receiving lesser amounts and green hands getting the smallest shares. After various deductions, Amos Humiston's "lay" probably amounted to about \$200, or only 17 cents per day, for forty months of hard and often dangerous work.

One voyage aboard a whaler was enough for Amos: harness making no longer looked so bad. He pocketed his meager earnings and headed home to Tioga County. And soon after his return, he fell in love.

Philinda Smith was a year younger than Amos, and the two met when she was visiting with relatives in Morris Hu-

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



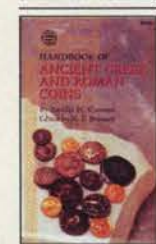
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To see what might be included, we took a handful at random and cleaned them with a soft wire brush. This took a little time and a lot of "elbow grease," but no special skill. All of the coins in our sample group turned out to be Roman bronzes dating from the third through the fourth centuries A.D., roughly spanning the period from Gallienus (A.D. 253-268) through Valens (A.D. 364-378). The coins we sampled ranged from Poor to Fine condition. Most of them could be identified, at least as to their type, and some were attributable to a specific ruler. Based on our small sample, it is likely that the majority of these coins will turn out to be bronze and in Poor to Fine condition—but no one will know for sure until they have been cleaned!

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miston's adopted town of Candor. Following a whirlwind courtship, Amos and Philinda were married on July 4, 1854, at Morris's house. Their three children arrived at regular intervals and seem to have marked the Humistons' movement westward. Franklin was born at Candor in 1855; Alice, about 60 miles to the west, at Adrian, New York, in 1857; and Frederick, in Portville, about 45 miles farther west, in 1859. Finally ready to settle down, Amos opened a harness shop in Portville with George W. Lillie, a boyhood neighbor from Owego.

"When the rebellion first took the form of open war upon the country, [Amos] was anxious to enlist," Reverend Ogden later wrote, "but his duty to his family seemed then to be paramount to his duty to his country." However, in July 1862, President Lincoln issued a call for 300,000 three-year volunteers. Assured by townsmen that his family would be cared for in his absence, Amos set out on his second adventure when he became one of the first Portville men to respond to the president's summons, enlisting on July 26.

Amos Humiston was mustered in as a corporal in Company C of the 154th New York on September 24, 1862, and a few days later, he left with the regiment for the Virginia front, where it was assigned to the First Brigade, Second Division of the Eleventh Corps, Army of the Potomac. The 154th spent its first seven months with that command, making inconsequential movements in northern Virginia. Amos related his experiences to Philinda in letters that expressed both longing for his family and a willingness to meet the enemy in battle.

During an expedition to Thoroughfare Gap in the Bull Run Mountains that fall, Amos was one of many members of the 154th who fell ill. For weeks he languished with a fever, lying in a tent that he described as poorer than an old bird's nest. But with the support of his comrades of Company C, who "have stuck to me like brothers," he pulled through. "I can die in battle like a man," Amos declared, "but I hate the idea of dieing here like a hog."

By New Year's Day of 1863, Amos was encamped near the Rappahannock River at Falmouth, Virginia, in a log hut that "rivles all modern architecture," he boast-

ed. Later that month, his regiment slogged along on the notorious "Mud March," when a planned offensive by the army became bogged down during heavy rains. Virginia mud was a formidable enemy, Amos noted: "It is like glue." A few days after returning to camp, on January 25, Humiston was promoted to sergeant.

The 154th New York moved its winter camp to the vicinity of Stafford Court House, Virginia, and by March 1863, Amos was sick again, suffering from chronic diarrhea, or "the Virginia quick step," as he called it. Although his friends cared for him, he could not shake the condition, and at the end of the month, he was admitted to the division hospital. There he recovered sufficiently to take part in the campaign that led the 154th New York across the Rappahannock River into an area known as the Wilderness, where the regiment fought its first battle.

On the evening of May 2, 1863, the Eleventh Corps was shattered by Confederate General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's famous flank attack at the Battle of Chancellorsville. The 154th, in a forlorn and rather foolhardy attempt to cover the retreat of the corps, lost forty percent of its men as casualties. By a lucky accident of velocity and trajectory, Amos survived. During the fighting, he was struck in the ribs above his heart by a spent bullet. The close call "made me think of home," he confessed to Philinda.

