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A Visit to the Battlefield

Michael J. Birkner
Gettysburg College

Richard E. Winslow

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Abstract

This piece was transcribed and edited by Michael J. Birkner and Richard E. Winslow.

With fighting concluded at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863, the enormous task of burying the dead, treating the wounded, and rehabilitating the town began in earnest. Although Gettysburg looked and smelled worse than it ever had or ever would again, thousands of people arrived on the battlefield in the days and weeks following General Robert E. Lee's retreat. Some came to minister to the sick and reclaim the bodies of neighbors and loved ones; others scavenged souvenirs of the battle. Of the many visits to the battlefield in July 1863, few have been more affectingly described than the account of Joseph H. Foster of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

In the document reprinted below, of a speech Foster delivered at the Unitarian Sabbath School in Portsmouth on July 26, 1863, he describes a brief trip to Gettysburg from which he had just returned. His objective in going to Gettysburg was straightforward: he wanted to locate the body of his neighbor and friend Henry L. Richards and bring it back to New Hampshire for a proper interment. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, Battlefield, Tourism, Memoir

A VISIT TO THE BATTLEFIELD

Edited by Michael J. Birkner and Richard E. Winslow III

Introduction to a Visit to the Battlefield

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In the document reprinted below, of a speech Foster delivered at the Unitarian Sabbath School in Portsmouth on July 26, 1863, he describes a brief trip to Gettysburg from which he had just returned. His objective in going to Gettysburg was straightforward: he wanted to locate the body of his neighbor and friend Henry L. Richards and bring it back to New Hampshire for a proper interment.

A word about Henry Richards: In October 1861 Richards enlisted in Company F of the Second Regiment, United States Volunteer Sharpshooters. He was thirty-five years of age at the time of his enlistment in Concord, the state capital. So determined was Richards to join up that he walked to Concord from his home - a distance of more than 75 miles. Richards fought in several significant battles, including Antietam in September 1862, where he was wounded in the leg. But once Richards' leg healed, he rejoined his unit and fought at Gettysburg, where he was hit on July 2 in the knee by a minie-ball. According to an account in his home town paper, Richards remained on the ground all night and was then transported to a field hospital, where an amputation was performed. He did not awake from the surgery.

That Richards was prominent and respected in Portsmouth is reflected in the decision of a community leader, Joseph Foster (1825-1885), to journey to Gettysburg and reclaim Richards' body.

Owner of a bookstore and stationery business in Portsmouth at the time of the Civil War, Foster was also active in various civic and charitable organizations, and served in a series of elected positions in local government.

In keeping with Victorian convention, Foster's talk to the members of the Unitarian Sabbath School pays ample tribute to Richards' kindness, integrity, and modesty. It also provides a vivid account of the scene Foster witnessed in Gettysburg approximately ten days after the battle ended. His conclusion, that war is dreadful, did not stop the citizens of Portsmouth and New Hampshire generally from supporting President Abraham Lincoln's policies, nor did New Hampshire shirk its responsibilities in fighting to preserve the Union and to make possible a new birth of freedom in America.

Sources: *Portsmouth (NH) Journal of Literature and Commerce*, July 18, 1863, August 1, 1863; *Portsmouth Daily Morning Chronicle*, July 14, 20, 27, 1863; *Portsmouth Journal*, March 28, 1885; *Revised Register of Soldiers and Sailors of New Hampshire in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Concord, NH: Ira C. Evans, 1895); and Raymond A. Brighton, *They Came to Fish: A Brief Look at Portsmouth's 350 years of history; its local and world-wide involvements, and the people concerned through the eyes of a reporter* (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall, Publisher, 1994), 231.

VISIT TO THE BATTLEFIELD

The following address by Mr. Joseph H. Foster, given at the Unitarian Sabbath School, in this city, on the 26th of July, contains so clear a detail of what he met with in his journey the previous week, and so just a tribute to the memory of Mr. Richards, that we have requested the privilege of presenting it to our readers

Last Sunday I was far away, amid very different scenes and engaged in a very different manner from my usual Sunday occupations. I had gone to the place where the last great battle had been fought, to obtain and bring home the body of a dear friend, who had been killed there. We have always heard of armies, battles, and such things; of late years the words and thoughts have been sadly more common among us; to those who have never been on a battlefield, or had any close view of the horrors of war, some little description of what I saw and heard may be interesting.

