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# Dan Sickles, William H. Tipton, and the Birth of Battlefield Preservation

## **Abstract**

Thirty years after the battle of Gettysburg, the small Pennsylvania town was once again besieged—only this time, the invaders were not rebels, but entrepreneurs with an unquenchable thirst for profit. The most visible sign of their voracious commercialism was an electric trolley line (“from which the shouts and songs of revelry may arise to drown the screams of the suffering”) belting the battlefield. The Gettysburg Electric Railway Company’s venture raised a host of new questions regarding the importance of battlefield preservation. Most significantly, it prompted Americans to ask if they had any obligation to set aside for posterity the land where it was saved. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Battle Reunion, Battle Anniversary, Sickles, William H. Tipton, Battlefield, Battlefield Preservation, National Park Service, NPS, Gettysburg Electric Railway Company

## Dan Sickles, William H. Tipton, and the Birth of Battlefield Preservation

JOHN M. RUDY

Thirty years after the battle of Gettysburg, the small Pennsylvania town was once again besieged—only this time, the invaders were not rebels, but entrepreneurs with an unquenchable thirst for profit. The most visible sign of their voracious commercialism was an electric trolley line (“from which the shouts and songs of revelry may arise to drown the screams of the suffering”) belting the battlefield. The Gettysburg Electric Railway Company’s venture raised a host of new questions regarding the importance of battlefield preservation. Most significantly, it prompted Americans to ask if they had any obligation to set aside for posterity the land where it was saved.<sup>16</sup>

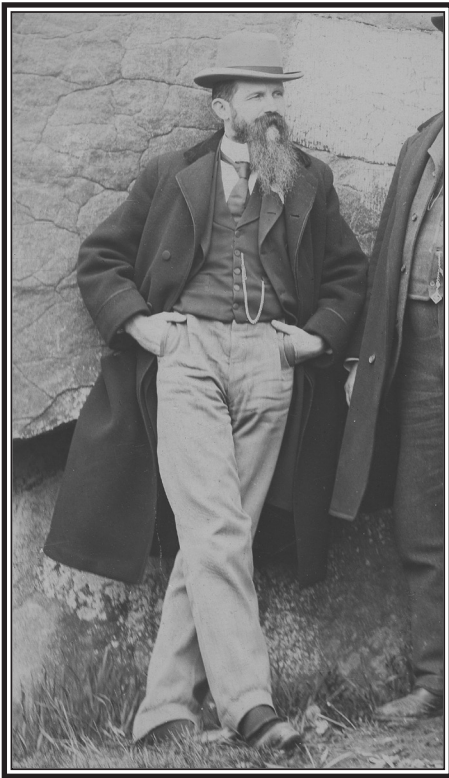
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The ambitious trolley construction project earned the ire of many in Gettysburg. While other communities across the state had established trolley lines for the express benefit of their citizens and the towns’ coffers, it was apparent to many Gettysburgians that the venture’s true aim was to benefit the tourist trade. Making matters worse, locals perceived the deal between the borough council and Edward Hoffer’s Gettysburg Electric Railway Company as hopelessly corrupt. When a competing railway company struggled to secure rights for a trolley line in nearby Middletown, Gettysburg’s *Star and Sentinel* suggested sardonically that the company’s representatives “invite the Council of Middletown to go to Allentown on a free ride, and then set up a free lunch.” “If they

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16 “A Contrast With a Moral,” *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 20 June 1893, p. 2.

can resist such blandishments,” the paper continued, “they will prove themselves to be of sterner stuff than the Council of Gettysburg.”<sup>17</sup>



*William H. Tipton at Devil's Den.*  
*Adams County Historical Society.*

The Gettysburg Electric Railway deal also seemed particularly suspect because William H. Tipton, who sat on the Gettysburg borough council, stood to benefit greatly from cooperating with the venture. A celebrated photographer, Tipton operated a studio and entertainment complex known as “Tipton Park” in the vicinity of Devil’s Den; he had lobbied hard for a rail line extension to the southern end of the battlefield, anticipating the hordes of tourists the trolley might deposit on his doorstep.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Garry E. Adelman and Timothy H. Smith, *Devil's Den: a History and Guide* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1997), 84-85; “The fight at Middletown is still on...” *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 20 June 1893, p. 2.

