

## Solving the Cathedral's US Civil War Riddle

### Why soldier's memorial?

A memorial to an American Civil War soldier near Dunblane Cathedral has puzzled both residents and visitors for many years.

Dunblane-based journalist and historian Andy Mitchell has attempted to get to the bottom of the mystery of William McCowan almost 150 years after his death. And he comes to a surprising conclusion.

One of the most prominent memorials at Dunblane Cathedral holds an American Civil War mystery that is now a century and a half old.

The 15-foot tall obelisk near the Cathedral entrance proudly states: 'In memory of William McCowan, Co C 58th Massachusetts Infantry, who died in Cam Readville, US America in defence of the Union against the Rebellion, April 1 1864 aged 47years'.

There is often surprise from cathedral visitors that a veteran of this conflict should be celebrated in Scotland, but anyone trying to find out more is in for a shock: there is no record of William McCowan fighting in the Civil War.

To mark the 150th anniversary this year of McCowan's death, I set out to unravel what really happened.

There are clues around the obelisk, starting with a helpful inscription underneath: 'Erected by Daniel McCowan of Fall River, US America, on his visit to Dunblane, November 22 1871, returned to America December 30 1871'. Daniel added other family members on the side panels, and a carved weaver's shuttle above.

From these snippets, William McCowan's life can be tracked through genealogy websites. He was a weaver from Bridgend in Dunblane, born in 1817, who emigrated to the United States in the late 1850s with his family. Daniel was his eldest son.

William, together with his wife Jean and five children, settled at New Brunswick, a town in New Jersey, where he carried on his trade as a weaver. Daniel, meanwhile, worked at a mill in Fall River, Massachusetts with his uncle (William's elder brother) Andrew, who had come out from Dunblane many years earlier.

It was a time of great upheaval in the United States as the Civil War raged for four years in the early 1860s. All young men were required to fight, but William was an unlikely combatant. At 47, he was too old to be drafted, and non-Americans were not expected to fight - he would have been considered an alien, which is how his son was ruled out. His motivation for joining up can only be guessed at, although it is tempting to think this Scot was driven by a sense of freedom and justice.

Thanks to the Dunblane inscription, we know he joined Company C of the 58th Regiment in the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry.

From February 1864 they were mustering at Camp Meigs in the town. Of Readville, Massachusetts, preparing to join the fray.

Unfortunately for William, he never had the chance to fight for the Union cause as he succumbed to a particularly nasty disease while still in camp. According to his death certificate (which states April 2, a day later than on his memorial) the cause was erysipelas, a virulent bacterial skin infection.

It could be argued that he did not die 'in defence of the Union against the Rebellion'; but he did intend to fight, so why is William McCowan not acknowledged in Civil War records?

Quite simply, the 58th Massachusetts Infantry left for the front on April 28 1864 and their roll only includes those men who were with them from that time. The story of Dunblane's Union army volunteer might never have been known had his proud son not returned to his birthplace and paid for the fulsome tribute that stands to this day.

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