As we approached Baltimore, the first sign that we saw of being in the neighborhood of war, was the guard along the railway, and the frequent little encampments of soldiers beside the truck. In Baltimore and beyond, these signs thicken. You cannot leave the city without a pass from the Provost Marshal; at every turn you meet some officer or soldier, either hastily riding with dispatches, or quietly pacing the sentinel's round. At a railroad junction, about 30 miles from Gettysburg, our cars were stopped to allow the passage of two trains filled with wounded, who were being removed from the temporary hospitals on the battlefield, to the more permanent ones in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington. The cars in which they were conveyed were common baggage and cattle cars, covered on the floor with a thick layer of straw, on which the poor fellows were obliged to sit or lie during the weary hours of their ride of from 50 to 150 miles. At this junction the Christian Commission have established a station, providing it with means and appliances for the comfort of these poor men. As soon as the trains reach this station, men pass along the cars with buckets of water and lemonade, and others with berries and more substantial provision for those who need it. A doctor also goes through the trains to examine the bandages, and make any alteration that may be needed. These refreshments are freely given to all, whether federal or rebel soldiers, for it is not forgotten that, although in arms against us, the rebels are still our countrymen, in many cases compelled to fight by wicked rulers, and more often deceived by those in whom they trust; and even if not in their suffering state, the Gospel rules command us to do them all the good we can, and I was very glad to learn how much this feeling prevails in our army: that while hating the cause of slavery and rebellion, there is no feeling of hatred and spite against the men themselves. One gentleman told me that he was among the first who arrived on the field after the fight was over, and that while going around assisting those who were lying there wounded, a loyal soldier, to whom he was rendering aid, would say, "don't stop with me, there is a poor fellow who wants your help more than I do, if he is a reb." And this was not a solitary instance, but repeated at least a dozen times. While there, he saw one man whose own arm had been shot off, and the wound had not yet been dressed, using the strength that remained to him in carrying water around to those unable to rise, and making no

distinction between his comrades and the rebels. The same feeling was also expressed by my friend who was killed, when he said that he could sincerely adopt the words of Mr. [Henry Ward] Beecher, and pray for the soul of a rebel at whom he was aiming his unerring rifle.

I arrived at Gettysburg late Friday evening and found the place (which is a small town whose inhabitants are largely of Dutch origin) so filled with the wounded and those who had come, either to care for them, or from motives of curiosity, or on similar sad errands to my own, that the only accommodation I could procure was a chance to sleep with 8 or 10 others on some old carpets in a garret while some could not even get this. Food was also scarce; for no milk was to be had, for "the rebels had stolen all their cows;" potatoes there were none, for "the rebels had taken all they had," and the same excuse for all short comings. The next day I went over most of the battlefield, which extends for many miles. The fight lasted three days, and the marks of it reach at least 8 miles in one direction and 4 or 5 in another. These marks consist of long lines of breastworks, reaching for many rods, made of stone walls and rail fences heaped together, and strengthened with dirt piled around them—of smaller earthworks, where the cannon were placed—of rifle-pits dug in the ground—of fences thrown down, or pierced all over with bullet holes—of trees whose limbs were cut off by cannon shot, or their trunks scarred by the shells—of houses with their windows shattered, their doors battered in or full of holes, their roofs and walls broken with the shells, some places large enough to put a barrel through—the gardens around them all trampled down by feet, and cut up by cannon wheels—the furniture broken or carried off by pillaging bands of the Southerners. I do not mean of course that every fence and house have suffered in this manner, but that all along these miles you find trees and houses that have, while many others have escaped unharmed. The ground is strewn [strewn] in places with the shot and shell, with bullets and grape shot, with broken muskets, torn uniforms, cast-off blankets, knapsacks, cartridge boxes, canteens, &c. and here and there the wheel of a cannon or ammunition wagon. A great portion of these things have been gathered up and taken into the town by the provost guard, and I saw three rooms filled up with them, and wagon loads being carried off.

The most offensive marks are the carcasses of dead horses and oxen which lie thick wherever the fight was hot. In one field fifty horses, in another the remains of more than as many oxen, and everywhere more or less. Some of these have been burned, others had earth-heaped over them, but have not been taken care of as they should have been, more important matters demanding all the time and labor that could be had; and the result may be more easily imagined than described.

The saddest marks are the graves of those killed. They are in all directions, sometimes singly, sometime in little groups of from 3 to 12. Some are marked with a board, carefully cut with the name and regiment, others have merely a stick with the initials scratched on it, and still others have no mark whatever to show who sleeps there. The graves are generally very hastily dug, not more than a foot, or at most 18 inches deep, and coffins of course are out of the question. I was told that in one part of the ground, where a very rocky hill made it impossible to dig, the bodies are not even thus roughly covered. Every day many are the parties who come in search of the remains of some lost friend. Sometimes they are successful, but often their search is in vain, and they

have not even the mournful satisfaction of giving their dear one the last sad marks of love and respect.