18 Adelman and Smith, *Ibid*, 84-85; for deeper background on William H. Tipton, see Timothy H. Smith, ed., *Gettysburg's Battlefield Photographer – William H. Tipton* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2005).

Not surprisingly, Tipton emerged as one of the Electric Railway's staunchest advocates. At one point, Hoffer failed to obtain a right of way for his line along the stone fence at the Angle. While the company had purchased what it thought was a clear path along the wall and toward the southern end of the field, their "right of way" was in fact impeded by land owned by the Seventy-Second Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers. Thirty years before, the Seventy-Second had repulsed one attack along this wall; now, they intended to repel the assault of the trolley company. Discovering that workers preparing to lay trolley track had disturbed their land, the Philadelphia-based veterans sent word to Gettysburg that, "a suit for damages and arrest for trespass would result if they continued."<sup>19</sup>

Hoffer dispatched Tipton to Philadelphia to negotiate with the stubborn old veterans. While "interviewing the Seventy-second people in behalf of the electric railway," Tipton expressed his overly optimistic view "that all right thinking people here heartily desire the road to be built." Furthermore, Tipton assailed the reports of battlefield damage as "maliciously exaggerated." He even went so far as to assert that photos had been retouched. The men of the Seventy-Second resolved to investigate the situation for themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Tipton's apparent victory was short lived, however. After visiting Gettysburg and concluding that the trolley stood to desecrate the entire Second Corps' battle line, the veterans announced to Hoffer that, "the Seventy-second regiment would not entertain any offer from the trolley road." Instead, the men "placed a sign on the lot forbidding any trespassing, raised the

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19 "Their Way Was Blocked," *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 06 June 1893, p. 3.

20 "Trolley Notes," *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 06 June 1893, p.

Stars and Stripes, had the lot surveyed and put down stakes to mark the boundaries.” In the eyes of the veterans, Hoffer had spoken to them in a disgustingly, “taunting and determined manner... of his intentions in the way of desecrating the battleground.” Hoffer allegedly claimed “that he would build the station by the Seventy-second’s lot, right in the Bloody Angle.” According to Captain Ker of the Seventy-second, “every reasonable person will realize what this means. The place would look like a barracks.”<sup>21</sup>

As the construction of the trolley line progressed throughout the spring of 1893, northern newspapers began to protest the construction in shrill tones. “Even an excuse of necessity could scarcely justify the desecration of the famous battlefield at Gettysburg,” the *Philadelphia North American* quipped, “and yet...we are notified that the damage has already been done by excavations and gradings.” The *North American*, and many of its readers, plainly understood that the trolley was solely perpetrated by a “corporation [that] contemplates a glittering monetary return.” Across the nation, “patriotic hearts” began to “swell with righteous indignation at the abuse of a landmark substantially consecrated – in the mind of every man, woman and child intelligent enough to read and comprehend.”<sup>22</sup> The *New York Times* pointed out that the trolley line resulted in “considerable changes” to the landscape around Devil’s Den. “A huge cut has been made by blasting out the rocks,” the paper noted, “which were a distinctive feature of

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21 “The Seventy-Second’s Committee,” *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 20 June 1893, p. 3; “The Field of Gettysburg,” *Rochester Democrat Chronicle*, 03 July 1893.

22 “Pengraph Picked Up,” *Philadelphia North American*, 27 May 1893.

that part of the field.”<sup>23</sup> In the *Milwaukee Journal*, the railroad was decried as unneeded: “there should be no rapid transit over that famous field but the people who visit it should be content to walk and study the ground.” “Mere curiosity seekers may have use for a railroad at such a place,” the editor admonished, “but the patriotic people of this country will look upon it as desecrating a sacred spot.”<sup>24</sup>

One especially colorful character paid particular attention to the disturbing reports from Gettysburg: Daniel Edgar Sickles, the irascible old Tammany Hall Democrat best known for murdering his wife’s lover in 1859. Sickles had successfully defended himself with a temporary insanity plea before marching off to war. The New Yorker rose through the ranks and led the Third Army Corps at both Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. On the second day of the battle at Gettysburg, without first securing the permission of army commander George Gordon Meade, Sickles directed his men to a point far in advance of their designated position. In the inquiries that ensued, Sickles worked to rehabilitate his name, suggesting to Congress that George Meade had been derelict in his duty during the Gettysburg campaign.<sup>25</sup>

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23 “Vandalism at Gettysburg,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1893.

