



Episode 2, 2012: Civil War Deringers

Dulcie Bomberger: In the late '70s my dad purchased these guns from an antiques dealer. These guns mean a lot to me because Dad gave them to me the year my son was born.

John P. Thompson, Owensboro, Kentucky.

They were appraised on the *Antique Road Show*

Chris Mitchell: Really interested in this is a pair of pistols. For retail, they would probably bring today around \$30,000, and that's without knowing who Mr. Thompson is.

Dulcey: So, I want to know who is John P. Thompson?

Wes Cowan: These ornate pistols would have been expensive when they were made. Whoever he was, John P. Thompsons was no ordinary soldier. And there's something else: This investigation hits mighty close to home. This is an exciting story for me because I'm from Kentucky. I spent an awful lot of time, forty or fifty miles from Owensboro, Kentucky. I grew up hearing about my Great-Great Grandpa Sam, who was a Confederate and he was a member of the 10th Kentucky Cavalry. So to see these pistols with this guy John P. Thompson from Owensboro, Kentucky, man the bells started ringing.

Dulcie, I know what's in the box here, because you brought these to the *Antiques Road Show* in Pittsburgh, right?

Dulcie: Yes.

Wes: Wow. So, there's an escutcheon here that says, "John P. Thompson, Owensboro, Kentucky." They're absolutely beautiful. What did you think they were used for?

Dulcie: I thought that they had something to do with the Civil War

Wes: Ok

Dulcie: ... because of the paperwork here.

Wes: Inside the pistol case, Dulcie found a prison parole document dated May, 1865, just one month after the war's end. It gives Thompson's rank and his regiment.

"I, the undersigned prisoner of war belonging to the 12th ba – battalion, Kentucky Calvary..."
"Jack P. Thompson, Major, 12th Kentucky Calvary."

Looks like he got this at the end of the war, and he's being paroled after being a prisoner of war.

Dulcie wants to know if the pistols saw action in the war, and more about their owner.

So, I'm ready to get going.

Dulcie: Thank you

Wes: The pistols are derringers, made in Philadelphia, and their ornate design and likely price tag suggest that Major Thompson may have been someone prominent. He certainly took up arms in one of the most divided and dangerous areas of the country. Probably nowhere more in the United States did you see brother fighting against brother. It was a war that literally tore this state apart. Pressed between north and south, the Bluegrass State did eventually back the Union. But tens of thousands of Kentuckians were staunch Confederates. Both John P. Thompson and my relative were among them. My great-great grandfather Sam fought in the 10th Kentucky Cavalry, commanded by John Hunt Morgan. His was a guerilla force which raided deep behind Union lines.

John P. Thompson was in the 12th Kentucky Cavalry. But you know, during the war, the 10th and the 12th can certainly have been under the same command. And they might have known each other. Who knows?!

From what I know about guns, derringers were not your typical battlefield weapon. I've reached out to my friend, Chris Mitchell. He's a weapons specialist who first looked at Dulcie's pistols on the *Antiques Road Show*. He wants to show me how the derringer works, but doesn't want to risk firing Dulcie's. So, he's brought his own.

Chris Mitchell: I just happen to have it right here, you would never know it. Take the powder and pour it down the muzzle, then we're going to put the patch on top. Then we're going to take our rammer. Alright, now we have the gun loaded. We're going to take our percussion cap, we're going to keep the barrel pointed in a safe direction and we'll head out to the range.

Wes: Let's Go.

We'll stand roughly 25 feet from the target.

Chris: Alright, take your aim and let's see what we can do.

Chris: It went over it.

Wes: I went over it!

Wes: I didn't hit the target.

Chris: There you go!

Wes: It took me three tires to even hit the target! And that's the point Chris wanted to make. As we head inside, he explains the Derringer was not terribly useful at long distance on the field of battle. But it was popular because it could be hidden and packed a punch at short range.

Chris: These could be used for protection, you know, you could carry them in your coat pocket. If you're in a in a close fight or in a hand-to-hand situation, this is definitely usable.

Wes: Chris says the Derringer's short barrel and large caliber made it a favorite of gamblers, outlaws, and assassins.

Chris: Probably is the reason that most, even kids today know that name is it's Derringer pistol that John Wilkes Booth used to kill Abraham Lincoln.

Wes: He doesn't know who Thompson was, but his guns were lethal, stealthy, and self contained.

Chris: You have this wonderful idea that everything I need to make these guns function is with me in this box.

Wes: Right.

Chris: This is the bullet mold that you would have used to make your bullets. This is the little brass loading rod that you would have used to actually load the guns. And then here we have the powder flask that would have held the powder and helped us measure the charge.

Wes: Chris agrees, the guns were almost certainly owned by someone of means.

Chris: These are more you know guns for a gentleman this case and all is an element of prestige. This is all about...

Wes: Showing off.

Chris: It's status.