Back in the dilapidated old camp near Stafford Court House after the failure of the campaign, Amos was delighted to get a special present from his wife. "I got the likeness of the children and it pleased me more than eney thing that you could have sent to me," Amos wrote to Philinda on receiving the soon-to-be-famous ambrotype. "How I want to se them and their mother is more than I can tell I hope that we may all live to see each other again if this war dose not last to long."

Weeks later, the 154th broke camp and embarked on a series of grueling marches in choking dust and blazing heat northward through Virginia, then across the Potomac River into Maryland. On July 1, 1863, they crossed into Pennsylvania. That afternoon the tired troops arrived at Evergreen Cemetery, on a hill overlooking the town of Gettysburg. There they paused to eat lunch, clean and load their rifles, and enjoy a brief rest.

On the other side of town, a battle was raging. Amos and his comrades anxiously watched the billowing smoke and listened to the roar of musketry and artillery, wondering if they would be sent into the fight. Soon the suspense ended. The 154th was rushed to the northeastern outskirts of Gettysburg, where it was to help cover the retreat of the Eleventh Corps—the same dangerous role it had played at Chancellorsville.

The results were equally disastrous. The Federal brigade had barely been posted behind a fence in a brickyard when two large Confederate brigades attacked the position. Outnumbered three to one, the Union troops were sent reeling. Retreating from the center of the besieged blue line, almost all of the members of the 154th New York were surrounded and captured by the enemy. With the Southerners in close pursuit, the few Federals who escaped made a mad dash for the safety of Cemetery Hill. Among them was Sergeant Humiston. He ran less than a quarter-mile before he met his fate.

The emotional response throughout the North to the Humiston story quickly inspired a grand idea. In its article announcing Amos's identity, the *American Presbyterian* suggested that "the interest occasioned by this beautiful event might be turned to the account of soldiers' orphans generally," and that an effort be made to found an asylum for the orphans of soldiers. During his visit to Portville, Dr. Bourns voiced a similar proposal. But as the war continued to rage, the ideas were not developed.

Proceeds from the sale of the children's photograph and other objects were earmarked for Philinda Humiston, who was trying to support her three youngsters by working as a seamstress, but was also relying on the generosity of her Portville neighbors.

The *American Presbyterian* sponsored a contest for the best poem about the incident. The winner, popular poet and balladeer James Gowdy Clark, set his verses to music and added "The Children of the Battle Field" to his repertoire. Profits from sales of the sheet music were "reserved for the support and education of the Orphan Children." Amos's only known portrait from life, an ambrotype made during his prewar days, was copied and touched up with a beard and uniform, and sold in

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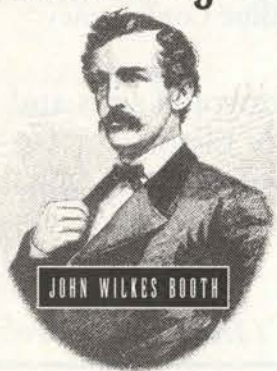
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the *carte-de-visite* format. In June 1866, Philinda Humiston was granted a widow's pension of eight dollars per month.

With Dr. Bourns playing a leading role, committees had established the National Orphans' Homestead Association and conducted a fund-raising drive to which Sunday schools and individual donors contributed liberally. The Association purchased and renovated a brick building on Cemetery Hill in Gettysburg, and in October 1866, about thirty soldiers' orphans arrived to take up residence. Among them were the Humiston youngsters and their mother, who had left Portville to join the institution's staff, in charge of the children's wardrobe.

On the day they arrived in Gettysburg, Frank, Alice, and Fred decorated their father's grave with flowers. Amos Humiston had been reinterred in Grave 14, Row B of the New York section of the Soldiers' National Cemetery—directly adjacent to the Baltimore Street orphanage inspired by his story. At the formal dedication of the National Orphans' Homestead, on November 20, the Reverend John W. Mears, editor of the *American Presbyterian*, held the audience spellbound with an account of the Humiston story.