24 “The electric railroad has desecrated the battlefield of Gettysburg...” *Milwaukee Journal*, 19 May 1893, p. 4.

25 For more on the Meade-Sickles Controversy, first see Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series 1, 53 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894-1917), Volume 27, part 1, beginning page 127 for letters penned by General George Gordon Meade and by the pseudonymous “Historicus,” either Sickles himself or a political ally. Then seek out Richard A. Sauers, *Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy* (Chicago: Potomac Books, 2005), for a detailed sketch of the entire case of slander by Dan Sickles against



*General Daniel Sickles at the  
Gettysburg battlefield, 1901.  
Adams County Historical Society.*

Sickles served as a member of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (the organization that held the deeds to the land upon which veterans placed their monuments), and as Chairman of the New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga. He was thus poised at the forefront of the movement to memorialize the new battlefield parks set aside by the federal government in the 1890s, and doled out hundreds of thousands in state appropriated funds to New York veterans' groups and regimental survivors' organizations.<sup>26</sup>

In that capacity, he invited New York's aging veterans to return to Gettysburg that very summer. Over the course of the battle's thirtieth anniversary, the New York Monuments Commission planned to dedicate a number of individual regimental monuments and markers, as well as a state  

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his commander George Gordon Meade.

26 New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg, 3 vols. (Albany, NY.: J.B. Lyon Company, Printers, 1902), Volume 1: 1-6, 195-206.



monument. In a circular mailed to each regimental association and veterans' organization in the state, Sickles generously offered to make the "necessary railway arrangements" for any New York veteran who wished to attend the ceremonials. Regimental organizations were instructed to "furnish without delay names and addresses of those entitled to free transportation and who wish to avail themselves of the same."<sup>27</sup>

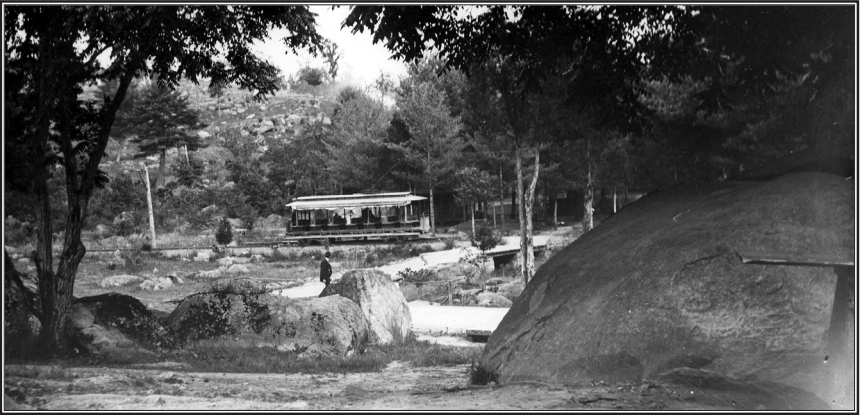
As the Empire State men prepared to descend upon the battlefield, they reviewed a blizzard of reports testifying to the damage resulting from the construction of the trolley line. The official government historian of the battle, an impressively whiskered New Hampshire artist named John Badger Bachelder, prepared one such report. "Workmen," he informed, "were engaged in blasting out a group of bowlders [sic] covering a space of 75 by 25 feet which formed a portion of the defenses in front of the left of the Third army corps during the day's battle." To make matters worse, "the variation of a dozen feet in the line, which there was ample chance to make, would have cleared those bowlders." But the purpose of their blasting was not simply to clear the right of way. "It was evident," Bachelder concluded, "that they were being blasted for material from which to make filling for the road, which is swampy at that point."<sup>28</sup>

Reading such words enraged the veterans. Sickles' announced that his blood "boil[ed] with indignation." The *Syracuse Daily Courier* reported that the members of the local Grand Army of the Republic post were "intensely indignant because of the desecration of the Gettysburg battlefield by the

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27 "In Memory of Valiant Sons," *New York Times*, 21 May 1893; "New York Day," *Oswego Daily Times*, 21 April 1893.

28 "Wanton Destruction," *Rome Semi-Weekly Citizen*, 17 June 1893.



