



Remembering Antietam:

John Philemon Smith's Shadowbox

Jeannine A. Disviscour

"I am exceedingly interested in matters of a Historical character and for the past two years have been writing the history of Sharpsburg..."

- John Philemon Smith, Sharpsburg, Maryland
(Maryland Historical Society Application, December 11, 1896)

John Philemon Smith's words have come to life in an extraordinary object that he made in 1886 —the Antietam National Cemetery Memorial Shadowbox. A recent gift to the Maryland Historical Society, it was discovered in an attic in Hagerstown. The shadowbox, or "tablet board" as Smith called it, is filled with artifacts from the

battlefield of Antietam and was made as a memorial to the thousands who were killed on that fateful day.

On September 17, 1862, the Battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg) was fought near Sharpsburg, Maryland. This battle between Confederate and Union troops fought on Northern soil was the bloodiest single-day battle in American history, leaving almost 23,000 killed or wounded. Many were buried in hastily dug graves on the battlefield. In 1865, the State of Maryland purchased 11^{1/4} acres for a national cemetery near the Antietam battlefield. By fall 1867 all the known Union dead from Maryland battlefields had been reinterred. Confederate remains were later moved to

nearby Maryland and West Virginia cemeteries. The Antietam National Cemetery was dedicated on September 17, 1867, the battle's fifth anniversary.

John Philemon Smith (1845-1912), was a 17-year-old student when his hometown of Sharpsburg witnessed the Battle of Antietam. The traumatic day overwhelmed this small town and left a lasting impression on Smith. He spent the rest of his life as a teacher and historian, documenting Sharpsburg's history and preserving Antietam's memory.

Smith was a well-known member of his Western Maryland community and was recognized in Thomas J. C. Williams' local history, *A History of Washington County, Maryland from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time*. His historical research was reprinted in J. Thomas Scharf's *A History of Western Maryland*.¹ Smith regularly contributed to a local newspaper in nearby Keedysville, the *Antietam Valley Record*. Smith's efforts to document Sharpsburg's history, begun in 1894, were published weekly in the *Record*. Although never completed, an unfinished edition of Sharpsburg's history written by Smith is on file in the Washington County Free Library in Hagerstown.² The Maryland Historical Society Library holds a September 17, 1896 souvenir edition of the *Antietam Valley Record* that focuses on the Battle of Antietam and the creation of Antietam National Cemetery.³ Smith wrote most of the articles for this edition. In the paper's introduction the editor acknowledges "...we are very much indebted to John P. Smith, Esq., of Sharpsburg, the historian of the Antietam Battlefield, for his efforts in securing and imparting to us valuable information." Smith also published poetry. In 1909 his poem "A Tribute to Maryland" was included in the Baltimore publication *Maryland in Prose and Poetry*.⁴

In addition to being a local historian, Smith was also an avid collector of battlefield relics, Indian artifacts, and other historic objects, and he made at least two other shadowboxes incorporating these collections. The *Antietam Wavelet* (the precursor of the *Antietam Valley Record*) mentioned in March of 1888 a shadowbox made by Smith that contained 109 Indian arrowheads; a tomahawk; fragments of pottery; bones, teeth, beads, and other ornaments; and bullets and grape-shot from the Antietam battlefield, all enclosed in a frame made of wood from the famous "Dunkard woods" of the battlefield. A year later, the newspaper recorded the sale of Smith's "large tablet of 'Relics and History of Antietam Battlefield.'"⁵ The 1889 shadowbox, with its "Relics and History" of the Antietam Battlefield, may have had a similar design to the Maryland Historical Society's shadowbox.

The Smith shadowbox owned by the Maryland Historical Society is 39" high x 34" wide x 5" deep. Following the meticulous approach he employed as an amateur historian, Smith clearly identified his creation. The outside is labeled "Antietam National Cemetery Memorial Tablet Board. Cemetery Dedicated September 17, 1867," and the inside is inscribed "The material from which this board is composed was found on the Battle Field of Antietam" and "Designed and constructed by J. P. Smith, Sharpsburg, MD August 6, 1886." Smith's distinct handwriting, punctuated by battlefield artifacts, fills the box's interior surface. The voluminous text records the dedication of the Antietam National Cemetery in 1867, the Dedication Poem by Clarence F. Buhler of New York, a list of the Union soldiers who died at or shortly after Antietam, and the installation of the Private Soldier Monument on the cemetery grounds. Smith also included poems honoring each state in the Union and their fallen soldiers. The battlefield artifacts include bullets, cartridges,

shells, bayonets, and personal effects of soldiers including uniform remnants, buttons, buckles, and a folding eating utensil. In 1912, the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Antietam, the box was updated with 48-star flags and black mourning fabric.

Shadowboxes and relic showboards were a common method of displaying battlefield collections after the Civil War. Veterans as well as civilians such as Smith visited and held reunions at battlefields where objects still littered the surface and were picked up by the box full. By the end of the nineteenth century numerous relic displays were included in private museums and collections. Smith's shadowbox is unique for its focus on Antietam National Cemetery and for the extensive use of text throughout. Similar to the many ways Americans have responded to the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001, this shadowbox was a way for John Philemon Smith to remember and document a momentous event in his life and the lives of all Americans.

Smith's shadowbox is part of the Maryland Historical Society's exhibition, *Remembering the Battle of Antietam: John Philemon Smith's Shadowbox*, and will be on display from September 5, 2002 through January 3, 2003. Admission is free. For more information, visit the Maryland Historical Society's website at www.mdhs.org. Special thanks to Steven Kania, Gallery intern, for the initial research completed on this project.

Jeannine A. Disviscour is a curator at the Maryland Historical Society.

1 Thomas J. C. Williams, *A History of Washington County, Maryland from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time*, 1908 (Reprint: Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968), p. 1209; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland*, Vol II, c. 1882 (Reprint: Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 1204, 1213.

2 John Philemon Smith, "Reminiscences of Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland, From the date of its formation - July 9, 1763 to the Present Time Jan. 1st, 1912" (Typescript on file, Washington County Free Library, Hagerstown).

3 *Antietam Valley Record*, September 17, 1896, Maryland Historical Society Library, Special Collections, Broadside.

4 Compiled by Edward M. Noble and Edward T. Tubbs, *Maryland in Prose and Poetry* (Baltimore: Lehman Printing Company, 1909), pp. 33-34.

5 *Antietam Wavelet*, March 17, 1888; *Antietam Wavelet*, August 3, 1889.