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In Gettysburg, the Confederacy Won

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In Gettysburg, the Confederacy Won

Abstract

Almost every day, I ride my bicycle past some of the over 1,300 statues and monuments commemorating the Civil War in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where I live. They are everywhere. None of them are of black people.

The Battle of Gettysburg, fought over three days in July of 1863, is often considered the turning point of a war fought over the fate of slavery in America. Black people ultimately were the reason why over 165,000 soldiers came to this Pennsylvania town in the first place. But on the battlefield, as far as the physical memorials, they disappear. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Gettysburg, Confederate States of America, Confederate flag, Confederate monuments, Civil War

Disciplines

African American Studies | Military History | Public History | United States History

CITYLAB



A statue of Robert E. Lee in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Matt Rourke/AP

In Gettysburg, the Confederacy Won

Some of the monuments in this small Pennsylvania town aren't telling the truth about the battle that was fought here.

[Scott Hancock](#), Aug. 24, 2017

Almost every day, I ride my bicycle past some of the over 1,300 statues and monuments commemorating the Civil War in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where I live. They are everywhere. None of them are of black people.

The Battle of Gettysburg, fought over three days in July of 1863, is often considered the turning point of a war fought over the fate of slavery in America. Black people ultimately were the reason why over 165,000 soldiers came to this Pennsylvania town in the first place. But on the battlefield, as far as the physical memorials, they disappear.

The Confederacy, on the other hand, is alive and everywhere in Gettysburg: Over the last 154 years, the South managed to win the battlefield, if not the battle itself.

I've lived in this town of 8,000 residents since 2001, when I started teaching at Gettysburg College. I'm fond of biking through the battlefield for its scenic value and to get my heart pumping, so I can maintain my diet of pastries and ice cream from the excellent local vendors. On one route, I start just below the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, where Union General John

Buford [saw the sun shining off Confederate soldiers' guns](#) from its cupola. I head south through rows of trees on West Confederate Avenue, past the North Carolina monument and then Tennessee's, up a hill past Virginia's Robert E. Lee monument. Then it's out of the woods into a peaceful little valley of fields, where red-tailed hawks sit atop dead trees. I glide by monuments to the soldiers of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, and Arkansas. I cross Steinwehr Avenue, the modest Texas monument on my right, and bank around the curve [by a duo of bronze Alabamians](#) before letting out a mental sigh, fly downhill into another copse of woods, over Plum Run creek, and climb up Big Round Top into Union territory.

All those Southern state monuments were put up in the 20th century. Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama went up between 1917 and 1933. The other eight were erected from 1961 to 1984—during and just after the Civil Rights Movement.

That timing was no coincidence. Just as many white Southern survivors of the war and their descendants worked hard to make black Americans and their story disappear, the state monuments they erected continued that work.

After riding past the Pennsylvania monument and [High Water Mark](#) on the Union side, I come up on [Abraham Brian's](#) house. Brian was an American success story—the son of slaves, he owned his own house and 12-acre farm. When the Confederates came, he fled the battle, no doubt for self-preservation but likely also because he, like other African Americans in Gettysburg, was aware of the Confederate Army's propensity to [kidnap free black Northerners](#) and sell them into slavery. After the battle, he returned, but was never able to rebuild his farm and eventually had to abandon his property. There's a sign for Brian, as the National Park Service has made sure to tell his story. But there is no monument. No statue.

In town, there are a few other signs recounting stories of African-American Gettysburgians, as well as the [Lincoln Cemetery](#), where Abraham Brian is buried. Black Gettysburg hasn't disappeared entirely, thanks to the efforts of black activists and historians here in town who have tracked family genealogies, revived the upkeep of the previously neglected cemetery, and erected markers noting the history of black schools in Gettysburg. But you have to know where to look and who to talk to in order to find those stories. The beautiful lies of the Confederate state monuments, meanwhile, decorate main thoroughfares and are easily seen by the more than one million tourists who come through town each year.

These are the same lies that the Unite the Right groups in Charlottesville tried to preserve last week. The effect of the City Council that voted for [the removal of of that city's Lee statue](#), and the actions of all those who supported of that decision, was to uncover the lies that white supremacists have been telling for more than 150 years.

Are the statues on the Gettysburg National Military Park any different than the other Confederate monuments in cities nationwide that are now [being removed, or shrouded, or otherwise "recontextualized"](#)? Is the park sacred ground? Most tourists probably see it that way. But when I see people who live here out walking or riding their bikes, or driving across battlefield roads because locals know they're often faster than town roads, well, it seems much more prosaic and a lot less sacred.

I can't speak for other black Gettysburgians, especially those born and raised here, and I wonder if some of those Americans who have expressed ambivalence about removing Confederate monuments in [recent polls](#) might feel differently if they knew when and why some of these monuments were put up. But as an American citizen, as a black man, as a historian, and as someone who sees these monuments almost every day, I see these battlefield markers as a constant reminder that the Confederacy keeps winning.

If this battlefield is indeed sacred space, that sanctity was disturbed in 1973, when Mississippi planted a state monument honoring those who "[fought for their righteous cause.](#)" W. E. B. DuBois summed up that cause in [his assessment of Robert E. Lee](#): "Either he knew what slavery meant when he helped maim and murder thousands in its defense, or he did not. If he did not he was a fool. If he did, Robert Lee was a traitor and a rebel—not indeed to his country, but to humanity and humanity's God."

Battlefields aren't untouchable; this one can and has changed over the years. It is time to consider how to make it a space that teaches the values each side fought for. That would mean that the battlefield, not just the museum, tells visitors why the Army of Northern Virginia came to Gettysburg—to protect the provision of [the Confederate Constitution that enshrined "the institution of negro slavery."](#) It means putting up new signs that tell us why those state monuments went up when they did—either that, or put them in some museum. It means, perhaps, erecting a statue to Abraham Brian so visitors have a chance to see who and what this battle was about. That's a monument I'd like to ride by.

Lee and his cause weren't righteous in 1863, or 1973, or now. The cause of the Union, to preserve the United States, and eventually to end slavery, was righteous. The deaths of so many on both sides is tragic. But we best recognize tragedy and honor the dead by telling the truth. I hope one day, if I'm still here and still healthy, I can ride through a battlefield that doesn't lie, and where the Confederacy has, finally, lost.

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