

## Saved by the bell – in this case, the ‘bell’ being a friend’s happenchance suggestion

By Dean Shalhoup - Telegraph Senior Staff Writer | Dec 18, 2021

Like so many of us males of pretty much every age group love to do now and then, Tom Burnham loaded up his truck recently and headed for Nashua’s Four Hills Landfill intent on purging some past-tense necessities that the passage of time had consigned to the clutter department.

But during the process, someone with Burnham at the time glimpsed a few things that caught his eye, and prompted him to make a suggestion.

“Why not swing by the Historical Society and see if they want some of these things,” the friend said. He referred to an oval-shaped portrait of a World War I soldier framed in convex glass – a beauty of an artifact in the eyes of any historian.

With the portrait was a certificate written in French, a card titled “Registration Certificate,” number 163, signed by a registrar by the name of Gerald F. Cobleigh, and a panoramic photo about a foot high and three feet wide with a bunch of words, numbers and acronyms printed in white ink across the bottom.

Lucky for the Nashua Historical Society and Nashua’s James E. Coffey Post 3, American Legion, Burnham promptly agreed and headed over to the Historical Society.

**REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE.**

To whom it may concern, Greetings:



No. 163  
(This number must correspond with that on the Registration Card.)

THESE PRESENTS ATTEST,  
That in accordance with the  
proclamation of the President of the United States, and in compliance with law,  
James E. Coffey  
(Name) \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
(City or P. O.)  
Precinct \_\_\_\_\_ County of Rockingham, State of \_\_\_\_\_  
has submitted himself to registration and has by me been duly registered this \_\_\_\_\_  
day of June, 1917.

Gerald F. Cobleigh  
Registrar.

3-4227

Courtesy of Nashua Historical Society, Nashua native James E. Coffey's World War I registration card is among items donated recently to the Nashua Historical Society.

The folks on duty that day welcomed the items with open arms. They were barely in the door when the accession process got underway, and it's a sure bet that *"thank you"* was heard at least a few times.

For these items are invaluable artifacts of Nashua history in general, and the city's military history in particular, all connected to native son James Edward Coffey, who was 22 when, on May 11, 1918, he became Nashua's first soldier to be killed in action in World War I.

The Coffey and Burnham families became related by marriage nearly a century ago, when one of James E. Coffey's sisters married a man named Burnham shortly before Coffey was killed.

Regarding the glass-framed portrait, it was initially thought that it depicts William B. Coffey, James's older brother, with whom he served side-by-side in France until James's death.

William was injured in the same gas attack that claimed his brother's life, but survived. He had returned home just before the news of James's death reached the Coffey family at their modest Broad Street home, which, if it were still standing, would be in the area where Broad Street and the Veterans Memorial Parkway intersect.



Courtesy of Nashua Historical Society, Nashua native James E. Coffey was attached to this unit -- the Nashua Light Infantry, Company D, New Hampshire 1st Infantry -- when he was killed in a gas attack.

According to Don Vincent, a retired U.S. Coast Guard officer and Post 3 member who currently serves as its adjutant and historian, it was determined that the portrait is in fact that of James E. Coffey, not his brother William.

How was this confirmed? It definitely wasn't easy.

*"It's very hard to distinguish sometimes,"* Vincent said, referring to the portrait and other photos of James and William.

What distinguishes James from William, Vincent said, is that James had a small cleft, or what some might call a dimple, in the middle of his chin, and William did not.

Today, the brothers are memorialized by side-by-side markers in St. Patrick Cemetery in Hudson, Vincent said.

While William, who was 60 when he died in 1956, is buried there, the family opted to have James buried in the St. Mihiel American Cemetery and Memorial in France, and install a marker in his honor in St. Patrick Cemetery next to his brother.



Courtesy of Nashua Historical Society, This glass-framed, oval photo of Nashua native James E. Coffey, who was killed in World War I, is among the photos and documents the society recently acquired from a descendant of Coffey.

At a meeting of Post 3's fast-growing membership in August 1919, much of the discussion centered around naming the post, according to an account in *The Nashua Telegraph*.

*"The wish was expressed by many that they might honor all three, for they all deserved any honors that their comrades could give them,"* the reporter wrote, referring to Coffey and the two other soldiers who were killed in action around the same time – Captain Wilkie Elliott and Private First Class Amedee Deschenes.

Ultimately, Coffey's name was adopted by unanimous vote, mainly because it had finally been confirmed that Coffey was Nashua's first World War I casualty.

The confusion stemmed from the fact that Coffey's family and two others – those of Private Edmond Leblanc and Sgt. Clement Gravelle – received the dreaded *"We deeply regret to inform you ..."* telegram at the same time.

But after looking deeper into the timelines, officials were able to confirm that Coffey was the first Nashuan killed.

In announcing his death in a page one story several days later, the *Telegraph* reporter called Coffey *"one of the most popular of the Nashua soldier boys,"* who was a member of the Knights of Columbus and the Lone Pine Hunters Club.

When war broke out, the reporter went on, *"nothing could keep James out of the fight ... when he found that men were needed, he gave up his fine job as a printer at the Nashua Gummed & Coated Paper Company (later, Nashua Corporation) and became one of the first Nashua boys to offer his services to his country."*

And now, thanks to Tom Burnham, two venerable Nashua institutions – the Historical Society and James E. Coffey Post 3, American Legion – know a little bit more about one of Nashua's enduring war heroes.

*Dean Shalhoup's column appears weekly in The Sunday Telegraph. He may be reached at 594-1256 or [dshalhoup@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:dshalhoup@nashuatelegraph.com).*