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“Of The People, By the People, For the People”:  
The Transformation of Gettysburg Battlefield Park  
From a Site of Official Culture to a Popular Tourist Attraction

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In November 1863, thousands descended upon the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to commemorate the thousands who had descended upon and fallen upon the field around the town four months earlier. They came for a ceremony of official culture: the dedication of a national cemetery for thousands of citizen-soldiers of the Union. Famed orator Edward Everett delivered a classical oration recounting the battle and memorializing the dead, which would make even Pericles proud, and then Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal 272 words. In the ostensibly secular but popularly religious society of nineteenth century America, it seemed like the embattled nation had a potential pilgrimage shrine for its citizens—a national religious site, in the mode of Canterbury Cathedral in England, which similarly was sanctified by death. Southerners were excluded from this initial commemoration, but in his own, little-remembered Gettysburg address on November 18 (the night before the official ceremonies), Secretary of State William Seward proclaimed the administration’s hope that once again there would “be only one country, having only one hope, one ambition, and one destiny.”<sup>1</sup> Little did any of the people present in November 1863 know the tremendous role Southerners would play in adopting this sacred field for popular pilgrimages in the years after the war. Nor could those on the stage know the extent to which the general populace would appropriate the hallowed ground for their own purposes beyond the purview of official culture.

Popular voyages to battlefields were not a new phenomenon in the post-Civil War era of American history. Thomas A. Chambers outlined this practice in his recent book, *Memories of War: Visiting Battlegrounds and Bonefields in the Early American Republic*. It was not immediately embraced after the Revolution or the War of 1812; “Battlefield tourism did not fully develop until fifty years after the Declaration of Independence. In its formative years attention to battlefields grew alongside the ‘Northern Tour’ and an American fascination with landscape.”<sup>2</sup> Although this grew in popularity in the ante-bellum period, “Americans maintained

an ambivalent relationship with the past.”<sup>3</sup> According to Chambers, Northerners took more direct interest in the battlefields than their Southern counterparts; he specifically traced the history of Yorktown in Virginia as a generally ignored battleground that merited more attention.

When the Civil War broke out, both sides looked back to the Revolutionary generation with increased interest (In *What They Fought For*, James McPherson cited the desire to match their fathers’ and grandfathers’ military exploits as a major motivator for enlistment among young Civil War soldiers). Some from the Northern states took intense interest in seeing the locations of the great victories of the Revolutionary generation. Among these were the men of the 77th New York Volunteer Infantry. Calling themselves the “Bemis Heights Battalion” and hailing from Saratoga, they were intensely aware of the heritage of their home region and their ancestors’ martial fame. During the battles of 1862 and 1864 in Virginia, men wrote to the hometown newspapers with pride about marching the same ground as George Washington and Daniel Morgan.<sup>4</sup> Passing by the grave of General Morgan upon one battleground, Colonel Windsor French of the 77th New York wrote to the *Saratogian* newspaper: “I wondered if his spirit did not hover over this battle-field, fighting to uphold the cause he fought to establish, and to continue the Government he fought to inaugurate. Surely the God of battles must aid our just cause.”<sup>5</sup> Not coincidentally, Morgan was a hero of the Revolutionary War battles at Saratoga—meaning the men of the 77th would be well acquainted with his reputation.

The short lifespan and travel difficulties of the founding generation made long excursions in search of history difficult. Patriotism was typically confined to city squares where few monuments were constructed. “Before the Civil War we had no history in the deepest and most inward sense. There was, of course, the noble vision of the Founding Fathers . . . the dream of freedom incarnated in a more perfect union. But the Revolution did not create a nation except on paper; . . . the vision of the Founding Fathers . . . became merely a daydream of easy and automatic victories.” In short, “There was little awareness of the cost of having a history.”<sup>6</sup> The Civil War, in its totality of involvement and intensity of suffering, provided a lesson in that cost for a vastly larger nation than that of the Revolutionary War, and a nation in which a tremendous number of veterans of that suffering still had decades to live.

Often called the first total war in history, the Civil War did not leave a soul on the continent unaffected.<sup>7</sup> When Americans emerged from this horrible conflict they tried to make sense of the destruction. However, they also celebrated and honored their achievements. In contrast to the people of Western Europe following

World War I, who wished only to think of ensuring peace, Americans were filled with pride over their military exploits; and some, especially in the South, were determined to keep fighting old battles.