*The new electric trolley line splitting the land between Devil's Den and Little Round Top. Adams County Historical Society.*

running across it of a trolley road.” The veterans threatened to “tear up the road.” Both the Auburn *Bulletin* and the Oswego *Daily Palladium* warned that the Gettysburg-bound veterans might turn violent. “There will be a multitude of old soldiers and their friends at Gettysburg on that day,” the Auburn paper recounted, “and the owners of the trolley line expect to reap a harvest. Their gangs of men are at work night and day laying the tracks and placing the poles which are to support the trolley wire.” But “instead of reaping a harvest . . . it may be that on that day they will witness the destruction of their line.” The paper alleged that a plot to destroy the trolley lines had been “very largely talked over among the veterans of this State.” “It is known that the occasion on which it is intended by some to make an effort to tear up the road is ‘New York day,’ when the old soldiers will be there in large numbers.”<sup>29</sup>

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29 “General Sickles; Indignation,” Gettysburg Star and Sentinel, 30 May 1893; “The Grand Army men are reported intensely...” Syracuse Daily Courier, 30 June 1893; “Veterans Indignant,” Oswego Daily Palladium, 26 June 1893; “New York Day at Gettysburg May Witness the Destruction of the Trolley Road,” Auburn Bulletin, 26 June 1893.

Rumors of violence quickly proliferated, prompting one Grand Army commander, Augustus Gordon Weissert, to reassure the press that “there is absolutely no truth in the statement that the G. A. R. will stoop to violence.” This promise aside, the New York Monuments Commission still felt that it needed to act swiftly, so as to avoid any premature, extralegal challenge to the railroad. General Sickles, on behalf of the board, “issued a circular calling upon the veterans to preserve law and order when they visit the battlefield.”<sup>30</sup>

For his part, Sickles attempted to persuade those attending the New York Day festivities that peaceful protest might be the best option. He advised veterans to boycott the railroad, and at the same time urged them to be mindful of “decorum.” “In making this appeal,” Sickles assured in a circular distributed to Grand Army posts, “the Commissioners are by no means insensible to the outrage committed by the vandals.” The document went on to characterize Hoffer and Tipton as “obnoxious” men who, “for the mere sake of gain, are desecrating and destroying the characteristic features of a battlefield which Lincoln said was consecrated ground.”<sup>31</sup>

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Despite the rumors of violence and the threat of a boycott, the Gettysburg Electric Railway Company worked feverishly on its line the week before the New York celebration. “In its anxiety to have its railway ready for operation by Saturday next around the Cemeteries,” the Gettysburg *Star and Sentinel*

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30 “Farnham Post is Dead,” Rome Semi-Weekly Citizen, 28 June 1893.

31 Daniel Sickles, “Circular No. 12 (24 June 1893),” in New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, *Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg*, 3 vols. (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, Printers, 1902), Volume 1: 204.

wrote, “the Electric railway company kept a dozen of hands busy all of last Sunday, setting the boilers in the Power House, and making other preparations for the masons on Monday morning.” “Done behind screens,” the work was, nonetheless, “watched all day by a crowd of young men and boys who had never before had the opportunity of seeing building operations going on in Gettysburg on a Sabbath day.”<sup>32</sup>

The following week, thousands of veterans—many with their wives, sons, and daughters in tow—flooded the flag festooned streets of Gettysburg. “A dozen special trains have arrived with veterans,” the *New York Times* reported from Gettysburg on July 1. One of those special trains transported Dan Sickles who, with his staff, enjoyed the luxury of “two Pullman sleepers and a dining car.” “Every hotel, boarding house, and private residence is already filled with people, and thousands of the veterans will find no better accommodations than their blankets afford.” Indeed, the hoary New York ex-soldiers pitched more than seven hundred tents on East Cemetery Hill. In their makeshift camps, they swapped tales of the war, “dwell[ing] upon those stirring episodes which are daily growing dimmer in the mist of a glorious past.”<sup>33</sup>

Along the borough sidewalks, vendors took advantage of the crowds—selling everything from lemonade and peanuts to souvenir badges, medals, and even “bullets said to have been dug up in the battlefield.” Throughout the day, stages and carriages “carried crowds of sightseers to Round Top and Culp’s Hill.” “Row after row of bronze-faced, gray-haired men in the dark hue of the Grand Army” opted to walk across the battlefields “where they marched and fought in the sanguinary

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32 “Trolley Notes,” *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, 27 June 1893, p. 3.

