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THE BEST SO FAR

By Britain Lockhart

The thrill of discovering something that a soldier owned well over a century ago influenced me to start metal detecting. I was 13 when I received my first detector and began hunting around parks and schools. Early on I uncovered terrific finds, including jewelry and coins, which increased my interest in the hobby. After a few months, I began to think about unearthing a relic that told the story of our American history. My goal was not to detect for money or display, but to actually find historical objects that told a story. This was when I was introduced to Civil War relic hunting. I first discovered this type of metal detecting by watching diggers on YouTube. Inspired by the fascinating relics and the history behind them, I thought to myself, “I want to do that! I want to find some historical relics!” So my quest to locate Civil War relics began.

An old homesite in Atlanta, Georgia was the perfect place to conduct my first Civil War relic hunt. I thought that the house might have been close to where Sherman’s army was located during the Civil War. My excitement grew after I received permission to hunt at the house. The first thing that I found was a nail. This was disappointing, but I did not give up. The second find was an old-fashioned music box key, followed by an old, timeworn toy train. At the end of the day, I was encouraged when I finally received a signal that sounded strong. According to the reading, it was about five inches in the ground. After digging, I saw something that looked like white patina. Carefully excavating it out of the hole, I cleaned it a little, and discovered the three rings of a Civil War Minié ball. So many thoughts went through my mind. Some of my questions were, “Who fired it?” “What



did it hit?” “How did it end up in the front yard of this homesite?” I was thrilled and immediately hooked on relic hunting.

Because I enjoyed this hobby so much, I joined a metal detecting club in my area. I attended the monthly meetings with my dad and was inspired to see and hear about other members’ successful hunts. I also received advice about how to research sites, how to properly clean finds, and



The Standing Liberty 1927 quarter mentioned in this article, along with the first Civil War Minié ball Britain ever found.

how to locate places to hunt for Civil War relics.

I also continued to listen attentively in my history class, which was about Georgia history. I was delighted when we began the unit on the Civil War. I learned about Sherman's March to the Sea, and the battles of Peachtree Creek, along with several battles that took place near my home in Fulton County. My love of history grew as I learned more about the soldiers and their uniforms and weapons. I very much wanted to find a button, or something that a Civil War soldier wore. This motivated me to keep hunting.

Eventually, I was granted permission to hunt at a house that was built in 1925. It was near a busy road in Fulton County, and was being reconstructed as a new home. I was particularly enthusiastic about searching on this property, because it appeared to be in an area that was traveled by soldiers during the Civil War. After we arrived, I immediately started hunting and after 45 minutes, I unearthed a silver Mercury dime and about 15 wheat pennies. These were good finds, and I was excited, but it was not what I was hoping for. Continuing my quest, I next found an Alabama tax token and a silver 1940 quarter. Encouraged, I resumed the

hunt and then heard a signal that indicated a quarter that was seven inches deep. Digging down, I glimpsed a glimmer of silver in the hole. I assumed it would be a Washington quarter, until I saw the eagle's wings of a Standing Liberty quarter! I was so ecstatic! I wanted to continue to hunt, but it was growing dark and I knew that it was time to call it a day.

The second time I hunted on this property, I found two Indian Head cents and a cheap class ring. I was happy with my finds, and thinking I had discovered all of the treasures around this homesite, began searching other areas and did not return to this particular site for several weeks.

December 30, 2013, was a bright, sunny, cold morning in Atlanta. After asking my mom if she could drive me to the 1925 homesite, she agreed, but informed me that we could stay there for only 45 minutes. I uncovered regular clad currency at the house until 45 minutes passed and my mom declared that it was time to leave. Discouraged and desiring to continue the hunt, I sadly placed all of my digging items and detector in the trunk. To my surprise (and I must admit, delight), my mom discovered that her car would not start! She probably needed a new battery. We needed to wait for my dad to bring jumper cables in order to start the car. This gave me two more hours of digging.

After searching the front yard of the house, I went to the curb on the side of the homesite and found more household relics and an old token. Next, I continued gridding the curb, which was about five feet wide. While investigating the middle part of the curb, I received a screaming signal that almost blew my ears off! I cut a plug with my digger and saw what looked to be an old mason jar lid. Picking up the item, I noticed that the back was made out of lead that had white patina. I initially thought it was trash, but turning it around, I discerned a design on the front. Renewing my efforts, I cleaned the mud off and exposed a shape that almost made me faint. It was the design of a Civil War eagle! I distinctly remembered it from a video; it was a Civil War eagle



Opposite page: Britain's happiness with his Civil War find is apparent, as shown in this photo taken moments after he recovered the plate (shown at center after cleaning). The photo at right shows the lead-filled back of the stamped brass cross belt "breastplate." As with many examples, 150 years in the soil has turned the wire loop fasteners into little more than a rust stain.



Although they may bear little resemblance at first glance, the freshly excavated Federal “eagle breastplate” found by Britain (above) is identical to the one worn on the chest of this unidentified Federal soldier. While most accoutrement plates had some practical function (even a cartridge box plate’s weight helped keep the flap closed), a cross belt plate (as it is properly known) was worn for decoration only. In fact, many were purposely “lost” by soldiers not keen on wearing a shiny brass disc over their heart in battle.

breastplate! Rushing to my mom’s car with a huge smile on my face, I showed it to her. She asked me what it was and I told her it was a Civil War breastplate. I also explained where a soldier would wear it. This was the discovery of a lifetime, my best find ever!

A Civil War eagle breastplate is a significant find because of the place that it was found. It was found in the (Confederate) state of Georgia. The fact that it was a Union artifact told me it had to be from Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign, or his “March to the Sea.”

After cleaning up this terrific relic, its design details became clear, and the plate itself turned out to be in very good condition. Researching the artifact, I found out that it was an 1826 pattern. I was so thrilled about my find that I bought a display case for it and placed this historical relic on a wall in my room. Almost everywhere I go, I take along the breastplate because it is the greatest discovery of my detecting career. Additionally, I emailed the builder of the house and showed him what I found.

When I hunted the house site, I was not expecting a breastplate or a Civil War buckle. I was only hoping to find a button or something that a soldier wore. My expectations were not high, and yet I unearthed the find of a lifetime, or at least my best so far. I have learned to never give up hope when metal detecting. Metal detecting requires patience and

a desire to learn more about our nation’s past. You never know what will happen when involving yourself in this unique hobby. In fact, at the January Stone Mountain Treasure Hunters club meeting, I was thrilled to win “Find of the Month” for finding the breastplate. I will never forget this memorable time. It has fueled my already keen interest in relic hunting. I am grateful to everyone who has shown me their finds in the relic world, and to everyone who persuaded me to start my Civil War relic hunting hobby. It is a pursuit that rewards patience and perseverance.



About The Author

Britain Lockhart, an 8th grade student, lives in Georgia and spends most of his free time metal detecting, relic hunting Civil War locations and old homesites. He also enjoys detecting on beaches and parks, and has been detecting for two years. He use a Minelab X-Terra 705.