

The Lasting Impact of Andrew Cowan



Cowan Family Lot. Courtesy Michael Higgs.



Andrew Cowan. Courtesy Library of Congress.

By Michael Higgs

When young Andrew Cowan left his home in Scotland and crossed the Atlantic, the contemplation of his legacy probably was not at the front of his mind. But Cowan, who is buried at Cave Hill Cemetery, arrived at a pivotal time in our nation's evolution and made a lasting impact on the United States and the city of Louisville. After fighting with the Union army in the Civil War, Cowan went on to head banks and leather companies, lay the groundwork for Louisville's park system, and help organize the Southern Exposition, which led to Louisville being referred to as

the “new Gotham” and a “City of Progress.” With each step that he took, this young Scottish immigrant made a profound impression on our nation’s history.

The timing of Cowan’s landing on the shores of North America during the Victorian era could be described as serendipitous. Prosperity loomed on the horizon as economies shifted and industrialization gained a foothold. About that same time in Louisville, the chartering of Cave Hill Cemetery marked the beginning of a long season of growth, change, and awakening.

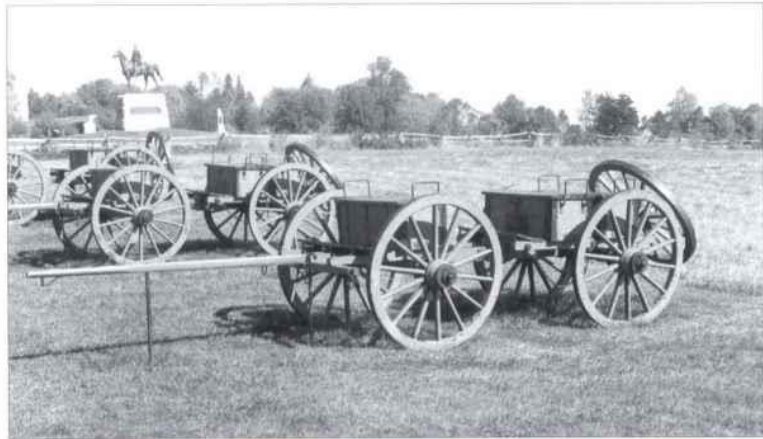
Cowan’s Early Years

Born in Ayrshire, Scotland, Cowan arrived in the United States in 1848. When the Civil War began, he heeded Lincoln’s call, joining the New York Regiment and 1st New York Independent Battery. From the Pennsylvania Campaign, Antietam, and Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Cowan participated in almost every battle in the Eastern Theater.

Though severely wounded in 1864, he quickly rebounded and became renowned for his actions in defense of the “Bloody Angle” at Gettysburg. The tumultuous battle was described as a “baptism of blood.” Both the Union and Confederate armies suffered significant losses. The

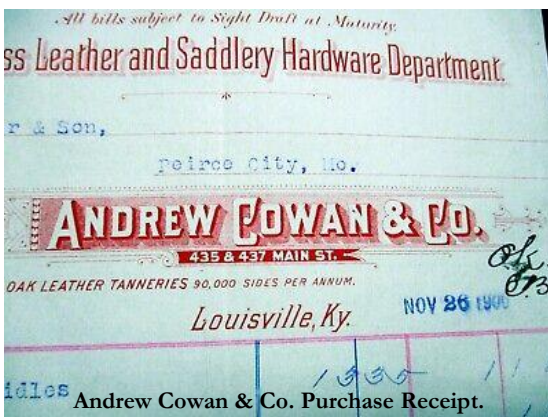
Confederates took the brunt of the charge, but the Union camp was not unscathed. Amazingly, Cowan emerged without a hint of injury. His guns were reportedly the only ones that remained in action during the entire campaign.