Wes: And he spotted something else.

Chris: Somebody has used these guns, there's no question. The tools, everything, has been used.

Wes: Gentleman officer? Assassin? Spy? Exactly who was Major John P. Thompson? And how had he used these pistols? I can tell you, it's going to be a challenge to run this guy down. Thompson is such a common name.

Let me just look at the Census data from 1860, from Owensboro Kentucky. Owensboro, Kentucky. Daviess County, Kentucky.

Look at that: John P. Thompson, born about 1832. He's listed as the Clerk of the Circuit Court and his real estate is worth \$10,000 and he has \$15,000 worth of personal property. I'll bet you that he had slaves at the start of the civil war.

Sure enough, a slave census from that same year shows the Thompson family owning nine slaves, the majority of whom are young men in their twenties. If this is the same John P. Thompson on the pistols, he certainly could have afforded them. I've made an appointment

with research associate, Tony Curtis, at The Kentucky Historical Society. I've sent him pictures of the gun and scans of the parole document.

Okay here are the pistols that I was telling you about. Encased derringers, both of them with this German silver escutcheon: John P. Thompson, Owensboro, Kentucky. Now with the pistols was this document, and this is a parole near the end of the war issued to a guy named Jack P. Thompson.

Tony Curtis: Well I think we have the sources here to look a little bit further into this.

Wes: Let's Go

Tony: Let's pull a couple of these volumes to look at.

Wes: Oh "Prisoner of War".

Tony: Yes.

Wes: Okay.

Military History of the Daviess County, Kentucky area. The title of the book is telling "At War with Ourselves". Both President Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis were from Kentucky, and the book details the tug of war over the border state. Loyalties were divided town by town, county by county. Although Kentucky chose to remain with the Union, pro-southern sympathizers set up a shadow government recognized by the Confederacy as early as 1862.

Oh, take a look at this, "The first man not only in Daviess County but also the entire state to raise a company of soldiers for the Confederate Army was Captain John 'Jack' Thompson of Owensboro, and he was in this early war regiment called the Dixie Guard."

Tony: It's a local unit of men who were put together by, sometimes, a prominent leader in the community.

Wes: Like the rest of the state, Owensboro was especially divided on the issue of slavery. Later in the war, local African Americans would sign up to fight for their freedom while prosperous slave owners often sided with the Confederacy.

I know from the 1860 Census that he in fact was the Clerk of Courts for the Davie, for Davies County. And he was a fairly wealthy guy.

Tony: That makes perfect sense then.

Wes: John P. Thompson of Owensboro was a zealous defender of the south. I'm almost certain it's the same guy who owned these pistols. But one thing I don't know, exactly how was he captured? Time to look at the Confederate Prisoner of War records.

Should I look through one and you look through one?

Tony: You look through that one and I will look through this one.

Wes: I got a hit. John P. Thompson, page 970. Executive Department, Richmond, June 10th, 1863. So this is from the Confederate government. "Honorable Secretary of War Sir, I'm informed that Major John P. Thompson, has been arrested in Owensboro, Kentucky and sentenced to be shot as a spy! He was a gallant soldier and has probably been taken attempting to recruit." Wow! Although Kentucky was now officially backing the Union, Thompson had deep roots in his former hometown. So it's interesting he was sent back, by the Confederate War Department, apparently, to Owensboro to recruit more Confederate soldiers.

Tony: He still had those connections in Owensboro, so he would have gone back to the town. When he's in Owensboro, he may have distributed pamphlets, leaflets. He would have tapped into those same networks.

Wes: And that would make sense, I mean the guy was connected.

With this information, I can dig a little deeper into his prison record. Local Union forces captured Thompson on May 17, 1863 crossing the Ohio River outside of Owensboro. Seems Thomson avoided the firing squad after Confederate officials plead for leniency.

Here he is on a roll of prisoners of war, Depot Prisoners of War, near Sandusky. So that's Johnson's Island.

Tony: That is Johnson Island.

Wes: Johnson's Island was an officers POW camp in the middle of Lake Eerie.

After his release, Thompson settled in Virginia, marrying a woman he had met at the start of the war.

Wow, quite a paper trail that was left behind.

Tony, I cannot thank you enough.

With this new information, I'm going to see if someone back at my office can help me track down a living relative.

I'm confident these pistols were owned by the same John P. Thompson I've been tracking. But I want to be certain.

Robin Hutchins: Absolutely, I can look into that for you.

Wes: Terrific. See ya.

The office came through; I'm headed to Virginia.

I'm on my way to visit the great-great granddaughter of John P. Thompson. Man.

Lesley Rosse Foster: Wes, what a pleasure.

Wes: You must – You must be Lesley.

Lesley: I am, indeed. I'm so delighted for you to be here.

Wes: So, you're John P. Thompson's great-great granddaughter

Lesley: That's correct.

