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Commemoration: Reflections on the 150th

Bryan G. Caswell
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

There is nothing quite like residing in the town of Gettysburg during the years leading up to the sesquicentennial of the great battle fought here in 1863. As a devoted student of that great internecine conflict known as the American Civil War, I had applied to Gettysburg College in 2011 with the full knowledge of what was to come only two short years in the future, and could not have been more excited for it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Commemoration: Reflections on the 150th

December 16, 2013

By: Bryan Caswell, '15

There is nothing quite like residing in the town of Gettysburg during the years leading up to the sesquicentennial of the great battle fought here in 1863. As a devoted student of that great internecine conflict known as the American Civil War, I had applied to Gettysburg College in 2011 with the full knowledge of what was to come only two short years in the

future, and could not have been more excited for it.



As the 150th drew ever closer, the reality of the commemorative festivities did not fail to disappoint my admittedly lofty expectations. It seemed special lectures were given every other weekend, and speakers of national fame made their way to town to address thrilled crowds of academics, students, and the interested public alike. And then, of course, the culmination of all efforts: those first three days of July, 2013. While I could not

personally observe the anniversary due to my internship at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, I followed in awe from my quarters in Fredericksburg as hundreds of thousands of visitors made the pilgrimage to Gettysburg and took part in the commemoration. I could not help but wonder at the impulse that drove so many to a small Pennsylvania town in the blistering heat of July.

The justification I could conceive of is directly tied to an event that would occur a little over four months after the battle. The immediate aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg saw over fifty thousand men from both North and South become casualties, either killed, wounded, or missing. A greater battle has never before or since been fought on the North American continent, nor has a bloodier battle existed in American history. The efforts to bury all those killed in the battle led to the conception of a national cemetery in Gettysburg, and on

November 19th, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg Address at the dedication of that cemetery. In his speech, Lincoln exhorted his audience and indeed the world to “never forget what they did here,” and further resolved “that these dead shall not have died in vain.” The sesquicentennial commemoration of the battle has made very clear that Americans have not forgotten the men who gave their lives at Gettysburg.

Lincoln’s second point is also mine, after a fashion. Every schoolchild knows the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg to the course of the American Civil War. It is the turning point, the single event that rung the death knell of the Confederacy and heralded the ultimate triumph of Union arms. This, anyway, is the common conception, and phrases such as “High Water Mark of the Confederacy” only enforce the idea that Gettysburg was the beginning of the end for the South. Yet this summer, as I performed a little commemorating of my own with a viewing of the film *Gettysburg*, I was struck by the closing lines of the movie’s epilogue: “The decisive battle sought by Lee had ended in failure, but the spirit of the Southern army was far from broken, and the war would rage on for two more devastating years.” If this statement is true, as indeed it is, how important a battle can Gettysburg have been? Has our national effort to give meaning to the sacrifice of the fallen, to ensure that those fifty thousand men did not fall in vain, gone too far? Have we given too much importance to this epic clash of armies in the fields of southern Pennsylvania? Questions such as these whirled in my head, and I devoted the remainder of my summer to resolving this personal crisis of Civil War faith.

Sources

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