



North South Trader's

CIVILWAR

INSIDE:

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Good to the last relic:

The Maxwell House Hotel

by Gregory L. Wade

In 1859, as war clouds built on the Southern horizon, a massive five-story structure was nearing completion in the heart of Nashville, Tennessee. It was originally intended to be a lavish and genteel lodging place, but the gathering storm of war delayed its being used for that purpose. The Maxwell House Hotel instead became Exchange Barracks No. 1, in which capacity it served as a hospital for wounded Union soldiers and a prison for unlucky Confederates. Among the more unfortunate chapters in its war-time history was a September 1863 stairway collapse, which took the lives of at least nine Rebel soldiers and injured more than 90 more.

The Maxwell House went on to a more gracious post-war existence, and during its heyday it served as lodging

for no fewer than eight United States presidents. The famous slogan "Good to the last drop" is said to have originated there, uttered by none other than Teddy Roosevelt after he enjoyed some of the Maxwell House Hotel's brew.

A century after the war began, a Christmas night fire in 1961 forced the hotel's final demise. The building was reduced to rubble and the site was cleared for other uses.

Aware of my search for new relic hunting territory, a friend suggested a home now located near where heavy fighting took place during the December 1864 Battle of Nashville. He had done some work at a residence there and felt that the lady of the house might allow me to hunt her yard. He also mentioned that she had several of the original sills from the old Maxwell House Hotel. Apparently, her husband



Located in Nashville at the corner of Spring and Cherry streets, the unfinished but nonetheless formidable Maxwell House Hotel saw use as a Yankee hospital and a Rebel prison before going on to become a noted post-war hotel. Before it was razed in a Christmas night fire in 1961, it sheltered eight United States presidents.

Union troops can be seen standing in formation in front of the hotel, then known as Exchange Barracks No. 1.

Charley Keck etched his name in large block letters in the window sill, right. His middle initial is shown as either a backward "J" or a curiously formed "L." Below, a Union flag on the sill.



had gone to the city landfill when the hotel debris was removed after the 1961 fire. He salvaged several of the heavy stone sills and placed them in the back yard of his home. These slabs measure 36" long, 14" wide, and 3.5" deep. Their estimated weight is 250 pounds—needless to say, a bit too heavy for my relic pouch!

What makes these relics so fascinating are the carvings etched into them by recovering Yankee soldiers or lonely captured Rebels. Unfortunately, most are unclear due to years of exposure to the elements. In the best tradition of the history-conscious relic hunter, I have arranged to preserve the best of these sills.

A sketch of one of the clearer sills is shown here.

While not a relic as we usually think of them, it seems to me that these particular pieces of the Maxwell House have every bit as much intrigue and importance. Who was Charley Keck? What were the thoughts of the man who carved "Oct 22 1863"? Was the United States flag carved out of frustration or sheer boredom? And did G.R. Purtee ever get back to his home in Adams County, Ohio?

Sources

Durham, Walter J., *Reluctant Partners: Nashville and the Union* (1981).

The "New" Maxwell House Hotel, 2025 Metro-Center Blvd., Nashville, Tennessee.

This marks a first-time contribution to NSTCW by Tennesseean Gregory L. Wade.

Below, an artist's rendering of one of the better-preserved stone window sills from the Maxwell House Hotel.

