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## Striking the Balance: Bringing Peace to the Battlefield of Preservation

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# Striking the Balance: Bringing Peace to the Battlefield of Preservation

## Abstract

Most Gettysburg residents took note this past winter when the Appalachian Brewing Company's branch restaurant near the Lutheran Seminary closed. The Civil War Trust bought the land for its historical value; the structure and an adjacent hotel surround the Mary Thompson House, General Lee's Headquarters during the battle. From the moment of purchase, the plan had been to demolish the buildings, sow grass, and transfer the four-acre lot to the National Park Service as a prized addition to the park. Most onlookers probably think that the tale is told as soon as the land is bought, cleared, and promised to the park. However, that thinking only pans out in a vacuum. In reality, the results of this purchase—as with any large purchase of land in a community—cannot be foreseen. Too many different actors are involved in and affected by something as simple as the demolition of a couple of businesses and the placing of a conservation easement on a property. And for those who stand to be affected by this purchase, controversy is pervasive and understandable [*excerpt*].

## Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Battlefield Preservation, Civil War Trust, National Park Service, General Lee's Headquarters

## Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Striking the Balance: Bringing Peace to the Battlefield of Preservation

May 4, 2015

By Matt LaRoche '17

Most Gettysburg residents took note this past winter when the Appalachian Brewing Company's branch restaurant near the Lutheran Seminary closed. The Civil War Trust bought the land for its historical value; the structure and an adjacent hotel surround the Mary Thompson House, General Lee's Headquarters during the battle. From the moment of purchase, the plan had been to demolish the buildings, sow grass, and transfer the four-acre lot to the National Park Service as a prized addition to the park. Most onlookers probably think that the tale is told as soon as the land is bought, cleared, and promised to the park. However, that thinking only pans out in a vacuum. In reality, the results of this purchase—as with any large purchase of land in a community—cannot be foreseen. Too many different actors are involved in and affected by something as simple as the demolition of a couple of businesses and the placing of a conservation easement on a property. And for those who stand to be affected by this purchase, controversy is pervasive and understandable.



*A modern photograph of Lee's Headquarters at Gettysburg (l) with the Appalachian Brewing Company and a glimpse of The Quality Inn to its right. Appalachian Brewing Company.*

Michael Birkner, Borough Council President and Professor of History at Gettysburg College is perhaps particularly positioned to comment on this purchase. With responsibilities toward the furthering of historical understanding as well as to the taxpayers of the borough, he has no choice but to aim toward sustainability in managing the space and resources of the town. However, he also understands that this is a universal conversation that must be had within the town and between the interests that compete for the town's attention: "I think whether I'm on the Borough Council or not, this is relevant to me because I'm a citizen and a taxpayer of Gettysburg and I'm going to pay higher taxes next year as a result of this." Indeed, the loss of the Appalachian Brewing Company and The Quality Inn at Lee's Headquarters represents a further burden upon a town that already has a shrunken tax base. As fellow councilman John Butterfield told the *Gettysburg Times* on 1 July 2014, "With more than \$3 million worth of property removed from the tax rolls, the borough will lose almost \$12,000 annually in real estate tax revenue, which will be very difficult to recoup." This comes on top of the vast swaths of the town that are tax-exempt as part of either the National Park or Gettysburg College, as well as having a number of residents who may not be able to handle heavier tax burdens. However, as Birkner acknowledges, "Is it all one way? Of course not." Birkner, as well as the majority of Gettysburgians, agree: anything that allows for fuller interpretation of the battle while not destroying the financial infrastructure of the town is wonderful. The average visitor that stops to ponder the fabric of the town realizes instantly that the town and the park are co-dependents. If either one dies, the other will surely follow.

But not everyone shares Birkner's job description. His responsibilities require him to strike the best balance between the interests of everyone involved, lest the entire house suffer and collapse. Protecting the interests of single organizations is far more common and can lend itself to a vacuum perspective with regards to a player's actions. There is no room for such thinking in Gettysburg. With the town literally divided up between the park, the college, and the local residents and merchants, the cooperative enterprise of the town must be fine-tuned. With such little room for developing a tax-base, there must be the greatest level of consideration and cooperation between all involved. Gettysburg is not a series of little bubbled-in groups; it is an organism that can grow or can stop breathing. If its historical heritage is left to rot, Gettysburg fails the American people and dies. If it cannot pay for roads or trash pickup, or cannot house the businesses that support the tourist industry, its historical heritage becomes inaccessible and Gettysburg fails the American people and dies. If it finds a middle ground preoccupied with *sustainability* above all else, it will never die. It is our responsibility as Gettysburgians and as inheritors of Gettysburg's historical legacy to make sure that we never strain its system to the verge of death. To preserve the town, we will need to adopt an environmental mindset that will allow us to chart out the best path forward together.



*Lee's Headquarters as it appeared during the battle's fiftieth anniversary. "Lee Hdqrts. – Gettysburg."  
Photo taken by William H. Tipton c. 1913. Library of Congress.*

#### **Sources:**

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