



# THE GETTYSBURG CYCLORAMA

# You

are about to experience the sights and the sounds of battle. Through the magic of the painter's brush and a narration animated by the clamor of war, you will be taken back to that dramatic instant when the leading wave of Pickett's Charge pierced the Union line at The Angle on Cemetery Ridge.

Momentarily, this handful of Confederates—a few hundred at most—brandished bayonets and riflebutts against their enemies in blue. In the confused isolation of battle, they briefly tasted victory. They saw not that the Union line—bent back by the impact of their assault—was now rebounding in greater strength than before. They knew not that they alone had come so far, that their nearly 15,000 comrades had been halted, that the charge had failed.

Then, in a swirl of smoke, fear, and death, this small band of heroes knew the grim truth. Most of them died in the storm of double canister and bullets that now enveloped The Angle.

But in that moment of victory for the Union and glorious defeat for the South, a legend had been born—a legend cherished today by the entire Nation.

Thus did the 3-day Battle of Gettysburg reach its climax on the afternoon of July 3, 1863. Pickett's Charge was Gen. Robert E. Lee's final attempt to sunder and destroy Gen. George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac. In this magnificent failure, the eventual fate of the Confederacy was foreshadowed; the tide of war had turned.

All this happened a moment's walk from where you stand.

## **Painting the Cyclorama**

Paul Philippoteaux, painter of the Gettysburg Cyclorama, came to America in 1881 to study the battlefield and interview eyewitnesses of Pickett's Charge. He chose a spot just back of The Angle as the focal point for the painting. (You can see a marker there today.) From an elevated platform, he made sketches of the terrain and had a local photographer take a series of panoramic views. Having become thoroughly informed about the battle and its field, Philippoteaux began to paint. He and his assistants completed the Cyclorama in 1884.

The imposing canvas—356 feet in circumference and 26 feet high—was first shown in Boston. In 1913, after exhibitions in several other cities, the Cyclorama was brought to Gettysburg where thousands of veterans of the battle saw it during the 50th Anniversary Reunion that year. It has remained at Gettysburg

ever since. The painting was acquired by the Federal Government in 1942 and is now displayed by the National Park Service.

## **A Unique Art Form**

Cycloramas are of interest not only for their subject matter, but as a special visual medium. Paul Philippoteaux' father, Henri, perfected the cyclorama art form in Europe. During the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th, cycloramas enjoyed great popularity there and in this country. Scores of them were painted, usually of battle scenes or other heroic events. The Philippoteaux', father and son, were associated in many of these productions, and together they dominated the cyclorama period.

Until the development of motion pictures, no pictorial representation provided quite the illusion of reality given by a cyclorama. Literally translated, a cyclorama is a circular panorama. It is unique because the viewer does not see a framed segment of the pictured world; instead, he himself is "framed" within the 360° sweep of the picture.

## **Things to Look For**

Your view of this cyclorama is from the rear of the Union line. Pickett's Charge is in the west; turning to the right, you will look north, then east, south, and finally west again.

Though his rendering of terrain and troop movements has been attested accurate by many veterans of the battle, Philippoteaux exaggerated or relocated certain features for artistic emphasis. An example is Confederate General Armistead, central figure at The Angle. The artist portrays him falling mortally wounded from horseback. But Armistead was on foot. Another example is the field hospital in the east view. It is much too close to the battleline; but this was the only way to show in detail this important phase of war.

Note also the bobbed strawstacks, the white trousers, the "Foreign Legion" knapsacks, and the red poppies scattered through the fields. These are typical of French military and pastoral scenes, and they reflect the European backgrounds of Philippoteaux and his assistants.

But these minor discrepancies cannot detract from the essential accuracy Philippoteaux preserved on canvas. Here is captured one of the most critical moments in our national history. And it is done with verve and realism that perpetuate that moment in our memories. An artist seeks no finer epitaph.

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