



8-12-2015

Silent Guardian: The 15th New Jersey Monument

Elizabeth A. Smith
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Smith, Elizabeth A., "Silent Guardian: The 15th New Jersey Monument" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 101.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/101>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/101>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Silent Guardian: The 15th New Jersey Monument

Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka interns](#) working on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. [See here for the introduction to the series.](#)

He stands at rest, knees slightly bent, musket casually leant back. His hands loosely grip the barrel, one over the other, calm but prepared. His mustached face looks with weary eyes over the slaughter ground. In the background can be seen trees alongside a winding dirt road and a solitary wheel—perhaps from a cannon—beside his left leg. He stands immobile, forever gazing over the picturesque landscape, the beautiful green of the earthworks, the scene of hell on earth just 150 years ago.

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, The 15th New Jersey Monument, Gettysburg National Military Park, Civil War Monuments

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

Silent Guardian: The 15th New Jersey Monument

August 12, 2015

By Elizabeth Smith '17

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka interns](#) working on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. [See here for the introduction to the series.](#)



The 15th New Jersey Monument. Photo credit Elizabeth Smith.

He stands at rest, knees slightly bent, musket casually leant back. His hands loosely grip the barrel, one over the other, calm but prepared. His mustached face looks with weary eyes over the slaughter ground. In the background can be seen trees alongside a winding dirt road and a solitary wheel—perhaps from a cannon—beside his left leg. He stands immobile, forever gazing over the picturesque landscape, the beautiful green of the earthworks, the scene of hell on earth just 150 years ago.

The Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, known for the infamous Muleshoe Salient and the Bloody Angle, was fought May 8-21, 1864, immediately following the Battle of the Wilderness.

On May 12, the twenty-two hours of continuous hand-to-hand combat at what would become known as the Bloody Angle would earn Spotsylvania a place in the history books. It is over this portion of the heaviest fighting that the 15th New Jersey Monument stands.

In his article “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument”, Kirk Savage discusses how monuments do much more than just memorialize a unit or person, they memorialize an idea. From the idea of slavery to states’ rights to emancipation, monuments speak through both what they say and what they do not say. For this post, I will be discussing the 15th New Jersey Monument in light of Savage’s article.

“Public monuments,” wrote Savage, “are important precisely because they do in some measure work to impose a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives.” The historical memory imposed by the 15th New Jersey monument is complicated, as is that presented in most monuments. At first glance, the monument matches many of the trends discussed by Savage: a white male, represented by the common soldier, unwounded, with slavery not mentioned anywhere in the depiction or inscription. But a deeper look at both the monument and the landscape surrounding it reveal a much deeper historical meaning that Savage does not discuss. Yes, the soldier depicted is a white male, but the 15th New Jersey was an all-white unit. Yes, he is unwounded—in fact, he is at rest—and yes, slavery is not mentioned on the monument, but that is not the purpose for the monument to have been placed on the Spotsylvania battlefield.

For the 15th New Jersey, the fighting at the Bloody Angle was hell on earth. From early morning on May 12 until three in the morning of May 13, the hand-to-hand fighting would not cease. They would fight with muskets used as clubs, with bayonets, with hatchets, with whatever they could use to defend themselves and to kill the enemy. “Our hands and lips were incrustated with powder” wrote one soldier, while another remembered the wounded being buried alive beneath the dead and the mud and blood. Soldiers would write of “demons” and “fiends,” language not used to describe any other battle. The fighting the 15th New Jersey would participate in truly was traumatizing, but it is not reflected in their monument.

It may seem odd that after such intense and horrific fighting, the monument erected in memory of that fight does not reflect that brutality at all. In fact, the figure shown is almost peaceful! Looking at it today, some may wonder why a different monument, almost a counter-monument, does not stand. A monument like that would portray a grievously wounded soldier, a soldier with haunted eyes and carnage and death at his back. Some may feel that this would be more appropriate, a better fit for the horrors of the Bloody Angle.



*The 15th New Jersey Monument stands as a silent guardian over the fields surrounding the Bloody Angle.
Photo credit Elizabeth Smith.*

But take a closer look at the 15th New Jersey monument. The background is peaceful, much like the landscape behind the monument today, with only a lone cannon wheel to hint at the carnage the battle brought. The soldier is unwounded, his hands loose around the barrel of his musket. His weary eyes watch over the Confederate line, the scene of the heaviest fighting, forever watching with an expression of regretful resolution. He does not stand at rest as a combatant, but as a war-weary soldier who is forever looking over the carnage before him, with a trace of regret, of sorrow, in his stone face. He sees what we cannot—the blood, the dead, the wounded, the unspeakable—and he stands immobile, gazing over the line, forever watching over the land that the men he represents fought and died upon. He stands eternal, a silent guardian over the Bloody Angle.

Sources:

Savage, Kirk. “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument,” in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994): 127-149

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/08/12/silent-guardian-the-15th-new-jersey-monument/>