The Homestead Orphanage prospered for several years. Incorporated in 1867 with a distinguished slate of officers and board of directors, it had, by 1870, come to include a second building and could now house a hundred children. More than seven hundred Sunday schools had donated \$25 apiece to become shareholders. The institution enjoyed the support of the local community, and Gettysburg newspapers routinely carried accounts of the orphans' participation in observances of Memorial Day and the anniversary of the battle that had made the town famous.

After a decade of commendable service, however, the Homestead met a sorry end. The matron, Rosa J. Carmichael, was convicted in 1876 of aggravated assault on one of the orphans. And succeeding months brought forth other shocking allegations. Rumors spread that the children were cruelly treated and that little or no teaching was going on.

When Mrs. Carmichael, who continued at the school despite her conviction, snubbed the local Grand Army of the Republic post by not allowing the orphans to participate in Memorial Day exercises in 1877, the veterans assumed the offensive. After investigating activities at the Homestead, the post leveled charges at both the matron and Dr. Bourns, who was attacked for his distant and autocratic authority over the institution.

Following an investigation of Bourns by the Homestead's board of directors, he and Mrs. Carmichael were sued for mismanagement, waste of property, violation of trust, and other charges. With the situation deteriorating, the *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel* editorial-

ized in June 1877 that "The general conviction in this community is that the Homestead has outlived its usefulness and that the sooner it is closed the better." By the end of the year, courts placed the institution in receivership, homes were found for the remaining nine orphans, and the Homestead closed its doors.

The Humistons' three years at the orphanage had come before serious problems arose, but according to family lore, it had not been a happy place for them. When, in October 1869, Philinda Humiston married a Massachusetts minister named Asa Barnes, their descendants recalled, she and the children gladly left Gettysburg.

All three of Amos's children attended Lawrence Academy in Groton, Massa-



A monument at Gettysburg—the only one on the battlefield erected to an individual enlisted man—commemorates Amos Humiston and his family, and by extension memorializes all the families on both sides that were disrupted by the tragic conflict.

PHOTO BY W. DOUGLAS SHIRK

chusetts. Frank continued his education at Dartmouth College and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. He hung his doctor's shingle in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where he raised a family and practiced until his death in 1912, a popular and successful physician. Alice never married and was somewhat of a nomad, working at a variety of jobs in New England and New York. She was living with one of Frank's daughters in California in 1933 when she met a tragic death, burned fatally when her dress caught fire from an open flame. Fred raised a family and became a prosperous grain merchant in West Somerville, Massachusetts; he died in 1918. After Asa Barnes died in 1881, Philinda seems to have divided her time between Frank's and Fred's families. She died at Frank's home in Jaffrey in 1913.

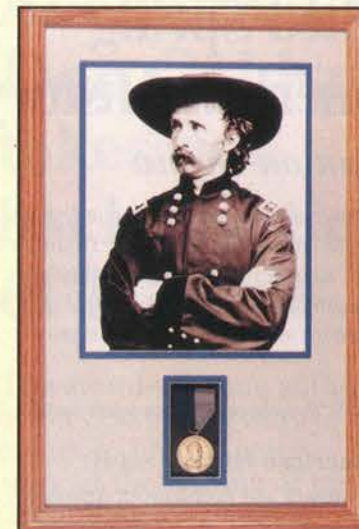
The Humistons spent their later lives shunning the spotlight of celebrity, which had shined so brightly on them during the Civil War years. All three grown children and their mother were familiar to the townfolk of Jaffrey, but their storied past was generally unknown until one winter night, when, during the presentation of an illustrated lecture on the Battle of Gettysburg, a lantern slide of the "Children of the Battlefield" was projected. The stunned audience recognized the children in the photograph to be their beloved doctor and his sister and brother.

In the years since the Civil War, the Humiston story has become a staple of Gettysburg guidebooks and accounts of the battle, and a frequently-told tale in newspapers and magazines. Inspired by the touching saga—much as their ancestors had been more than a century earlier—a group of Gettysburg residents, supported by people from Portville and descendants of members of the 154th New York, dedicated a new monument to Amos Humiston in 1993. Located on North Stratton Street, near the spot where Amos was found, it is the only monument to an individual enlisted man standing today on the battlefield of Gettysburg. ★

Mark Dunkelman is a freelance writer from Rhode Island who has written extensively on the 154th New York "Hardtack" Regiment. He is currently working on a book about Amos Humiston.

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