The natural setting for these reflective pursuits was the actual terrain on which the soldiers had fought, and Gettysburg came to the fore in the minds of both sections' citizens. Many in the Union recognized the importance of Gettysburg at the time of the battle in July 1863. Even while the war still raged on, men of the North worked to first create the Gettysburg National Cemetery and then the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, "whose purpose was to preserve portions of the battlefield as a memorial to the Union Army that fought here."<sup>8</sup> That simple purpose was adopted and accelerated in the post-war period by a new and powerful veterans' organization, the first of its kind in United States history, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). With its ranks open to all veterans of Union armies, the Grand Army of the Republic dominated political life in the decades following the war, and had tremendous financial capabilities as America entered the Gilded Age.

The Grand Army of the Republic's leadership was determined to leave imprints on the battlefields of the war, and a tremendous market for monuments sprung up in the North after the conflict. This new artistic marketplace sold hundreds upon hundreds of custom monuments to cities, towns, and GAR chapters throughout the North. Monuments embellished city squares and town parks everywhere. The Civil War was a war of the people, with regiments formed in individual communities, and the citizens of those communities were universally resolute to honor their dead and celebrate their returning brothers and sons. "These war memorials, which have re-emerged from the national memory with the sesquicentennial of the start of the Civil War, literally mark a monumental change in how that war was commemorated," a recent article in the *Times Union* of Albany stated. "Rather than saluting generals on horseback or poised for battle in earlier wars, they revere the rank-and-file's service to the communities."<sup>9</sup> The designs of the statues reflected even more about the views of manliness developed in Victorian society of America. Randolph Rodgers's sculpture of a soldier in action began to rival the top-selling soldier-at-rest statue. A committee of veterans in Covington, Kentucky resolved that they would not accept a statue of a soldier "at parade rest, or one that looks as if he were ashamed that he was a soldier."<sup>10</sup> Clearly demonstrating the goal of making popular representations of the Civil War past in commemoration, "Veterans in Jersey City sued (unsuccessfully) to stop the city from erecting Philip Martiny's Soldiers and Sailors Monument (1899) on the grounds that the seated

Athena-like figure in helmet and armor could not properly commemorate soldiers.”<sup>11</sup>

Over the years, each regiment’s veterans—with the support of state governments—returned to the fields of Gettysburg to dedicate their own monuments and markers. The pageantry and speeches made at the dedication ceremonies reflected the values of the communities from which the soldiers came. The 77th New York Infantry of Saratoga (mentioned earlier), which served only in reserve at Gettysburg, nonetheless held a large monument dedication ceremony on the field to celebrate their mere presence there in July 1863. Colonel French, in his address, again harkened back to the Revolutionary War, as he had when describing the regiment’s battles to the hometown newspapers during the war. He recalled that the victory of the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg made permanent “the principle which our forefathers then and there fought and established at Saratoga.”<sup>12</sup> In this public display of official culture, the men sought to place themselves alongside the ghosts of their heroic fathers and grandfathers, fulfilling their popular desire of 1861.

Among Southerners, it was not the former soldiers who took the lead in memorializing the Confederate war effort in emerging national parks on battlefields. Rather, it was the women of the South who took it upon themselves. Although battlefields did not obtain national park status until the 1890s (with Gettysburg among the first handful),<sup>13</sup> the women of the South wasted no time in the decades between Lee’s surrender at Appomattox and the national park preservation movement. They developed the tradition of Decoration Day, or Memorial Day as veterans preferred to call it, as an annual date on which to venture to battlefields and cemeteries to decorate the graves of Confederate soldiers with flowers. In 1868, in a symbol of unity for the nation in the midst of Reconstruction, General John Logan—serving as commander of the Grand Army of the Republic—ordered that these ceremonies be held on the same date throughout the country, specifying May 30. By 1876, it was a federal holiday. Civil War monuments—present in countless cities and small towns throughout the nation and intended to “shape the symbolic life of a community”—became the focal point of the holiday, but the largest commemorations were reserved for the battlefield parks like Gettysburg.<sup>14</sup>

Popular poetry and literature sprang forth from all sections of the country in connection with the observance of Memorial Day/Decoration Day. Among the most prominent American poets to contribute to this new trend in popular literature were Sidney Lanier, Abram Joseph Ryan, and Walt Whitman. Poems like Ryan’s “The Conquered Banner” were woven into pieces of art, sold to hundreds of people for hanging in their homes, and spoke of the everlasting popular appeal the Civil War

fields and memory would hold in America:

Furl that Banner! True, 'tis gory,  
Yet 'tis wreathed around with glory,  
And 'twill live in song and story  
    Though its folds are in the dust!  
For its fame in brightest pages,  
Penned by poets and by sages,  
Shall go sounding down the ages.<sup>15</sup>

Other popular poems like John Albee's "A Soldier's Grave" and Henry Timrod's "Ode at Magnolia Cemetery" (set to music and sung during the Charleston, SC ceremony of 1867) mourned that plainness of individual graves, but the latter proclaimed that,

Though yet no marble column craves  
    The pilgrim here to pause,<sup>16</sup>

people everywhere would still be drawn to the site. In "A Georgia Volunteer," Mary Ashley Townsend demonstrated the moral ambiguity of late nineteenth century/early twentieth century American literature:

He sleeps – what need to question now  
    If he was wrong or right?<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of a dead Confederate soldier, this signified the increasing sense of reunion and reconciliation spreading throughout the country, which General Logan hoped to promote with his proclamation, and which Nina Silber portrayed in great detail in her book *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*. A similar sentiment was expressed by Henry Peterson in his "Ode for Decoration Day," in which he concluded:

Then let your foeman's grave remembrance share:  
    Pity a higher charm to Valor lends,  
And in realms of Sorrow all are friends.<sup>18</sup>

The spirit of reconciliation and common national grieving was not limited to the popular poetry of the era. Novelists also contributed to the national popular culture of commemoration. This trend continued well into the twentieth century. Most notably, it was embraced by the great Southern author, William Faulkner, who wrote not only of the shared sadness of the post-war era, but whose works also contained strong elements of the growing sense of nostalgia for a bygone and romanticized era of history. Writing directly about the centerpiece of it all, Gettysburg, Faulkner captured the new American sense of being a part of history:

“For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863 . . . and it’s all in balance, it hasn’t happened yet, it hasn’t even begun yet, it not only hasn’t begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin...and that moment doesn’t need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time. Maybe this time.*”<sup>19</sup>

His allusion to the July afternoon in 1863 is referring to the final day of the battle, just prior to Pickett’s Charge commencing and sealing the defeat of Lee’s army at Gettysburg. Americans no longer had the “ambivalent relationship with the past”<sup>20</sup> which Thomas Chambers referred to concerning the post-Revolutionary War generation.

Since the end of the Civil War, Americans had a keen awareness of “the cost of having a history.”<sup>21</sup> Yet obsession with battlefields demonstrated a clear willingness to not only accept that aspect of national heritage, but also to relive it. Younger generations like the one Faulkner wrote about could look with envy at the legacy of their ancestors just as young Civil War soldiers looked with envy upon the martial exploits of their fathers and grandfathers in 1861. But unlike the Revolutionary generation—whose reputation was based primarily on legend—by filling the landscape of the nation with monuments to their own admirable performance, the Civil War generation created an image of American manhood for all to strive for in future years. Nowhere could this be seen more clearly than at the great battlefield of Gettysburg, where over nine hundred monuments ultimately appeared. The original sacred intent of the cemetery and battlefield preservation now was partially co-opted by an effort to shape American memory.

Another mode of attraction to Gettysburg soon appeared, however, beyond

the noble intents of the 1860s townspeople, the veterans, or the federal government. Somewhere along the way in the development of the park, around the turn of the century, merchants recognized the tremendous commercial potential of the battlefield parks. The beautiful aesthetics of the natural landscape drew in some, nostalgia for a bygone era brought others to south-central Pennsylvania, and the quest for inspiration from the Civil War generation was the motivator for many. Yet as the old adage says, it is money that makes the world go 'round. Memorial Day began a shift toward commercialization and politicization. In 1880, the *New York Tribune* already was complaining about the sacred day falling into “the slough of politics.”<sup>22</sup> As political candidates aimed to identify with the Civil War generation or to compare themselves to the legendary Lincoln, Gettysburg became an attractive location for photographs and stirring patriotic speeches. Much of the solemnity of the holiday was lost during this era. Parades were incorporated and drinking, festiveness, and rowdiness became commonplace.

