



12-18-2013

Examination: Reflections on the 150th

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Caswell, Bryan G., "Examination: Reflections on the 150th" (2013). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 22.
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Abstract

Gettysburg, the first three days of July, 1863. An epic clash of titans sways back and forth across the fields and hills of this small Pennsylvania town. The two armies who fought here left in their wake over fifty thousand men broken in three days of combat, and the significance of their actions to the course of the American Civil War has rarely been doubted. The Union's victory at Gettysburg put a halt to Robert E. Lee's second invasion of the North, an invasion that could have broken the Northern civilians' will to continue prosecuting the war. The crushing repulse of the Confederate charge on July 3 shattered the myth of Confederate invincibility, delivering the first major Union victory in the Eastern Theater. This battle has widely been heralded as THE turning point of the American Civil War, the battle that permanently ended Confederate hopes of victory and set the Union on the road to victory. My experiences of the battle's sesquicentennial commemoration and of a summer spent working at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park inspired me to look deeper, however, and upon closer inspection, cracks began to show in this traditional view of Gettysburg's paramount importance. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

Disciplines

History | United States History

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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

Examination: Reflections on the 150th

December 18, 2013

By: Bryan Caswell, '15

Gettysburg, the first three days of July, 1863. An epic clash of titans sways back and forth across the fields and hills of this small Pennsylvania town. The two armies who fought here left in their wake over fifty thousand men broken in three days of combat, and the significance of their actions to the course of the American Civil War has rarely been doubted. The Union's victory at Gettysburg put a halt to Robert E. Lee's second invasion of the North, an invasion that could have broken the Northern civilians' will to continue prosecuting the war. The crushing repulse of the Confederate charge on July 3 shattered the myth of Confederate invincibility, delivering the first major Union victory in the Eastern Theater. This battle has widely been heralded as THE turning point of the American Civil War, the battle that permanently ended Confederate hopes of victory and set the Union on the road to victory. My experiences of the battle's sesquicentennial commemoration and of a summer spent working at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park inspired me to look deeper, however, and upon closer inspection, cracks began to show in this traditional view of Gettysburg's paramount importance.

The most common trend in the historical debate surrounding Gettysburg's importance is the emphasis of other events in the American Civil War as equally important and deserving of the same attention often paid Gettysburg. Battles as Vicksburg and Antietam have received such rehabilitation, with Grant's Overland Campaign closely following. It is this last that I gained a unique perspective on this summer as I worked the battlefield of Spotsylvania Court House. As I studied the brutal fighting that characterized the last two years of the war in the East, it became clearer that while Gettysburg may have been a setback for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, it in no way broke that army. Battles such as the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor saw Confederate soldiers, still fighting with fervent devotion to their nation, win repeated victories at the tactical level. Yet these victories were robbed of any greater significance due to the strategic maneuvering of Ulysses S. Grant and his grasp of attritional principles. The Union would eventually achieve victory

in 1865 as a direct result of Grant's strategies, an individual whose promotion and conduct were not influenced by the Battle of Gettysburg.

Gettysburg's role as turning point also involves the consideration of the battle's immediate effects on Lee's campaign and the potential outcome of his invasion if it had proved successful. If Lee had been victorious in Pennsylvania, would the North's will to fight have crumbled? Could a Confederate occupation of Harrisburg or Philadelphia have forced public opinion to demand a peace settlement? While such questions can help people realize the importance of an event, they flirt with that dangerous realm known to historians as counterfactual history. Once we stop studying what did happen and begin to study what might have happened, the ground begins to shift. Nothing in history is ever inevitable, and any argument can be made. The North's will could have failed, or the people could have rallied to the cause with more fervor than ever. Was an occupation of Harrisburg ever a real possibility, given that the Confederates would have had to cross the mighty Susquehanna to get there? Counterfactual justifications can thus be seen to prove a highly questionable basis to any discussion of historical significance.



While the traditional view of Gettysburg's importance had been soured for me, I still could not forsake this event that holds so much interest, not just for me but for legions of historians and the American public. Few battles have a greater story than Gettysburg, and that story cannot be allowed to fall by the wayside. I began to ponder again: if traditional assumptions did not adequately explain Gettysburg's importance for me, might that path lie in another direction, in a more unorthodox examination of the battle?

Image:

“3/4 VIEW FROM SOUTHEAST. – Market Street Bridge, Spanning East channel of Susquehanna River at Market Street (State Route 3012), Harrisburg, Dauphin County, PA.”
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