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Abstract

Schmucker Hall offers an unprecedented opportunity to interpret the role of religion in the Civil War and the American experiment in democracy. In particular it can give palpable expression to major themes in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address concerning the battle itself, the conflict as a time of testing, the sacrifices of those who fought here, and the hope these sacrifices bring to the young nation for a new birth of freedom.

Built in 1832 and named for an abolitionist and founder of Gettysburg Seminary, Samuel Simon Schmucker, it is the original structure on the oldest continuously-operating Lutheran seminary in the United States, and many say it IS the most significant Civil War building in America still in private hands. Thus, Gettysburg Seminary has a place and it has a man to interpret significant aspects of the Civil War in ways that no other museum, including a government agency such as the National Park Service (NPS), can do. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, Schmucker Hall, Field Hospital, Samuel Simon Schmucker, Abraham Lincoln, Museum

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Bradley R. Hoch and Gerald Christianson

A Sense of Place

Schmucker Hall offers an unprecedented opportunity to interpret the role of religion in the Civil War and the American experiment in democracy. In particular it can give palpable expression to major themes in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address concerning the battle itself, the conflict as a time of testing, the sacrifices of those who fought here, and the hope these sacrifices bring to the young nation for a new birth of freedom.

Built in 1832 and named for an abolitionist and founder of Gettysburg Seminary, Samuel Simon Schmucker, it is the original structure on the oldest continuously-operating Lutheran seminary in the United States, and many say it is the most significant Civil War building in America still in private hands. Thus, Gettysburg Seminary has a place and it has a man to interpret significant aspects of the Civil War in ways that no other museum, including a government agency such as the National Park Service (NPS), can do.

Schmucker Hall testifies to the vast influence of religion in nineteenth-century American society – an influence that is hardly imaginable to citizens today. Yet, Schmucker Hall offers more than a survey of the nineteenth-century religious landscape. On a single day in July 1863, the building was engulfed in a cataclysm of mayhem and death. In one of the tragic ironies of American history, Schmucker Hall witnessed service to humankind in the midst of violence and unparalleled acts of kindness in an arena of monumental killing. Rather than hide from these ambiguities, the museum can engage and illuminate them. With its stature as the best-recognized symbol of the best-known battlefield in

America, Schmucker Hall speaks quietly and eloquently of recurring themes apparent throughout human history.

- As a witness to the decisive First Day's Battle that culminated in a desperate struggle on the seminary grounds, Schmucker Hall provides a sense of place that is all-important to visitors.
- It also gives a sense of place as a hospital where Union and Confederate doctors tended Union and Confederate soldiers. Although the NPS emphasizes the care of the wounded in its new Visitor Center, it cannot surround visitors with an actual hospital as it tells the stories of pain and suffering, tending and caring.

However, Schmucker Hall was not originally a hospital, nor a home, church, meeting house, or town hall. It was a theological seminary, dedicated to the study of the gospel of love where, since its founding in 1826, students and faculty had engaged in issues of peace, justice, and mercy. The contrast between a dormitory and hospital room did not escape Seminary graduate Rev. Franklin Schantz who returned to assist the wounded after the battle. "I visited the many sick and wounded in the building," Schantz wrote. "I read Scripture Lessons and prayed with many of the men. What different scenes from those of the two years I spent as a student in the building."

Religion, Slavery, and the Coming of Civil War

From a still wider perspective, Schmucker Hall reflects religious responses to three highly contentious issues in American society as it became embroiled in Civil War—slavery, war, and death. Strong religious convictions such as those expressed by Pastor Schantz penetrated deeply into the landscape of pre-Civil War America. Circuit riders and stump preachers on the frontier, and revivalists in towns and cities testified to vigor that is often overlooked or underestimated. Roughly forty percent of the total population was sympathetic to evangelical Christianity, making it the most significant subculture in American society. Many more people attended church each Sunday than voted in the 1860 presidential election. And the vast majority of American institutions of higher education –

including Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary – were owned by religious organizations.

The most controversial question of the day was as deep-seated in this religious landscape as it was divisive. Was slavery ordained by God as testified in the Bible (e.g. Genesis 17:13 and Colossians 3:22) and, if so, were those who opposed it heretics, even ungodly atheists? This view could only be strengthened when several abolitionists abandoned Christianity because of the insistence on a literal Biblical defense of slavery. On the other hand, was the institution an abomination, condemned by higher biblical principles of mercy and justice? The controversy became so heated that in 1844 it split three of America's largest denominations, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, into separate Northern and Southern churches and reverberated throughout the land, dividing families, communities, and friends.

- By raising the divisive consequences of slavery on American religion and culture, Schmucker Hall can help visitors understand the civil rights struggle from Reconstruction to Martin Luther King and Barak Obama. It can also clarify how the politics of exclusion are still with us today, as is the confusion created by quoting scriptures to support or oppose any political party, candidate, or policy.
- The slavery question can be addressed with considerable force from the viewpoint of President Schmucker, a man far more well-known than students of the Civil War commonly suppose. He was ahead of his time, even ahead of his church – an abolitionist who had written on the evils of slavery and even harbored slaves. It was no accident that his was the only private home in Gettysburg deliberately ransacked by Confederate forces. But ambiguity was woven into the American character. Even though Schmucker himself hid runaways in his barn, his wife's slaves remained under his authority for many years – as at least one of them refused his freedom.

