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First In the Nation's History: Gettysburg From Battlefield Memorial Association to National Park

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Abstract

Just over a month after the Battle of Gettysburg turned the town on its head, local attorney David McConaughy sent a letter to several prominent citizens suggesting that “there could be no more fitting and expressive memorial of the heroic valor and signal triumphs of our army... than the battle-field itself.” He had already purchased some of the ground, and in order to keep the effort going, he suggested trying to get Pennsylvania citizens to contribute money to purchase and preserve more. In order to manage this fund and the battlefield, McConaughy proposed the formation of a preservation association and made a plan to seek its formal incorporation by the State Legislature. The idea went over well with the local citizens, and on September 5, 1863, they and McConaughy met to consider the matter of battlefield preservation. What they established was Gettysburg’s first preservation organization and the nation’s earliest attempt to preserve a Civil War battlefield.

[*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

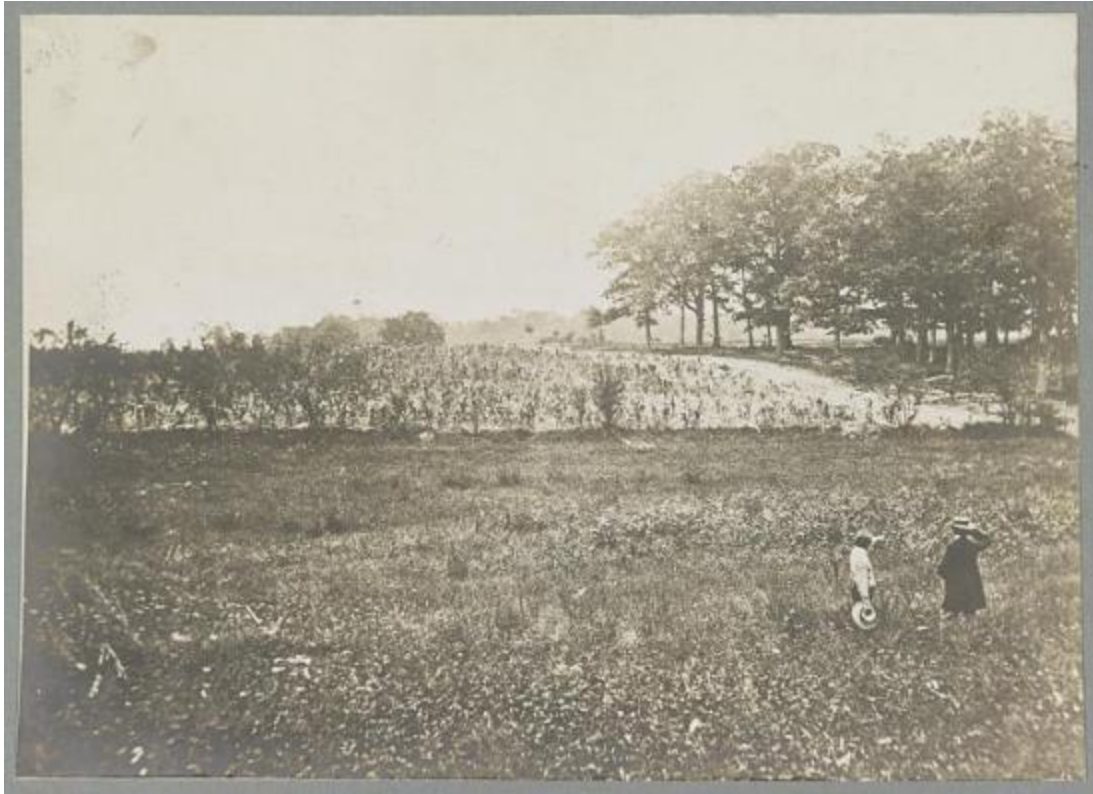
First In the Nation's History: Gettysburg From Battlefield Memorial Association to National Park

By [Hannah Christensen '17](#)

Just over a month after the Battle of Gettysburg turned the town on its head, local attorney David McConaughy sent a letter to several prominent citizens suggesting that “there could be no more fitting and expressive memorial of the heroic valor and signal triumphs of our army...than the battle-field itself.” He had already purchased some of the ground, and in order to keep the effort going, he suggested trying to get Pennsylvania citizens to contribute money to purchase and preserve more. In order to manage this fund and the battlefield, McConaughy proposed the formation of a preservation association and made a plan to seek its formal incorporation by the State Legislature. The idea went over well with the local citizens, and on September 5, 1863, they and McConaughy met to consider the matter of battlefield preservation. What they established was Gettysburg's first preservation organization and the nation's earliest attempt to preserve a Civil War battlefield.

