

The granite orchards of Gettysburg



(photo Kathy Georg Harrison)

Detail of the Louisiana Memorial

Richard West Sellars

Standing near the large Pennsylvania Memorial on Gettysburg Battlefield at dawn, I watch the early light give form and definition to the monument with its beaux-arts design and inscriptions and lists of the Pennsylvania veterans of the battle. Nearby, other memorials dot the landscape. None is larger, though, than the ornate structure built by the people of Pennsylvania, where the momentous Civil War conflict took place in 1863.

A brief glance, and the battlefield appears a bit outdated. With obelisks and equestrian statues, it, like other Civil War battlefields, is crowded with heroic sculpture. Today, the visitor to Gettysburg may view the memorials as curiosities; they do not have, for example, the powerful, direct emotional appeal of the Lincoln Memorial or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. But in the larger context of the battlefield's history, they have great meaning. To me, they give evidence of the long continuum of commemorative history at Gettysburg, and they indicate that people other than those who fought here also have dedicated, consecrated, and hallowed this site.

Gettysburg is one of the most monumented battlefields in the world.

Scattered about this gentle landscape of woods and fields where the battle occurred are almost 400 memorials, many of them impressively large, and more than 900 smaller markers. An important museum of commemorative architecture, the battlefield exhibits styles of sculpture from more than a century of memorializing. In several areas the memorials dominate the landscape with their size and numbers, and in places they are oddly situated among the historic farmsteads that remain from the time of the battle. The most striking visual feature of the battlefield, the memorials appear like randomly planted orchards—architectural surprises of granite, many topped with bronze sculpture—that at once seem out of place yet, given their purpose, are altogether fitting and proper. Each a call to remembrance of some aspect of the battle, the memorials also testify to its lasting impact.

The history of the Battle of Gettysburg differs from the history of Gettysburg Battlefield. The first is military history, the events of the battle itself; what followed at the site is largely commemorative history—this country's response to the battle through memorialization, veterans' reunions, encampments, and ongoing preservation.

For three days in July 1863, the North-

ern and Southern armies fought a grim, noisy battle in what was otherwise a peaceful rural area. Resulting in more than 50,000 casualties, with more than 6,000 dead, the battle was also a decisive reversal for the Confederacy. Here, the Northern troops blocked the last major Southern effort to penetrate deep into Union territory.

But then the armies moved on, leaving the dead to be buried in a landscape that suddenly had been imbued with a meaning much deeper than mere pastoral beauty. Gettysburg Battlefield became a sacred place, hallowed and revered. These were no longer ordinary farms and wooded hills; they differed even from neighboring farmlands and would not be allowed to return to obscurity.

Every generation since the battle, including our own, has placed memorials at Gettysburg—as late as the 1970s and '80s, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee commissioned monuments for the site. Even in the late 1860s, but especially in the last decades of the 19th century, patriotic groups led by veterans' organizations erected memorials here. The early memorials were direct expressions of the feelings and emotions of the generation that fought the war. Traditional memorials erected by traditional people to commemorate the sacrifice and

heroism of the battle, the memorials express national and personal sorrow.

While the Southern states needed a greater perspective of time before memorializing the site of a Northern victory, for the people of the North, Gettysburg immediately became a primary symbol of the tragedy and heroism of war. The battlefield attracted curious visitors even as the soldiers moved out and before the dead and wounded had been fully tended to. The Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, chartered by the State of Pennsylvania in 1864 (the year after the battle), led early efforts to acquire and preserve the site.

After the war, Union veterans and ordinary citizens came repeatedly to the site to get a sense of the place, gain perspective, and associate themselves with Gettysburg. The Pennsylvania posts of the Grand Army of the Republic held encampments almost annually on the battlefield. In 1888 Union and Confederate veterans held a reunion at Gettysburg to commemorate the battle's 25th anniversary. By this time, the first big wave of memorialization was taking place, in part a response to the anniversary.

More than 54,000 Civil War veterans—both Union and Confederate and including many who did not fight at Gettysburg—attended the 50th anniversary encampments in 1913. This commemorative observance created intense national interest, attracted leading politicians of the time (President Woodrow Wilson was the principal speaker), and served as a bond between Northern and Southern states. Reflecting the gradual subsidence of sectional hatred, Gettysburg was becoming a *national shrine*.



(photo Gettysburg NMP)

Gettysburg Battlefield Park

In 1938 the nation observed the 75th anniversary of the battle with a reunion of more than 1,800 Civil War veterans, most by then in their 90s, some over 100. On the day President Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled the Peace Light Memorial, the crowd was estimated at more than 250,000. This was the last major observance that veterans of the battle attended. A large commemorative gathering in 1963 included reenactment of parts of the battle to mark the centennial.

Of all the commemorative activity at Gettysburg, some events have had a lasting effect and deserve special note. By far the foremost event to occur after the battle came in November 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address—probably the premier public address in American history—at the dedication of the battlefield cemetery. (In the cemetery there is even a memorial to the address.) The cemetery itself is of historical importance. In 1872 Congress designated it a “national cemetery,” one of the first cemeteries to be so named. And in 1895, Congress authorized Gettysburg National Military Park, which, along with similar legislation for other battlefields, established a precedent for extensive, eventually nationwide federal involvement in preservation.

Gettysburg Battlefield has been a powerful magnet, repeatedly attracting commemorative activity, itself historic. Now the battlefield appears like a giant stage set, the play over and the actors gone, but with embellishments of granite and bronze recalling the heroism and tragedy of those three summer days.

Today, visitation to the battlefield has risen to about 1.5 million people annually, while gradually the emotional intensity associated with Gettysburg has diminished, although not vanished. There

are more tourists but fewer pilgrims. The site is closely managed to preserve its many historic features, but it has become more of a park than a battlefield, its history institutionalized by Congress and through federal administration, and its hallowed ground largely defined by legal boundaries. This generation's primary tribute to the battle fought well over a century ago is its continuing commitment to preserve the battlefield and its memorials.

All in all, I disagree with President Lincoln: Even in a larger sense, we have dedicated, we have consecrated, we have hallowed this ground. Lincoln himself did so with his great address. Gettysburg is the best remembered battle of the Civil War, in part because of this commemorative act by Lincoln in which he articulated the larger sense of the battle and the war. How dedicated, consecrated, and hallowed are other Civil War battlefields, such as Champion Hill or Glorietta Pass? Not at all. Yet the same generation of brave men struggled there for the same causes. Gettysburg is so not only because of the battle's major significance and the sacrifices of those who fought here, but also because of the American people's response to sanctify the battlefield.

Sanctification is an act of special remembrance. The Civil War generation and its descendants have time and again paid tribute at Gettysburg. The memorials perpetuate this special remembrance. They are the chief physical evidence of the battlefield's hallowedness.

Today, amid green, pastoral beauty, I find it difficult to comprehend the battle that took place here. Yet the peaceful countryside of the park suggests the giant, steady rhythms of nature—an ironic juxtaposition to the brief, furious

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(photo Gettysburg NMP)

Pennsylvania Memorial

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battle. Far more than a scattering of individual memorials, Gettysburg is a single, immense pastoral memorial, a landscape of monuments and farmsteads, its granite orchards recalling the battle and the war. The evolution of Gettysburg's memorialized landscape reflects a continuing rite of passage by a nation long reconciled, yet determined to remember.

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