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An inscription on a monument at the Gettysburg battlefield recently dragged me down a rabbit hole of history.

Drapped across the base of the monument to the Fighting 69th's Irish Brigade marker was a bronze statue of an Irish wolfhound, the famous unit's mascot.

The monument was unveiled in 1888, and the sculptor, a former

Confederate soldier, William R. O'Donovan, inscribed the following on the base, "This, in the matter of size and structure, truthfully represents the Irish wolfhound, a dog which has been extinct for more than a hundred years."

As a guy who lives with two Irish wolfhounds, I think O'Donovan was a little premature. But I understand. Through much of the 1800s, the wolfhound was a whiff of a rumor in the British Isles.

No one had actually seen one in years, but the the size of the wolfhound and its incredible fighting spirit were legendary. But after the last wolf in Ireland was killed in 1786, the wolfhound was out of a job. The mighty breed declined.

A Scottish veterinarian, Capt. Augustus Graham, began to bring the wolfhound back from extinction in the latter half of the 1800s, using the few wolfhounds he could find and crossing them with Scottish deerhounds and Great Danes for size and vigor.

It wasn't until the early 1900s that Irish wolfhounds came to estate kennels of the wealthy in America. This raises the question: How was a wolfhound the mascot of the Fighting 69th in the Civil War?

Were there Irish wolfhounds in America that history forgot about? The short answer? Probably not.

The Fighting 69th was originally all-Irish. Many of its members were veterans of the failed Irish rebellion of 1848. They dipped into Ireland's mythical past for a symbol for their unit, the fierce Irish wolfhound. But actual wolfhounds didn't

march at the head of New York's St. Patrick Day Parade until the 1950s.

Donovan sculpted the wolfhound statue based on written memories of wolfhounds. It's a pretty fair likeness. But if there were any wolfhounds in America in the 1800s, they were a well-kept secret.

Their cousins, however, were very much in demand here hunting wolves and coyotes.

Teddy Roosevelt and Gen. George Custer both had and hunted with Scottish deerhounds, greyhounds and staghounds. The big hounds had the speed and the heart needed in the the rough-and-tumble Old West.

While you don't see many dogs in movies about the American West, in truth, they were very much present, mostly dogs like the Australian shepherd and the Australian cattle dog, smart, tough dogs who did well herding and protecting livestock.

One of the best known hunting packs of the Old West — a group of deerhounds and greyhounds — was owned by stockmen in the Sun River Hound Club of Montana. In 1866 alone, the dogs killed 146 wolves.

A writer of the day described them as having "superior strength and are dauntless fighters."

In 1870, a pack of imported Russian Greyhounds (Borzoi) made a splash in Dodge City due to their speed and hunting prowess.

And there was Gen. George Armstrong Custer, who kept dogs throughout his military careers. The cavalryman favored big,

strong dogs with stamina who could course alongside his horse in a hunt.

His dogs — deerhounds and staghounds — weren't popular with his men. He had 40 of them. While stationed in Kentucky, they generally raised a ruckus, killed cats and terrorized other dogs on the post.

During his exploration of the Black Hills, his hounds rode in the unit's best ambulance wagon while the wounded were relegated to the remaining rickety ambulances.

In his last letter to his wife on the night before the Battle of the Little Big, Custer wrote that his favorite hound, a deerhound named Tuck, was lying at his feet with her head in his lap.

Riding out the next morning, he made the camp staff restrain his hounds so they wouldn't follow him, but Tuck insisted and broke free. She was last seen in the valley of the Little Big Horn, racing beside her master's horse as he rode into battle. Tuck is counted among the casualties of the massacre.