Modern audiences of the twenty-first century may be shocked by the harshness with which veterans and others looked upon this new era in Memorial Day commemoration, but it mirrored a similar distaste among the traditional actors toward merchants appearing in the vicinity of ceremonies and reunions. “By the 1890s northern and southern veterans frequently lamented that too many Americans devoted the day to recreation rather than remembrance,” echoing a criticism that some still wage today.<sup>23</sup> “No less problematic were special holiday promotions of merchandise for sale.”<sup>24</sup> The distance of time from the Civil War era to 2016 America obliterated these concerns, and modern Memorial Day—falling always on a Monday by federal decree—is seen by the vast majority of Americans as an extra day of vacation at the start of the summer, a day for shopping deals, and a day for premiere athletic events.

Civil War commemoration is certainly not immune from commercialization in the modern era. A quick walk through the town of Gettysburg reveals this simple truth. At the time of the battle, Gettysburg was a small college town composed of many tiny farms that served as the seat of Adams County in south-central Pennsylvania. A century and a half later, while it is still a small college town, it is full of hotels, restaurants, and shops selling a wide array of Civil War-themed items. Families can go on an array of ghost tours. Parents can buy their children teddy bears in tiny Civil War uniforms, toy rifles or a Lee or Lincoln bobble-head. For the adults there are coasters, magnets, keychains and a number of other trivial items. There are even cookbooks; certainly soldiers of the civil war would be amazed at anyone

having the desire to eat like them. There are also CDs available with superficial narratives meant to immerse the tourist in the past. One can only wonder about the feelings veterans of the battle would have over this bizarre commercialism.

Even more perplexing to them may be the popular hobby of Civil War reenactment. While “War reenactment is by no means an American phenomenon,” and, “By all accounts, the impulse to dress up and play Hektor is as old as Hektor himself,” the popularity of it in the United States is bizarre.<sup>25</sup> This is especially true when the nation is engaged in actual wars. Numbers of re-enactors have dropped a bit from their peak in the 1980s and 1990s, but not by much. This effort to simulate or become one with the past suffered a setback in 2006, when the National Park Service banned combat re-enactments on actual battlefield land. “Even the best-researched and most well-intentioned representation of combat cannot replicate the tragic complexity of real warfare,” a NPS statement proclaimed at the time.<sup>26</sup> Veterans of the Civil War would heartily approve of this statement, but not necessarily of what has been left in its wake. Re-enactors now assemble on the old sacred battleground for camp and drill demonstrations. This elicits an image of the Civil War soldier similar to the parade-rest soldier monuments that veterans protested in the 1880s and 1890s. In the same vein as amusement or theme parks, Civil War battlefields now primarily hold an appeal as leisure entertainment locales—the very sort of thing the veterans railed against. In the modern citizen’s desire to connect with and emulate the admirable people of the past, there is a clear disconnect of simulated reality.

Stephen Vincent Benet captured the new direction of Civil War battlefield tourism in his Pulitzer Prize-winning epic poem "John Brown's Body" in 1928, and its relevance to the current situation is remarkable. Interrupting his description of the Battle of Gettysburg, he wrote:

You took a carriage to that battlefield.  
Now, I suppose, you take a motor-bus,  
But then, it was a carriage – and you ate  
Fried chicken out of wrappings of waxed paper,  
While the slow guide buzzed on about the war  
And the enormous, curdled summer clouds  
Piled up like giant cream puffs in the blue.  
The carriage smelt of axle-grease and leather  
And the old horse nodded a sleepy head





And the wind came, the wind moved in the grass,  
Saying...while the long light...and all so calm.

“Pickett came  
And the South came  
And the end came,  
And the grass comes  
And the wind blows  
On the bronze book  
On the bronze men  
On the grown grass,  
And the wind says  
‘Long ago  
Long  
Ago.’ ”<sup>29</sup>

Despite all the commemorative artwork and the efforts of educators and preservationists, the park was evolving into an attractive piece of nature and nothing more. Again, the ambivalent relationship with the past was on the rise, and the cost of having a history was reduced to the cost of that comfort food and carriage ride in public awareness. This section of Benet’s 1928 poem ended with a coup de grace of mourning for historical memory in the Gettysburg Battlefield Park:

Then it was time to buy a paperweight  
With flags upon it in decalcomania  
And hope you wouldn’t break it, driving home.<sup>30</sup>

Commercialism trumped all.