The pitting of North against South did not leave a lasting wound on Cowan’s heart. He became the “father of the joint reunion of the blue and gray at Gettysburg,” which occurred July 3, 1887, on the Gettysburg battlefield. Both sides recognized the bravery and extreme sacrifice that occurred during Pickett’s Charge. As Union General William Burns remarked, “The world will applaud both alike,



Caissons at Gettysburg. Courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park.

and history will record their deeds together” (Bush, p. 130). In one of the more unusual events of the reunion, Cowan returned the sword of a rebel soldier who fell at his feet to Pickett’s Division Association. This simple action demonstrated mutual respect for the lost and hope that lasting division would be dispelled.



Louisville Connections

Cowan’s leadership of the firm Cowan & Company, a wholesale hardware, leather, and mill supply

business, marked the beginning of his tremendous footprint in local history. He went on to serve as president of the National Oak Leather Company and as director of the National Bank of Commerce, Fidelity Bank, and Columbia Trust. However, his association with the Southern Exposition, a series of world fairs held in Louisville from 1883 to 1887, arguably made the biggest impact on our city.

The Southern Exposition at Louisville could be described as the beginning of a new era. As business leaders gathered to discuss the idea, they set these goals: “to advance welfare of the producing classes of the South; to exhibit products and resources for the Southern States to the Northern and Eastern manufacturers and the implements and machines of the giant industries of the former.” The ripple effects of this singular endeavor resulted in Louisville being referred to as the “New Gotham” and a “City of Progress.” The boosts to home construction, street railways, tobacco, distilling, and cloth manufacturing created economic effects that have lasted for generations.



Color Rendering of Southern Exposition from German Newspaper. Wikipedia.

The Southern Exposition cemented Louisville’s progressive cultural stance. When Cowan joined the city’s Board of Parks Commissioners, he laid the groundwork for development of greenspace that would be enjoyed by millions of people in the years that followed.



Lookout at Iroquois Park. Courtesy City of Louisville.

In an 1887 speech, Cowan proposed the Parks Act. The philosophy undergirding the proposal encompassed four central tenets:

- Enhance the city’s status
- Benefit recreation and health of residents
- Attract businesses (additional commerce brings additional revenue)
- Increase property values

Cowan proposed at least three large parks—one in the eastern, one in the western, and one in the southern portion of Louisville—with a system of parkways that connected community to greenspace. Thus the concepts of Cherokee, Shawnee, and Iroquois Parks were born that very moment. Just four years later, the city would partner with the renowned landscape architect

Frederick Law Olmsted to make the plan a reality. One can hardly dispute the positive impact that these parks, and the many others that make up the current park system in Jefferson County, have made on the lives of millions of citizens over the 140+ years since the concept was spoken into existence.

A Lasting Legacy

When Cowan first stepped foot onto North American soil, he could scarcely have imagined what the future would hold. Looking back on his story today, it is hard to imagine that a single Scottish immigrant could have succeeded on so many fronts. With a sense of patriotism that ran deeper than mere support for the battle cry, Cowan created pathways for community, conversation, and widening of perspective. His business success in both Indianapolis and Louisville opened doors to



Gwen M. Mooney, Cave Hill Cemetery President & CEO

work within ever-expanding circles of influence. When opportunity came, he did not shy away. He kept running forward, always aware that a better future lay within reach, and that it would just take work and consensus to get there.

Cave Hill Connection

When Gwen Mooney, Cave Hill Cemetery's President & CEO, was hired in 2015, she did not realize that she had family buried on the grounds. Born in Massachusetts, and residing in Cincinnati for the last 30 years, there was never a correlation made to an extension of her family being historically posited in Louisville.

But, much to her surprise, through a casual family conversation with her father and nephew, did she learn about Andrew Cowan. Immediately, Mooney pieced together the genealogical puzzle and learned that Cowan is related to her through her father's lineage.

Sources

Bush, Bryan S. *Colonel Andrew Cowan: Union Soldier, Louisville Citizen, Peacemaker* (Morely: Acclaim Press, 2015).

Joyce, Charles. "Reluctant Hero." *Military Images* (2018), pp. 30-35.