

Back Before the Civil War People Called It Compton's Hill

SHY'S HILL, looming up above Harding Place and the Granny White Pike, is the most famous and physically the most prominent landmark of the Battle of Nashville. It can be seen for miles around.

Until about 10 years ago, when Harding Place was extended past the spot, Shy's Hill was a deserted knob on the A. M. Burton farm, not approached by any road closer than Granny White. Now the knob is belted by new roads and homes, and is a part of the residential community of Seven Hills.

Today the hilltop is owned by the Tennessee Historical Society, a gift of the late real estate developer and builder C. B. Kelley, and almost every pretty Sunday finds a score of hikers on its crest.

It was not until November, 1912 that Shy's Hill came into general notice, historically speaking, as a landmark in the Battle of Nashville. A few years before that date it had been referred to in the Confederate Veteran as Compton's Hill.

On that date, however, the Veteran carried two letters on Shy's Hill that have become an authentic part of the history of that eminence which rises above the Granny White Pike at Harding Place.

The first of the letters was written by Park Marshall of Franklin, Williamson County, who had written and published a life of Gen. W. B. Bate four years before. Marshall's letter follows.

Marshall's Letter

In the September Veteran A. E. Glanville, of Poe, Kansas speaks of "Shy's Hill" as connected with the battle of December 16, 1864.

The origin of the name is clear. I have been on it twice in the last three years. The breastworks were built on the crest by Brigadier General Ector, of Stewart's Corps, the night of December 15, 1864, and were occupied by Brigadier General W. B. Bate, of Cheatham's Corps, after General Ector had returned to his own corps, and are the most distinct now of any of the lines around Nashville.

They are nearly as they were on that day, minus the head logs. . . The hill is thick with timber, brush and bushes. The line ran west to the top of the hill, where it curved south, descended into the depression and to the top of the smaller hill southward. Later the line was extended a short distance from the smaller hill and faced south. Cheatham's division was moved to this position on the evening of December 15 after he had repulsed Steedman near the Murreesboro Pike. Tom Benton Smith's brigade was placed on the hill, and Col. William Shy's Twentieth Tennessee Regiment was placed on top of the hill. Colonel Shy was killed, his head being powder burned around the hole made by the shot. Gen. T. B. Smith was captured at the same time, and was struck on the head with a sword after he surrendered.

Bate's Report

General Bate's report in the "War Records" Vol. XLV, gives an account of these events. He says that the hill was called Shy's Hill because of Col. Shy's death there. J. A. Smith's report (somewhat mutilated) in the same book gives further information.

The hill is not strictly one of the Overton Hills, as it is an isolated hill lying within the curve of the Overton Hills, but hardly over four hundred yards from the main Overton Hills range. It lies between the Hillsboro and the Granny White Pikes, about a quarter of a mile from each. On the Granny White Pike you reach it through the gate of Obe Sawyer, nearly opposite the famous Lea home.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Since this report in 1912 many roads have been opened up around Shy's Hill, including Harding Place and roads named for generals who fought there. The Obe Sawyer place referred to here is the present location of St. Bartholomew's Church.)

The Nashville Industrial Bureau is just now (1912) in the act of putting up about 20 large metal markers on the lines of Dec. 15, and this fall expects to place others on the lines of December 16, including Shy's Hill. Their plan is also to publish a booklet description of this battlefield and to have, if the County Court will so direct, a new road, opened across the country at Shy's Hill.

Editor's Comment

To this letter the editor of the Veteran, S. A. Cunningham, appended a footnote. He wrote:

(The editor of the Veteran was near the top of Shy's Hill during the battle of December 16. The eastern slope was covered with bluegrass. The right of Cheatham's division extended to within about 100 yards of the top of Shy's Hill. The Federals broke Bate's line near the crest, but they would have been forced back had it not become so apparent that the Federals were getting in our rear on our left and that the hope of the Confederates was in running out.

As gallant men undertook to rally the Confederates there as ever contended for Southern rights and homes. Retreating from the Federal forces there was the most patriotic service that could possibly be rendered, as that only saved the army. Private soldiers realized that the greatest generals that ever lived could not have done anything to save the army.)

Compton Home

In the same issue of the Veteran appeared a letter from Mrs. Emily C. Thompson of Birmingham. She wrote:

In the September Veteran Mr. A. E. Glanville, of Poe, Kansas, asks why the Hill between the Granny White and Hillsboro Pikes was called Shy's Hill. As I claim to be a veteran, especially of the battle before Nashville (for I was in my old home with my parents, a very short distance from the place) I shall reply.

Colonel Shy fell on the afternoon of December 16. His body, with many others of both armies, was laid upon the front gallery of our home. Shortly afterwards a Federal guard called my attention to Colonel Shy. Then turning back from the face a gray blanket which some kind friend had placed over the body, I saw him as he lay peacefully there with that cruel hole in his brow. I know of no other reason for the name.

The hill was owned by my father, Felix Compton, for years, and was known as Compton's Hill. It is not a part of the Overton and Lea range, but stands alone, facing the hill, which was also my father's, on which the Yankee



This is Shy's Hill as it looked about 60 years ago from Granny White Pike.

batteries were placed on the afternoon of December 15.

The Overton and Lea range of hills crosses the Granny White Pike about three miles south of Compton's Hill and blends with the Harpeth range to the Hillsboro Pike. Both the Granny White and Hillsboro Pikes ran through the Compton farm.

Many places around Nashville are spoken of as historical, and some are marked as such, but I have never seen the Compton home mentioned as historical, while surely it ought to be. The first night

that Hood's army camped in front of Nashville Gen. James R. Chalmers established his headquarters in my home. After 10 days he moved across to the Harding Pike, and General Walthall came with his staff and were at our home until the afternoon of December 15. Oh what a flood of memories come over me as I write! Both of these generals were from Mississippi.

The old home of my girlhood is still standing, and my brother, who saw it last spring, says it is just as it was in the Sixties. (EDITOR'S NOTE: This

house is still (1964) standing, and is owned and occupied by A. M. Burton.)

My personal experiences during these years of trouble were venturesome. They had even some dash and much of pathos. The old home was built in 1837 by my father. It fronts the Hillsboro Pike on the left hand side just five miles from the Public Square in Nashville. It is a two-story frame with long galleries in front and back. It shows now only two marks of the shot and shell that rained about it. One is a minie ball hole in the front

door which is now stopped up with putty and painted over. This ball passed into the staircase. Then at the south side of the house a shrapnel shell went through a tin gutter that my mother would never allow repaired.

Saw Campfires

General French's command was just one mile nearer town on the 15th of December. They fell rapidly back to the Compton Hill, on which General Bate's command was entrenched. From the windows of our home I watched the campfires of our boys all night on the 15th of December. They were camped in my father's hills and the hills of my great-uncle, Harry Compton, between the Granny White and Hillsboro Pikes. The next day our line gave way and passed on to the south.

There were 150 dead and

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wounded in our house at one time, so I was told. My mother and I were permitted to give water to the Confederates and some bread and milk, for that was all we had for three days except what an old black mammy stole and begged from the Yankees for us.

For 17 days the house was a

hospital. In the first three days Lieutenant Giles, of Franklin, Tenn., and Lieut. John Chambers, of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, died in the house. We buried Mr. Chambers in the garden. After the war his father came for the body. Lieutenant Giles's family buried him at his home. . .

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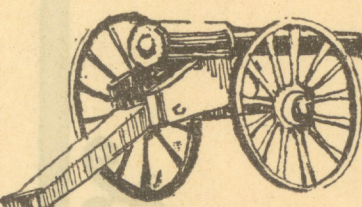
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