One man (a Portsmouth boy, tho' a resident of Massachusetts) who went on with me searched two days in vain for the body of his son, although apparently plain directions had been sent of the place where he was buried; another was obliged to disinter eight bodies before finding him for whom he sought. I was more fortunate, for my friend had been carefully buried by comrades who knew his worth, and who had time to do it well; and yesterday his remains were carried beneath the trees which his own hand had planted, to rest with kindred dust in our own beautiful cemetery. Never, oh never may that hallowed spot suffer the desecration which has befallen the cemetery at Gettysburg.

This was the central point of our position, and there the conflict raged as hotly as at any but one place. The monuments are broken by shot, scarred by bullets, or thrown over by bursting shells; the pretty iron fences are thrown down or smashed up, the flowers, and bushes, and trees, planted by loving hands, are broken and trampled, and thick around are scattered all the other marks of fighting of which I have spoken. Such is war; destroying all that we hold most dear; desecrating all that we most reverence; polluting all that we most love and cherish. God grant that it soon may cease to rage in this our beloved land, and that we may ere long obtain the liberty for all men, and the firm re-establishment of our glorious constitution, for which we are paying such a fearful price.

I spoke of the wounded men whom I met on the road. These, severe as their wounds seemed, were those who were the least hurt, and who could therefore be first removed. Every day some hundreds are brought to the railroad station in ambulances and carried to other places, or allowed to go home; but there are still great numbers left at Gettysburg, for the whole number wounded in the battle was over 10,000 of our men, and about half as many rebels, who were left behind by their retreating army. The little town is filled with them, many private houses have one or more, and the churches, court house and seminary building are filled with beds, many barns also, are used for the same purpose. But much the largest proportion are in the corps hospitals, of which there are three at different distances of 2 to 4 miles from the town. These consist only of tents of various sizes, some mere shelter tents, which accommodate two men, others large enough to hold 10 or 12 beds, and although one would think this very poor accommodation, yet many of the doctors, and of the men also, say that they are better off than in the confined air of a room. I am glad to say that all possible attention seems to be paid to these brave sufferers. Medical and surgical attendance is abundant, and there are many noble women there devoting themselves unweariedly to their care and comfort. The Catholic Sisters of Mercy are conspicuous by their peculiar dress, but there are as many of our Protestant women whose hearts are at least as tender, and their ministrations as prompt and loving, if their garb is less observable. One lady in particular (Miss Dame from Concord) has been with our New Hampshire boys during most of the war, accompanying them through the whole Peninsular campaign, and lately being in charge of the N.H. State Commission Rooms in Washington, whence she hastened to this place as soon as news was received of the battle.

The Sanitary and Christian Commissions are both there with ample store of provisions, and luxuries even, beside their trained corps of agents, and many are the private contributions which have been poured out freely to comfort and assist the sufferers. The wounds are, many of them, fearful to behold; it appears strange that men can undergo what I saw some suffer and yet live, but they not only live, but in most cases are cheerful, hopeful, and even more, and in none was there any murmuring or repining, but always entire patience. The recollection of the sights which I here saw and of the lessons that I learned will never leave me while I live.

Of the friend for whose remains I undertook this journey, I would say a few words, for altho' never a member of this school, his character was one that you may all well take as a model, especially the boys. Pure, upright, honest, brave; never as a boy do I remember hearing from his lips any profane or indecent word, and as a man, all that which was in the least tainted with impurity was most abhorrent to him. A lie, or anything inconsistent with the strictest honesty and uprightness of word or deed; was his utter detestation. Brave as any soldier in the army, and meeting his death at least because he would not fall back when his comrades did, he yet feared sin, nor did he ever even in his youth regard it as any mark of courage to do what he knew was wrong, or would displease his parents or his God. He eminently obeyed the precept, "be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another." His little acts of kindness at home, to neighbors and to all with whom he was connected were of constant occurrence; himself he did not consider when another was to be helped. When at home last winter with a wounded leg, he walked several miles to obtain flowers for a poor sick woman, who had not the remotest claim on him but her distress and poverty. His modesty and retiring disposition were as conspicuous as his kindness. He refused a commission in the army, saying that he knew he could be a good soldier, and that was better than to be a poor officer; although friends well knew that whatever position he might take he would fill it well. But for him the toils of life are over. For him we can well quote the hymn,

"Go to the grave; at noon from labor cease;
Rest on thy sheaves, thy harvest task is done;
Come from the heat of battle, and in peace
Soldier go home; with thee the fight is won."

May we all so live that when our call to depart comes, we may rejoin him in that world to which he has gone, where there are no more wars and fightings, no more battles nor sin nor death: and may God hasten the time when here below, also, the song of the Christmas angels shall be fulfilled, and there be "peace on earth, good will among men."

Portsmouth (NH) Journal of Literature and Commerce