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Battlefields and Supermarkets: The Importance of Battlefield Preservation and the Case of Camp Letterman

Savannah Labbe
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Gettysburg National Military Park is an immense park, encompassing and preserving a large section of the battlefield. What many don't realize, however, is that the battlefield was not confined only to the areas that have been preserved, but also to a much larger section of the greater Gettysburg area. Where now stands the Giant supermarket was once home to land that the Confederates retreated over and also, more importantly, to a large battlefield hospital, Camp Letterman.

Keywords

Camp Letterman, Gettysburg PA, Historic Preservation, Hospitals, Medical History, Savannah Labbe

Disciplines

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Comments

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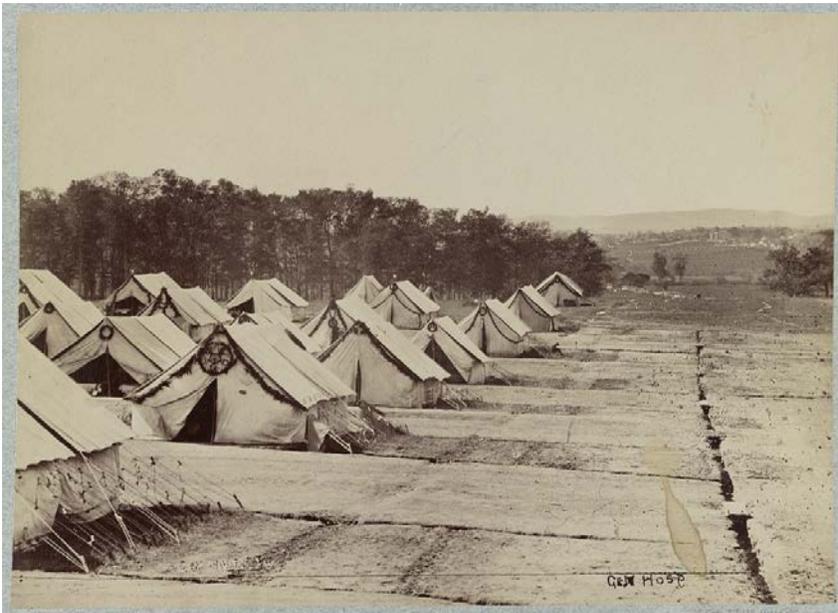
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Battlefields and Supermarkets: The Importance of Battlefield Preservation and the Case of Camp Letterman

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

Gettysburg National Military Park is an immense park, encompassing and preserving a large section of the battlefield. What many don't realize, however, is that the battlefield was not confined only to the areas that have been preserved, but also to a much larger section of the greater Gettysburg area. Where now stands the Giant supermarket was once home to land that the Confederates retreated over and also, more importantly, to a large battlefield hospital, Camp Letterman.



Tents at Camp Letterman in August, 1863. Photo courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

After the Battle of Gettysburg, most of the wounded and the medical staff moved on with the army. However, some wounded couldn't be moved due to the severity of their injuries. All these men were consolidated into the general hospital that became known as Camp Letterman, which housed around 21,000 badly wounded Union and Confederate soldiers. It was the largest field hospital of the Civil War with 500 tents and the capacity to house 21,000 wounded. About 1,200 soldiers died there, but that number could have been much higher if not for Major John Letterman's advanced triage system. His system became the gold standard of medical practice during that time period. Since Camp Letterman treated both Union and Confederate soldiers, they were able to

interact and help begin to heal the divide that was crippling the nation. For example, there was a picnic at Camp Letterman in which both Union and Confederate soldiers ate and played games together. Camp Letterman was also involved in the First World War, providing housing for soldiers in the wake of the Spanish flu epidemic.

While it is true that Giant and other developments have taken away fifteen acres of the land on which Camp Letterman once stood, there is still some left. The proposed housing development project will intrude on the rest of the land, obstruct the view of other parts of the battlefield, and come close to intruding upon the restored Daniel Lady Farm. This land is what the Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association (GPBA) is trying to save. They have successfully preserved eight acres of it, but the remaining seventeen acres belongs to S & A Homes, who have plans to develop it. These plans have been put on hold due to protest from the GPBA, which hopes to buy the land and are requesting the public's help in preventing this land from being further developed. They are asking for signatures on their petition to stop as well as for people to directly contact the developers and communicate their opposition to this project. According to the president of the GPBA, "Gettysburg draws hundreds of thousands of Americans annually by its place in our history, not for having big box commercial development." This land is just as much a part of the battlefield as the preserved sections are, and once it is developed, it is forever lost to history.

A lone battlefield marker stands across from the McDonald's and in front of a hotel, marking the site of Camp Letterman. It is not a site that is well-known or visited often by those that come to the Gettysburg battlefield. This might not be the case if it was not surrounded by marks of modern life: fast food restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels. If the plan to develop more of the land is successful, the history and the impact of the hospital will be all but forgotten. The importance of Camp Letterman will fade from memory, taken over by modernity. This will be the fate of the place where "many spilled their last ounce of blood." It was a place that saw Confederate retreat, advancements in medical treatments, and harmony between soldiers of both sides. It was also home to a graveyard for both sides and while most were moved, some may have been left behind. This section of land is as much part of the Gettysburg story as the land on which the heat of the fighting occurred. It is unfortunate that "little evidence exists to remember the wounded, the heroic medical staff, and the dead of Camp Letterman." This problem will only be worsened if further development occurs.

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