The desire of religious people to aid those who sought to flee oppression in the face of legal and physical threats can be seen within the context of apocalyptic sentiments such as those expressed by a slave named Aunt Aggy. She had witnessed the beating given by her master to her daughter Caroline and recalled after the war, "I allers knowed it was a-comin.' I allers heerd de rumblin' o' de wheels. I allers 'spected to see white folks heaped up dead. An' de Lor,' He's kept His promise, an' 'venged His people, jes' as I knowed He would."

Religion, War, and Death

As the war progressed, American Christians had to rethink another issue: the command, "Thou shalt not kill." While Southerners might overcome the prohibition in the belief that they were on a crusade, fighting to maintain the Biblical defense of slavery, Northerners might assure themselves that they were defending the "last, best hope of earth" as declared by Abraham Lincoln.

Religion also contributed to resolving the disturbing anxiety over what meaning could be derived from the staggering losses in the Civil War by emphasizing the art of dying. The idea of a good death reaches back at least to the fifteenth century but as the long lists of the dead on both sides continued to roll in, the ritual of how to pray and how to die, especially with a firm faith, took on a new urgency. Wounded soldiers often attempted to follow these rituals when they wrote to offer comfort to their families. Nurses and volunteers did their part by providing evidence of a good death by writing letters to the grief-stricken back home and by eyewitness testimony to the relatives who came to search for their dead.

As the North began to grapple with the question of whether to punish the enemy or reconcile with fellow Americans, religion again played its part with the assertion that both North and South shared a common legacy: a "last full measure" of suffering and loss. After the war, a nation reunited by meaningful sacrifice became a significant factor in numerous celebrations of remembrance. Schmucker Hall contributed to this reconciliation during the fiftieth anniversary of the battle in 1913 when it was given a peace portico in recognition of its role.

Schmucker Hall and War

On July 1, 1863, these issues – slavery, war, death – came dramatically and violently to Gettysburg when Schmucker Hall became the epicenter of a heroic struggle for the future of the nation. From the cupola General John Buford of the Union cavalry scouted the advance of the Confederate army from the west. As the attack broke through late in the day, the Union army's last desperate line of defense was a breastwork in front of, and a row of cannon adjacent to, the building. General Abner Doubleday later said that the United States was saved that day by the determined Union defense around the seminary, providing precious time to set a new defensive line on Cemetery Ridge. Had Lee advanced unimpeded, he would have divided the Union corps and marched on Washington.

Doubleday remembered soldiers going into battle with the cry, "We have come to stay," and reflected that many fulfilled their pledge by being buried where they fell. While the battle swirled around Schmucker Hall, the building came to shelter Union and Confederate wounded alike. Errant artillery shells struck the building, endangering the wounded and the medical staff.

In the aftermath of battle, the scene must have been appalling. Union losses on Seminary Ridge were more than 5,700 men. Ellen Orbison Harris of the Philadelphia Ladies Aid Society witnessed the carnage. "The appearance of things here beggars all description," she wrote. "Our dead lie unburied, and our wounded neglected . . . thousands of them are still naked and starving. God pity us! Pity us!" From early July until the middle of September 1863, Schmucker Hall housed more than six hundred wounded Americans. At least seventy died.

Two months later, on the morning of November 19, President Abraham Lincoln set out by carriage from Gettysburg and traveled westward toward Seminary Ridge, probably with his now-famous speech in his pocket. He likely viewed the battlefield from near Schmucker Hall – from here he could see where a favorite, Union General John Reynolds, had died – before returning to the Wills

House and joining the parade to the National Cemetery where he delivered “a few appropriate remarks.”

As no one else in American history, President Lincoln gave voice to the hopes and the paradoxes evident in the young nation when he explored the tragedy of human conflict in his Gettysburg Address. Not only does the language of the address echo the cadences of the King James Bible, the profound convictions it articulated closely parallel the deepest religious themes and images that have come down to us from the Judeo-Christian scriptures: violence and peace, suffering and healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, remembrance and re-dedication to a new future.

Schmucker Hall as Museum

The visitor to Schmucker Hall – the seminary building turned hospital – also encounters these themes and images articulated in the Gettysburg Address:

- Led by the words of Lincoln, “Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure,” the visitor, upon entering, is invited to understand the battle and the building from a new and different perspective that probes for deeper meanings in the conflict and its aftermath.
- With the unparalleled vantage point of the fourth floor and cupola, one can cast a long view over the first day’s battlefield and grasp the brute force needed to resolve the conflict and hear the president summon us to acknowledge “those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.”
- In the third floor rooms adapted to healing Confederates and Federals alike, one can sense the sacrifice in suffering and death as the price of war and appreciate the president’s affirmation that “we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.”
- Finally, in three related areas on the second floor -- dormitory rooms where students studied theology, rooms recalling the Underground Railroad in Adams County, and the open area set aside for remembrance

and reconciliation – we hear Lincoln's plea "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom . . ."

With the overall experience, the visitor to Schmucker Hall begins to count the cost of the conflict and appreciate its greatest gift – the renewal of hope for a just society. If, as is often said, the Union was forged in Philadelphia, it was preserved in Gettysburg. After "four score and seven years," the young republic found out who it was: a nation "of the people, by the people, for the people."
