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# Thinking Fourth Dimensionally: How Battlefields Become Deloreans

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# Thinking Fourth Dimensionally: How Battlefields Become Deloreans

## Abstract

I have written before of my intense love for Back to the Future III. Part of the reason that film resonates with my movie-going soul is my abiding love of the 19th century. Part of me wishes I could hop into a Stainless-Steel Delorian and visit the past for a short stint. I'm pretty sure I'm too much of a pansy to last very long in the world of latrines and muddy water, but I'd love to see the past for even just one fleeting moment. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Time Machine, Beyond the Battle, Back to the Future

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

## Comments

*Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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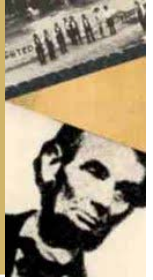
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## Thinking Fourth Dimensionally: How Battlefields Become Deloreans

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, 2012**

I have [written before of my intense love](#) for Back to the Future III. Part of the reason that film resonates with my movie-going soul is my abiding love of the 19th century. Part of me wishes I could hop into a Stainless-Steel Delorian and visit the past for a short stint. I'm pretty sure I'm too much of a pansy to last very long in the world of latrines and muddy water, but I'd love to see the past for even just one fleeting moment.

Of course, I don't need a souped-up Delorian to take that fleeting glance into the past. Time travel is possible, and not simply the straight arrow, forward ho! style that Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity takes into account. I can break the laws of physics, bend the universe to my will and move backwards in time.

Hold up an historic photograph and line it up perfectly on the landscape and you can peer through a window in time, if only for a moment. Chant aloud the words of a vaunted or vilified historical character on the spot where he himself spoke those words and you can, just for a moment, hear an echo of their very voice. Close your eyes and look at the historical landscape in front of you and your mind will pull back the curtain of time, for just a split second, to reveal the gory or glorious past.

On the tour around Antietam I wrote about last week, Garry Adelman mentioned one of my favorite concepts: the fourth dimension. Although in the descriptions of the universe there's some arguments over what constitutes the fourth dimension (which we'll leave to the physicists, thank you very much), one useful way to visualize that construct is as the dilation of time. Garry mentioned that getting out on the physical resource and peeling back the layers of the past is the closest thing we have to time travel.

But...

Sometimes we historians fixate on a particular target in that Fourth Dimension, unable to take our eyes off of it. It rushes at us like a horde of cartoon indians on the back wall of a derelict drive-in movie theatre:



"Marty! It runs on steam!" / CC Bill V

Doc: "All you have to do is drive the time vehicle directly toward that screen accelerating to 88 miles an hour."

Marty McFly: "Wait a minute, Doc. If I drive straight towards the screen, I'm gonna crash into those Indians."

Young Doc: "Marty, you're not thinking fourth dimensionally. You'll instantly be transported back into 1885, and those Indians won't even be there."



"No wonder this circuit failed.  
It says 'Made in Japan.'" / CC Adafruit

But one of the true amazing joys of the DeLorean *cum* Time-Machine that Doctor Emmett Brown crafted is that it's completely programmable. If Doc wanted to, as he points out to Marty in a keen moment of exposition in the first film, see the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Birth of Christ or even the mundane 5th of November, 1955, all you need to do is punch in the time into the keypad, engage the circuits and accelerate to 88 mph. The whole of time is yours to observe. But the landscape (Hill Valley, California in Marty and Doc's case) remains the same. Three dimensions, the physical location, never shift or change. But

the crucial fourth dimensions is eternally fluid thanks to a Flux Capacitor and a dream.

We historians can do the same thing. We have the choice of going anywhere within this landscape in the Fourth Dimension, leaping from time to time to help find deeper meanings. This is the prerogative of the present: we have the freedom to see the past with 20/20 hindsight, the ability to see the ripples in the pond and the stone that made them simultaneously.

This means we can stand in one place, be it the steps of the Montgomery State House or the base of the Peace Light in Gettysburg, and witness the entirety of the past. Furthermore, it is our solemn duty to allow those different points to dialogue, to interact and to live simultaneously on the landscape. Standing on the State House steps, Jefferson Davis gives Martin Luther King Jr. more meaning, and King's march gives Davis' act trajectory. At the Peace Light, FDR in 1938, the KKK in 1925 and bleeding young men for North Carolina commanded by a man named Iverson in 1863 all play on the landscape simultaneously in a symphony of meaning, each melody melting into the next to give that landscape the ultimate story.

Our time machines **MUST** be programmable. If we lock them into one date alone, we miss the broader world of meanings. If public historians refuse to think fourth dimensionally, history will never make sense to the public.