Wes: Do I have a lot of questions for you...

Lesley: I bet you do.

Wes: Lesley's pride in her family history is evident. The house is kept as a family museum and filled with ancestral relics. Lesley spent years researching genealogy and cataloguing the Thompsons' storied history from before the Civil War to the present. She's eager to fill me in on John Thompson's past.

Lesley: He went by Jack – that was his familiar name.

Wes: Okay. Well, that – that makes.

Lesley: And so, we in the family refer to him as Jack, or Major Jack. His father was Philip Thompson, and his father served, as a matter of fact, in the US Congress, 1823 to 1825. He was very prominent, was considered one of the richest people in Owensboro at that time.

Wes: Lesley says that Jack was a prolific letter writer, especially to the love of his life, Nelia, who he courted during the war.

Lesley: I have 88 surviving letters that he wrote...

This was written to Ms. Nelia, and do you know what this is? His letter of proposal of marriage.

Wes: Oh my word.

Lesley: This letter would have been written when he was on the march. He writes Wednesday night June 11th, 1862. "You are a diamond among gems. A pearl amid sea shells."

Wes: Wow. That's an amazing letter.

Lesley: Isn't that beautiful?

Wes: What a treasure.

In addition to preserving her ancestors' romantic correspondence, Lesley's family also has an incredible record of Jack's wartime activities.

Lesley: He wanted to be part of the guerilla raids going back to – into Kentucky, to recruit for the Southern Side. And this one is actually shown here. This has Major John P. Thompson – so, he was promoted in rank at this time, and was appointed, "Should you accept, you will report for duty to Brigadier General John H. Morgan." So, he was under the umbrella of John Hunt Morgan.

Wes: Guess what?

Lesley: What?

Wes: So was my great-great grandfather.

Lesley: Oh – Oh, what a small world.

Wes: And he was from Waverly, Kentucky, which is about 40 miles from Owensboro.

Lesley: Oh my gosh. That's remarkable.

I – I'd also like to show this, "Attention Kentuckians." So, written from Camp Hawes, Athens, East Tennessee. March 1st, 1863.

Wes: It's a handbill, Recruiting volunteers to flock to the rebel cause.

Oh, listen to this. "Come in such numbers as at least will fill the Kentucky regiments and battalions, to drive the invader beyond the borders of your native state. Rally for the redemption of Kentucky." So, this is what he would have carried with him when he went back to Owensboro to recruit, and he was handing these things out. Oh, this is fabulous.

Lesley: Yeah.

Wes: There is no mention of the Derringers in the family papers.

But what Lesley shows me next will almost certainly be a shock to Dulcie.

Wes: Well, this was a great story. But I say that with every *History Detectives* story. It's always a great story. This one was particularly great.

I fill Dulcie in on a lot of details about John P. Thompson's early life.

He was a slave owner. He organized the very first Confederate Regiment in Kentucky.

Ducie: Wow.

Wes: Through a little bit of genealogical work, we were able to discover his great-great granddaughter.

Ducie: That's unbelievable.

Lesley: Right here is where his pistols sat. And as a matter of fact, I have a photograph of that. This shows the complete set, along with his photo at the time that they sat here on the table.

Wes: Do you how amazing that is?

Lesley: It's quite something.

Wes: For my story I mean this is, sort of puts everything together.

Lesley explains the pistols were treasured heirlooms and sat on the table in a place of honor. But in the 1970s, her grandmother told the family an intruder broke into the house and stole them. No one has seen them since.

Wes: There are the set of pistols.

Lesley: Ah, well that's very moving. I know all the women and past relatives are very happy at this moment. That's really moving.

Wes: Well, Pick one up.

Lesley: Oh, They mean so much more than just the beauty, and the intrinsic value of what they are as pistols in a set. after Jack died, Nelia brought them back here to her home, and she placed them over there on that table, and they sat there enshrined – sort of the holy family relics. They became an expression of him and his spirit.

Wes: I can't tell you how remarkable an experience it's been.

Lesley: And for me, as well. For me, as well.

Ducie: Oh my gosh. That's – That's wonderful.

Wes: But I had some startling news for Ducie. Lesley's family said the pistols had been stolen in the 1970s.

Ducie: I don't know what to say. I kind of just want to cry.

Wes: The family felt the same way when they saw them. They started crying.

Ducie: Thank you for telling me who he was.

Wes: John P. Thompson passed away in 1872. He and his beloved, Nelia, had three children. When I began this investigation, I had no idea it would prove so fascinating or complicated. Delicate questions of ownership often come up in the world of antiques, and while it is not our place to determine title, it's obvious that these guns have long been treasured by both families. After filming, we learned that Lesley had contacted Dulcie in an attempt to amicably resolve the pistols' ownership. As of this airing, we don't know the outcome. To read more of John P. Thompson's letters during the Civil War, visit *History Detectives* on the web at PBS.org.