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Old Baldy to return to Frankford Civil War museum

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He was a hero to the rank-and-file soldiers. He rode to the sound of the guns and was repeatedly wounded in some of the Civil War's most horrific battles.

One hundred and forty-five years later, the horse that carried Union Gen. George Gordon Meade through fighting at Gettysburg again found himself in the middle of the fray.

That time it was between two Philadelphia Civil War museums, each wanting his head.

In the end, both sides won.

The preserved head of Old Baldy had been a prized possession of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library in the city's Frankford section, and it was lent more than 30 years ago to the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia on Pine Street.

But after the Center City museum closed in August 2008, officials arranged to temporarily store or display the priceless collection, along with Old Baldy, in other museums in and outside Philadelphia until a new home was found.

That's when the Frankford museum stepped in to retrieve its property. Attorneys for the two institutions worked out a deal - approved by Philadelphia Orphans' Court in December - that allows Old Baldy's return, possibly this month.

"It's been a long, drawn-out process to bring Old Baldy home, but we're glad he's coming and hope that he will bring more folks to the museum," said Eric Schmincke, president of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library on Griscom Street.

A new museum-quality display case is being built, and the horse, wounded when Meade led a charge at Gettysburg, is expected to be on public display this summer. The relic is now stored at a warehouse in the city.

"We need to be sure that they can take care of it," said Sharon Smith, president of the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia, which is preparing to move its collection for retreatment and rehousing within about six weeks. "The court gave us responsibility for Old Baldy's protection."

The former Center City museum must approve plans for the transportation of Old Baldy and display of the relic, according to the court-approved agreement, Smith said.

Most of the museum's other items will be moved to the new National Park Service facility in Gettysburg; some will be displayed at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Independence Mall and at the African American Museum in Philadelphia on Arch Street.

The board of the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia is working on a plan that would lead to the opening of its new home by 2015.

The Pine Street museum got possession of Old Baldy in about 1979 after helping to pay for the relic's restoration. The GAR museum couldn't afford it at the time and agreed to lend the horse to the Center City institution.

Old Baldy will be at the Frankford museum for a minimum of three years, Smith said.

Meade, the victorious commander at the Battle of Gettysburg, would be pleased. Of Old Baldy, he once said, "I am very much attached to the old brute."

Both rode into many desperate battles, including at Mechanicsville, Va.; Gaines' Mill, Va.; Second Bull Run, Va.; South Mountain, Md.; Sharpsburg, Md.; Fredericksburg, Va.; Chancellorsville, Va.; and Gettysburg, where Old Baldy's military career ended.

Meade was leading staff members and other soldiers trying to blunt a Confederate advance on July 2, 1863, when a musket ball struck the horse, said Andy Waskie, a Civil War historian, author, and Temple University professor who serves on the board of the Grand Army of the Republic Civil War Museum and Library.

"Baldy was shot again, and I fear will not get over it," Meade wrote to his wife on July 5, 1863.

Three days later, the general penned another letter to his wife: "Old Baldy is still living and apparently doing well; the ball passed within half an inch of my [right] thigh, passed through the saddle and entered Baldy's stomach.

"I did not think he could live," Meade wrote, "but the old fellow has such a wonderful tenacity of life that I am in hopes he will."

Old Baldy had been wounded several times in other battles and always continued on, Waskie said. That time, he had to retire. He was sent to a friend of Meade's who agreed to care for him on his farm in Downingtown.

In those peaceful surroundings the horse recovered, and after the war, he was reunited with Meade, who lived in Philadelphia in a house given to his wife by the city as a show of gratitude for the general's military service, Waskie said.

Long after the guns fell silent, Meade, accompanied by his daughters, took Old Baldy for rides through Fairmount Park.

The faithful warhorse was viewed so warmly by veterans that they arranged for him to walk in Meade's funeral procession to Laurel Hill Cemetery in 1872.

When the horse died 10 years later, his head was removed by members of the Meade Post #1 of the Grand Army of the Republic in Philadelphia and preserved for mounting at their post on Chestnut Street in Center City. It later found its way to the Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library.

Last week, a plan for Old Baldy's move was submitted to an expert at the Academy of Natural Sciences for approval.

"Once it's approved, there's no reason why we can't go and pick him up," Schmincke said. "We're just happy and excited he's coming home."

Added Waskie: "We are planning a grand opening and reception to officially unveil the display of Old Baldy, hopefully by the first Sunday in September.