The battlefield park at Gettysburg has seen tremendous changes in the 150 years since the battle that raged there. Preservation efforts have worked to restore the land to its 1863 appearance, and the National Park Service and academics have attempted to limit the popularization of the field. Yet in a manner similar to theme parks like Busch Gardens, where foreign cultures are distortedly experienced through comfortable entertainment and trivial trinkets, Americans accept this new presentation of the past full of commercialism and convenience.<sup>31</sup> A luxury hotel stands next to the home where Abraham Lincoln prepared his Gettysburg Address.

George Pickett and his tragic charge that ended the battle are commemorated in the name of an all-you-can-eat buffet. Historians buzz on about the war, while paperweights and other souvenirs are sold in countless gift shops downtown along crowded Steinwehr Avenue. People utilize a park as they see fit, and acres of open fields in a tourist center surrounding a college campus inspire the typical recreation. By various methods, Americans who travel to Gettysburg form connections with the men who descended on those fields 150 years ago. Whether those long-gone men would approve of the uses of their hallowed ground is irrelevant. To re-appropriate Mary Ashley Townshend's popular poem about the Georgia volunteer: the dead are gone; what need to question now if the living are right or wrong? The park was created by the people of a bygone era, for the people of their ensuing generations, and it continues to meet the demands of the people of the present.

## Notes

1. John Hay and John G. Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln: a History*, vol. 8 (New York: the Century Company, 1890), 191.
2. Thomas A. Chambers, *Memories of War: Visiting Battlefields and Bonefields in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3-4.
3. Ibid.
4. Unit History Project, "77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Civil War," New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, <http://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/77thInf/77thInfCWN.htm> (accessed 3 February 2013).
5. Ibid. From *The Saratogian*, October 13, 1864.
6. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 3.
7. Many historians, including Mark Grimsley in his seminal work, *The Hard Hand of War*, dispute the assertion that the Civil War was the first total war or even necessarily a total war at all (comparing it to the brutality of the Thirty Years War and others in European history).
8. National Park Service, "History and Culture," National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/gett/historyculture/index.htm> (accessed 5 February 2013).
9. Kenneth C. Crowe, "Civil War Monuments Still Evocative," *Times Union*, December 12, 2011.
10. Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: a Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 2004), 31.
11. Ibid.

12. New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg (Albany: J.B. Lyon Co., 1900), 620-621.

13. Chickamauga/Chattanooga in 1890, Shiloh in 1894, Gettysburg in 1895, and Vicksburg in 1899, according to Ronald F. Lee, *The Origin & Evolution of the National Military Park Idea* (Washington: Department of the Interior, 1973), e-book, [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/history\\_military/nmpidea5.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/history_military/nmpidea5.htm) (accessed 10 February 2013).

14. Brown, 41-45.

15. Abram Joseph Ryan, "The Conquered Banner," in *The Photographic History of the Civil War: The Armies and Leaders & Poetry and Eloquence*, ed. Robert Lanier (New York: the Blue & Grey Press, 1987), 248.

16. Henry Timrod, "Ode at Magnolia Cemetery," in *The Photographic History of the Civil War: The Armies and Leaders & Poetry and Eloquence*, ed. Robert Lanier (New York: the Blue & Grey Press, 1987), 274.

17. Mary Ashley Townsend, "A Georgia Volunteer," in *The Photographic History of the Civil War: The Armies and Leaders & Poetry and Eloquence*, ed. Robert Lanier (New York: the Blue & Grey Press, 1987), 280.

18. Henry Peterson, "Ode for Decoration Day," in *The Photographic History of the Civil War: The Armies and Leaders & Poetry and Eloquence*, ed. Robert Lanier (New York: the Blue & Grey Press, 1987), 282.

19. William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 190.

20. Chambers, 4.

21. Warren, 3.

22. Brown, 43.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Dan Fastenberg, "A Brief History of Civil War Reenactment," *Time* (July 3, 2010). <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2001375,00.html> (accessed 12 February 2013).

26. *Ibid.*

27. Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body* (Chicago: Elephant Books, 1990), 260.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 260-261. The Round Tops were a pair of hills on the southern end of the battlefield that were crucial to the Union army's defense on July 2, 1863. The bronze book Benet refers to is a monument near the site of General George Pickett's failed charge on July 3, 1863; the monument lists the units that served in repulsing the assault.

30. *Ibid.*, 261.

31. Lawrence Mintz, "Simulated Tourism at Busch Gardens: the Old Country and Disney's World Showcase, Epcot Center," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 3 (Winter 1998): 47-58.

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