The beginnings of battlefield preservation went hand in hand with another post-battle development: the Soldiers' National Cemetery. David Wills and McConaughy presented competing solutions to the problem of where to put thousands of Union dead, and Wills' plan won out. McConaughy's plan was designed to benefit the local Evergreen Cemetery, while Wills had planned for an entirely separate cemetery. McConaughy then turned his attention to battlefield preservation: he and the group of citizens that met on September 5th created the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (GBMA), which created a fund for preservation purposes to be supported by voluntary subscriptions at \$10 per share. They also appointed a provisional committee from which an executive committee would be elected; they would also appoint local committees across Pennsylvania.

When the fund was large enough, the subscribers were supposed to elect trustees, meet at Gettysburg, and organize. The officers on Gettysburg's preliminary committee consisted of Joseph R. Ingersoll (chair), Dr. Samuel S. Schmucker and Rev. J. Ziegler (vice chairs), T. D. Carson (treasurer), and David McConaughy (secretary). The executive committee consisted entirely of Gettysburg residents and included J. B. Danner, J. L. Schich, D. A. Buehler, David McConaughy, R. G. McCreary, George Arnold, and T. D. Carson.



View of woods near the location where General John Reynolds was killed c. July 1863. This area was one of the first parts of the battlefield purchased on behalf of the GBMA. Photo via Library of Congress.

The Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association was formally incorporated by the Pennsylvania State Legislature on April 30, 1864. The act of incorporation gave it the power to acquire parts of the battlefield for the purpose of preservation, promote the building of monuments and memorials, build roads, and issue certificates of membership. The property the association acquired would not be taxed and would be managed by a president, a board of 13 directors, a secretary, a treasurer, and other officers as needed. More permanent officers would be elected at a later date.

Once the GBMA was incorporated, it got busy. By the end of 1867, it had either purchased or was planning to purchase Culp's Hill, Little Round Top, East Cemetery Hill, Round Top, McKnight's Hill, and the area where General Reynolds died—roughly 132 acres. The association was also responsible for placing monuments and markers and building roads, the former of which resulted in plans for a reunion in 1869, ostensibly so the association could get the necessary information for accurate placement of battlefield memorials and markers.

However, the association had several problems. The combination of strict enabling legislation and a lack of funds meant it could only purchase land on the Union battle lines, leaving Confederate lines in private hands. In addition, post-war apathy, competing charitable causes,

and an economic depression in the 1870s led to indifference toward the association's and McConaughy's aims. McConaughy, persisted, using the state senate seat he had won in 1866 to lobby on behalf of the GBMA. However, his colleagues were becoming increasingly suspicious of his motives and were reluctant to grant more money to the association.



Gettysburg battlefield Taneytown road entrance c. 1896/1900. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Problems aside, the GBMA did much to improve the landscape: they rebuilt Union defensive works, placed plaques at important places, and placed several dozen cannons by 1876. In 1879, the Pennsylvania department of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans' organization, purchased a majority of shares in the GBMA. By 1880, it had erased the association's debts and dominated elections for board officers, pushing David McConaughy out of the organization he had directed for sixteen years. During that time, he had acquired over one hundred acres of land and simultaneously turned the battlefield into a commercial enterprise and a sacred space.

The G.A.R.-controlled GBMA picked up right where McConaughy left off, taking advantage of a renewed interest in the Civil War to finally get the support it needed to follow through on its vision. It purchased more property, built roads, directed monument placement by state commissions, and successfully lobbied the state legislature for \$10,000. When it came to battlefield monuments, though, the association exhibited near-dictatorial control over placement, materials, and inscriptions.

While the association was moving forward, Congress decided to establish national military parks under the War Department, with the intention of protecting the grounds and preserving them as memorials to the men who fought and died there. With Gettysburg in their sights, the Secretary of War established a three-man commission to handle battlefield operations, and New York Representative Daniel Sickles introduced a bill in 1894 to "establish a National Military Park at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania." After the bill was approved in 1895, the over 500 acres, 17 miles of

roads, and 320 monuments and markers the GBMA had acquired or built were deeded to the government, creating the Gettysburg National Military Park.

While the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association was now out of the picture, it had created a base for the military park to build on. The park's boundaries had been set at over 3,000 acres, and the GBMA had gotten them one-sixth of the way there in 31 years. From its organizational meeting barely a month after the battle to the day it turned everything over to the War Department, the association was the official custodian of the landscape and an organization capable of coordinating the construction of a memorial park.

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