



## Episode 4, 2012: Marshall House Flag

Gale: I had a lot of boxes at my house and my daughter Jill, here, kind of push me to go through them. One of the things I found was this envelope, and it said, "Pop's letters of the Civil War and Relics." And there was this piece of fabric that didn't look like anything.

Jill: One of the letters had said, "Succession rag... Marshall House... Colonel's blood." So, I found out that Colonel Ellsworth died taking this Confederate flag down from the Marshall House in Virginia at the start of the war. It was quite a big deal, this death.

Gale: Colonel Ellsworth was the first officer killed in the civil war. So we thought, let's call the History Detectives.

Jill: We want to know, do we have a piece of American History? Do we?

Gwendolyn Wright: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and today I'm investigating a small piece of cloth that may connect to the very beginning of the civil war.

Gale: There it is...

Gwen: Oh, it is tiny. What did you make of it when you first saw it?

Gale: I thought it was weird. I mean it's like, why is there a red piece of fabric in there? Then Jill who's the genealogist in our family, she started researching it, and we had some letters of my, that my great grandfather wrote to his parents.

Gwen: Gale's great grandfather was a Union Soldier named Ira Wilson.

Gale: That is Ira.

Gwen: Very distinguish man. What did he do?

Jill: He was actually a hat block maker. He carved wood so people could make hats.

Gwen: Can you pull out the letter? Do you have that one?

Jill: Yes, I will. Yes, it's right here. It says, "I sent you a piece of the, 'succession rag'," it says rag, "that the Colonel took down from the Marshall House, but I forgot to tell you of it in my last. Keep it for me as a relic of the war."

Gwen: Jill Learned the Marshall House was a hotel in Alexandria, Virginia, which in the spring of 1861 had celebrated Secession by raising a huge flag.

So it's possible that the "secession rag" was just a derogatory way of speaking about of a Confederate flag.

Jill: Right, the enemy flag.

Gwen: I'm looking forward to learning more about your great-great grandfather, and possibly having this give some insights into the beginnings of the Civil War.

It would be exciting if this was a piece of the Marshall House flag, but there's some reasons to be skeptical. First, it's tiny and it may be very difficult to get much information from something that's barely an inch square. The color seems very bright for something that's 150 years old.

Ira's letters are from May and June, 1861, and already give a sense of wartime shortages: he asks for a revolver, shoes, socks, and a dollar or two for provisions.

The letters aren't complete, some pages are missing.

Well, several places he mentions Alexandria and I know that was the site of the Marshall House.

He also mentions Colonel Ellsworth several times. Now here's the crucial part. He tells his parents that he has sent them a piece of the "secession rag" that the Colonel took down from the Marshall House.

But that letter appears to be missing its first page. I don't see a date, or any details on how he got that piece of the flag.

I've received Ira's service records from the office.

Ira Wilson, age 21 years. April 20th, 1861 at New York City, he enlisted in Ellsworth's 11th Infantry. Wounded and captured at the First Battle of Bull Run, then mustered out on May 24th, 1862.

Colonel Ellsworth was killed on May 24, 1861.

So, Ira was captured 2 months after the flag was removed from the Marshall House Inn. With no gaps in his enlistment he was in Ellsworth's regiment when the flag was removed.

Adam Goodheart's bestselling book "1861" details the Marshall House incident.

Gwen: Now this had belonged to a man named Ira Wilson. Who sent this fragment and a number of letters back to his family. The letters wrote glowingly of Colonel Ellsworth. Tell me more about Ellsworth.

Adam Goodheart: Ellsworth was almost like a 19th century rock star, even before the Civil War began. He had come seemingly from out of nowhere. Very poor background, ended up in Chicago working as a shop clerk, but became fascinated with the military.

Gwen: Adam explains how Ellsworth formed a touring drill unit called The Fire Zouaves. Before the Civil War, all fire departments in the U.S. were volunteer companies and some of them also engaged in military drill. The Zouaves were known for ornate uniforms and parade routines that wowed crowds. One performance caught the eye of a future president.

Adam: Well the last stop on this nationwide Zouave tour was Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln's town. And Abraham Lincoln, that summer as he's running for president, comes down to the town square in Springfield, watches the Zouaves perform and becomes entranced with Ellsworth. It was almost this immediate connection between these two extraordinary men. Ellsworth becomes almost a member of the Lincoln family.

Ellsworth worked enthusiastically on Lincoln's campaign trail, and also served him as a legal clerk.

Adam: Various people said that Lincoln loved him like a younger brother. And when Lincoln is elected and travels to Washington D. C. in early 1861 Ellsworth accompanies the Lincoln family.

Gwen: Have you seen pieces of the flag before?

Adam: I have. This piece actually looks a little bit more red than some of the other pieces out there. It can be very hard to tell whether a particular piece of fabric came from a specific flag.

Gwen: The original Marshall House Inn was torn down in the 1950s, but The Gadsby Tavern in Alexandria is almost an exact replica.

3 stories high, that was a relatively large building for the time.

And at 24 feet wide, Adam says the massive flag was almost as big as the structure.

