

A Closer Look at the Timber

A word used in the 1864 account of the scaffold auction sale has been echoing with BECHS researchers. The newspaper described the gallows being auctioned off by the quartermaster as badly 'racked'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says it should be "wrack and ruin," wrack meaning to ruin, while rack means to torture. However, in timber framing: "Traditional timber framing is the method of creating framed structures of heavy timber jointed together with various joints.... Diagonal bracing is used to prevent 'racking,' or movement of structural vertical beams or posts." Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timber_framing

That would mean that the gallows had become rundown, crooked, unsightly or warping. Why would that be? Answer: is that it was "new cut white oak" and it was in the process of deep drying. When oak dries it discolors, twists and shrinks. In the case of the scaffold, drying would have left the joints loose, wobbly and crooked/distorted. By this time the wood would have also been gray and weathered. All this physical change in appearance reported at the 1864 quartermaster auction points to the fact that the timbers were in fact originally new cut oak in 1861-1862 and not previously used lumber.



Decaying Oak (above) and BECHS timber (below).



At this point it is critical to explore if the timber we have was (or was not) one of these "new cut" timbers. We know the last use of the timber was in the construction of Meagher's hardware store as a floor joist. This accounts for the square cut portions of the outer edge of the beam as it lay facing up in the store. We know that it spent its time with this side up because that surface suffers from a permanent discoloration. The logs of a late 1860s log home that we have been using for a comparison, display the "this side up" look just like Meagher's beam. However, the decay is not characteristic of oak, a mosaic pattern, per local examples.

Regardless of the timber's possible use in the gallows or not, there are blind/shallow mortise holes on the side opposite the notches that don't make sense. We know that Meagher's floor sill would have no need for mortise holes in those locations because they would have been sticking out the side. We also know the mortise holes would not have been used as knee braces for the gallows because

- they would have pointed down,
- there are too many of them,
- knee braces would have been too far into the rope position area of the gallows and,
- the aforementioned "wracking" infers there were no diagonal/knee braces.

Therefore their presences demonstrate that this beam was not one of the 1861-1862 "new cut" pieces for the scaffold, and it had a previous use before being used in Meagher's building.



Blind/shallow mortise hole



Another anomaly is the mortise hole that interferes with the square notch joist hanger near one end. Both the floor joist and the mortise could not have used the same space at the same time. This is another point that it could not have been one of the "new cut" beams for the scaffold and had a previous use before Meagher's building.

It also appears that the timber was never any longer on one end than it is right now. On the half with the four alleged hanging positions, the blind mortise hole on that side is very close to the end and the wood broke out



when it was disassembled the first time it was used. Had the timber been longer, there would have been adjoining support that it would have prevented it from breaking out of the adjoining wood, as it appears in the other three blind mortise holes. That end of timber had to have been originally as long then as it is today. If

Meagher's story was true, it would have been longer to give that mortise area support. Also, the gallows had tenon joints on both ends, so the timber would have had to be longer to account for that as there are no tenon joints on the BECHS timber. This is also the only end that is rotting. Wood rots from water intrusion on the ends. The other end is not rotten suggesting it is the end Meagher would have cut off to fit the floor sill at a later date.



Another note to consider, the notches and the joist hangers (two different purposes) look like the same tool and individual cut them. The beginning and finish angles are identical. The chances of that being true in both the gallows construction in 1862 and Meagher's hardware construction in 1864 are unlikely.



Entire timber view, Floor Sill "This Side Up"