Fresh tales from distant battlefields

For UMass pair, Civil War lives on

By SUZANNE WILSON
Staff Writer

"It's pretty cool," said Eliza Ahrens, as she carefully held the old newspaper in her hands, angling it so that the photographer could get a good shot.

It was a copy of the last edition of The Liberator, the newspaper published in Boston and edited by William Lloyd Garrison that championed the abolitionist cause before and during the Civil War. The Liberator ceased publication Dec. 29, 1865, after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery.

Ahrens, 26, is a graduate student in history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The fragile, faded copy of The Liberator that she was holding is part of a new exhibit she worked on at the Skinner Museum at Mount Holyoke College, titled "Experiencing the Civil War: From the Battlefield to the Home Front."

On The Liberator's front page are these words:

"This paper was started in the infancy and interest of the anti-slavery cause, and for the total abolition of slavery in the United States by peaceful measure ... The Liberator will have been published thirty-five years on the first of January next, and will then be discontinued for the reason that the object for which it was started has been accomplished ..."

Written at the top of the page is the name of Ebenezer W. Irving, who

■ See CIVIL / Page A6

KEVIN GUTTING

The last issue of "The Liberator," an abolitionist weekly, published Dec. 29, 1865, is on display as part of a new exhibit, "Experiencing the Civil War: From the Battlefield to the Home Front" at the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum in South Hadley starting Wednesday.

KEVIN GUTTING

University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate students Molly Campbell, left, and Eliza Ahrens created the exhibit.

Civil War exhibit to run until 150th anniversary of war's end

■ Continued from A1

owned this copy of the paper. And there is his note, written in pencil, conveying his wish that the newspaper be preserved for history now that its mission was complete:

"Let this number be preserved," he wrote. "Well done!"

Passion for history

Ahrens, who lives in Amherst, researched and assembled the exhibit with two other students, Molly Campbell, of Northfield, and Stephania Villar, who has left the area for the summer. All three are working toward master's degrees with a concentration in public history, a program of the UMass history department that prepares students for careers at museums, in historic preservation, or in archives management or related fields.

The love of history that Ahrens and Campbell brought to creating "Experiencing the Civil War" came through clearly as they spoke during an interview last week at the museum.

"I don't think I was ever interested in anything else but history," said Ahrens, who grew up in Iowa. Ever since she became fascinated as a child by medieval knights and kings, she said, she "always wanted to know what life was like in other times."

"I never understood why everybody *didn't* like history," said Campbell, 22. As a fourth-grader growing up in Maryland, Campbell went on a class trip to Historic St. Mary's City, the state's first capital — and that was it. "I think that was what sparked my love for museums and historic sites."

"Experiencing the Civil War," which opens Wednesday, was created as a project for a museum studies class taught by David Glassberg, a UMass history professor.

KEVIN GUTTING

A state-issued flintlock is among the munitions on display in an exhibit marking the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War.

As he visited the museum the other day to look over the results of his students' work, Glassberg said that the Civil War continues to attract students drawn by the scale of the story — the staggering loss of life, the impact on the country's development and industrialization, the fundamental questions around slavery and states' rights.

More personal, less abstract

The exhibit occupies three glass-covered display cases of objects at the Skinner Museum. All of the objects chosen for "Experiencing the Civil War" were drawn from the wide-ranging collections gathered by the late Joseph Allen Skinner, who died in 1946.

Apart from those three display cases, the rest of the museum space is a showcase for Skinner's holdings — the diversity of which explains why the museum that bears his name is described on its website as "a cabinet of curiosities."

Skinner, whose family gained wealth and prominence in this area's silk mill business, started collecting rocks as a boy. He went on to amass everything from paintings to clocks to furniture to figurines to farm tools to eyeglasses — more than 7,000 items in all — some of which he purchased, and some of which were donated. The museum is housed in what was a church that was dismantled and moved from Prescott, one of the towns flooded to create the Quabbin Reservoir.

Ahrens and Campbell said they designed their exhibit to show three aspects of the war: the battlefield, the home front, and the written record of that time.

The display case related to battle shows one of the leather cases Union soldiers wore strapped to their belts that held ammunition, bandages and other supplies. Also on view is a torn piece of bunting from a flag that was carried into the battle at Antietam, and a shell casing loaded with shrapnel that was found at Gettysburg.

A nearby display case holds items from the home front, including a small album of photos. Looking straight ahead with solemn expressions, the men are thought to be soldiers from the South Hadley area. The portraits were likely taken shortly before they left for war, according to Campbell and Ahrens, and were kept as remembrances during their long absences.

The third case contains artifacts related to communication of the war's message. In addition to the copy of The Liberator, there is, among other items, an early edition of "The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant." Written in 1885 as the former Union general and president was dying from throat cancer, Grant's memoir of the war was published to widespread critical acclaim and is still considered one of the best-written works of its kind.

As they sifted through Skinner's collections on the hunt for items related to the Civil War, Ahrens and Campbell say they gained a deepened appreciation of the conflict that claimed the lives of 620,000 soldiers, North and South.

Ahrens, who focused primarily on finding and researching the battlefield-related artifacts, said that seeing the leather supply case, for example, with a soldier's faded initials on it, made the war more personal and less abstract.

She became more aware of what life at the front was like, she said, for soldiers who sometimes spent months at camp, waiting for action. In between marching drills and shooting practices, soldiers occupied themselves in many ways — reading, writing letters home, whittling wood crafts, playing cards — all while contending with harsh conditions, outbreaks of disease, and boredom, loneliness and fear.

KEVIN GUTTING

University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate student Molly Campbell holds a photo album of South Hadley area soldiers that opens, left, with a card of Union generals, including Gen. Winfield Scott, in center.

Campbell, who did her undergraduate work at James Madison University in Virginia, said the project brought her closer to the Union experience of the Civil War. In Virginia, where so much of the war was fought, the conflict is still a living presence, she said, memorialized in every community.

"The landscape is still scarred," she said.

Campbell, who took on the home-front part of the exhibit, said many of the women whose husbands, brothers or fathers left to fight took on new responsibilities. They ran the farms, handled finances, and tended fields and livestock — in addition to raising children and keeping house. In the display Campbell put together, there is a small sewing machine, emblematic of the effort women made to replace lost income by taking in laundry or sewing.

"Experiencing the Civil War" will be on view through April 2015, marking the 150th anniversary of the war's end. The milestone is being observed around the country with commemorations, special events and exhibits that will mine the war's meanings, the deep feelings it still arouses, and its central place in the nation's ongoing story.

With all due respect to the observance of the Fourth of July, said David Glassberg, the UMass history professor, the Civil War remains "the most important event in American history."

The Skinner Museum is at 33 Woodbridge St., (Route 116), South Hadley. Hours are Wednesday and Sunday, from 2 to 5 p.m. and admission is free.