Adam: It was and so you can imagine why this wide flag was visible apparently even from Washington D.C., and Ellsworth had looked at it from the window of the 2nd floor of the White House through a spyglass, and seen this sort of mocking the Union forces from across the Potomac River in the Confederacy.

Gwen: Adam explains how Ellsworth and his men wanted to remove the offending flag from the view of the Whitehouse, convinced this would please the President.

Adam: Ellsworth goes up to the roof and opens a trap door to cut down the huge Confederate flag.

Gwen: The flag vanishes from the skyline. In Alexandria, at least one man was looking for revenge and blood.

Adam: Ellsworth has cut the flag down, they're coming downstairs and they reach a point just at the first landing when disaster strikes. A door swings open and out from behind it steps a man named James W. Jackson, the innkeeper who owned the Marshall House hotel, he's also an ardent secessionist. And he points a shotgun at Ellsworth at point blank range, pulls the trigger, and almost immediately Ellsworth's chest is ripped open. He's dead before he hits the ground.

And almost in the same instant one of the Corporals, a man named Frances Brownell, Union Corporal accompanying Ellsworth, turns his gun to James Jackson, the killer, fires pointblank into his face, bayonets him in the chest, and almost in the same instant, the killer has fallen dead alongside the fallen Colonel Ellsworth.

Gwen: Just over a month after the initial battle shots of The Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter, Ellsworth's death marked the first Union officer killed on duty.

The event quickly became a media sensation, enflaming passions on each side. Both men, Ellsworth and Jackson, were mourned as martyrs. In Virginia, Jackson, at least, is still remembered.

Oh, here's the plaque.

Adam: That, that's it.

Gwen: The Marshall House. James Jackson was killed, the first martyr to the cause of southern independence.

Adam: Isn't that amazing? And underneath it says that "the justice of history does not permit his name to be forgotten". Now of course we know that Ellsworth's name, at least on this plaque, is forgotten.

Gwen: How could Ira have gotten a piece of this flag?

Textile conservator, Sarah Stevens, has an answer. Sarah works for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, where the flag is housed.

Sarah: So we have it set up here.

Gwen: One look tells the story.

Wow, it is huge! There are large pieces that are gone.

Sarah: These large cut out areas are from souveniring. Especially this, the diagonal ones that are very clean cut.

Sarah explains how the blood soaked flag was seized by Ellsworth's soldiers, and eventually accompanied the Colonel's body back to New York.

But not before his men cut pieces of the flag as relics of their fallen leader's bravery. Sarah says about 40 percent of the flag is missing.

Are there any bloodstains still on the flag?

Sarah: Yes, we have two small stains. There's one over here on this star that's very easy to see in the white.

Gwen: Oh yes.

Sarah: And we tested that. And then there's one down here which is uh, pretty difficult to see because it's red on red.

Gwen: Sarah tells me the enormous flag had been made from bunting by a local sail maker.

Sarah: Bunting in the 19th century was a lightweight wool fabric that flies in the breeze very well. So when you make a large size flag like this, you want it of lightweight material so that it'll fly.

Gwen: So here's our piece.

Sarah: Oh! So small.

Gwen: The color of red of our fragment is somewhat different from the red of the flag. Does that surprise you?

Sarah: No it doesn't. You know they haven't been together for the last 150 years. So the light exposure would have been different and that would affect the color.

Gwen: Is this flag too small for you to make a match and see if it's made with the same material?

Sarah: No. We'll be able to put that under the stereo microscope and take a closer look.

Gwen: Sarah magnifies the weave by 150 percent.

Sarah: There's the Marshall House flag.

Gwen: Wow.

Sarah: And then this is the fragment. And so they're at the same magnification. And we start looking at the yarns and the yarn structure and spin. There's two ways you can spin a yarn in the "Z" direction or the "S" direction.

Gwen: "Z" means that the fibers are pulled from upper right to bottom left.

Sarah: And these are in the "Z" direction, and we can see that in the yarns.

Gwen: Next, was the yarn in our fragment woven in the same way?

Sarah: The yarns go over and then under and then over again, um, every other yarns. And then so here it is over and then under, over and under.

Gwen: But the real test is the fabric's density.

Sarah: And then so we'll also, um, count how many warp and wefts per inch there are.

Gwen: Well, first of all, let me tell you a little bit about Ira that you may not know. He was 21 when he enlisted with a thousand men in Ellsworth's New York Fire Zouaves. Those young men, Ira among them, probably would have followed him anywhere. I know you wanted to find out if this object was in fact part of the Marshall House Flag.

Sarah: We count, um, yarns per inch, and we did that for these specimens. And these are very similar, 30 yarns per inch.

Gwen: So what do we have? What have we proved?

Sarah: Um, well, you do have letters that say he had sent something home and it mentions the flag specifically.

The two samples are identical, and the family letters connect them like a thread.

Sarah: Because you have this documentation, it's most likely the Marshall House Flag itself.

Jill: It's wonderful! It's very, very cool.

Gale: It's been a wonderful journey. I would like to have the letter and the flag, have it, you know, preserve it now that we know what it is. I mean it lived 150 years in a little white envelope with nobody knowing so now we ought to give it 150 years of everybody knowing. So, we will take care of what we have.