33 “Veterans Go To Gettysburg,” *New York Times*, 01 July 1893; “Great Concourse of Veterans,” *New York Times*, 02 July 1893.

conflict.”<sup>34</sup> Both the *Watertown Times* and the *Albany Evening Journal* reported that the sight of these tottering veterans was, “one of the greatest at Gettysburg since its wheat fields ran red with the blood of confederate and Union dead.”<sup>35</sup>

On the afternoon of July 2, Sickles dedicated the New York State Monument in the National Cemetery. In recounting the gallant deeds of the veterans gathered in the audience, Sickles’ speech echoed many others delivered on the battlefield that weekend. But he went further. “This famous battlefield has been chosen to signalize [sic] the patriotism, fortitude and valor of the defenders of the Union, in the great Civil War,” he argued, citing the three-hundred and forty monuments and memorials that had already been placed on the field. “The time has come,” he continued, “when this battlefield should belong to the government of the United States . . . . It should be made a national park, and placed in charge of the War Department.” These words were greeted with a thunderous applause. Dan Sickles was rallying his troops once more.<sup>36</sup>

Before this moment, most veterans were principally concerned with the maintenance of their individual memories. The threat posed by the Gettysburg Electric Railway Company, however, alerted ex-soldiers that more was at stake. Nothing

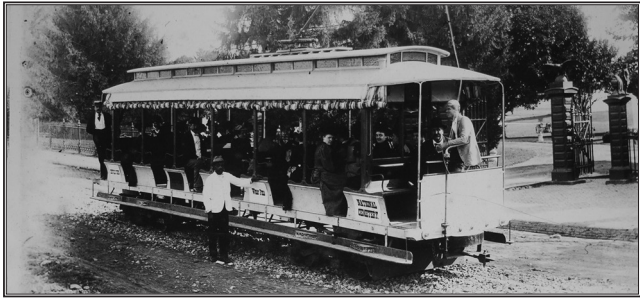
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34 “Great Concourse of Veterans,” *New York Times*, 02 July 1893.

35 “A Great Day for Veterans,” *Watertown Times*, 03 July 1893; “It Stands on Sacred Ground,” *Albany Evening Journal*, 03 July 1893; “The Field of Gettysburg,” *Rochester Democrat Chronicle*, 03 July 1893; “To Unknown Dead,” *Oswego Daily Palladium*, 03 July 1893.

36 Daniel Sickles, “Address By Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles, U.S.A. (2 July 1893),” in New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, *Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg*, 3 vols. (Albany, NY.: J.B. Lyon Company, Printers, 1902), Volume 1: 238.

short of a collective, national movement was necessary to ensure that “the monuments [already] erected” would always be “guarded and preserved.” Insisting that “topographical features” on the battlefield “not yet destroyed by the vandals . . . must hereafter remain unimpaired,” Sickles announced that he would make it his “personal duty” to advocate for the preservation of the Gettysburg battlefield.<sup>37</sup>



*Gettysburg's electric trolley, "General Lee," along Taneytown Road at the National Cemetery stop.  
Adams County Historical Society.*

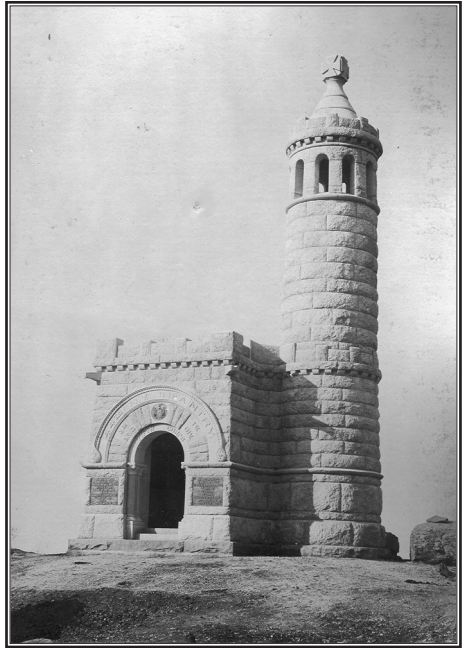
Sickles had one more ruckus to stir while in Gettysburg. The next day saw the dedication of several monuments, among them the monument to the 44<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry on the rock strewn southwestern face of Little Round Top. The imposing memorial, shaped like a medieval castle with a tall granite spire and arched portals, sat on the slope of the hill just a few dozen yards from William H. Tipton's amusement complex and photographic studio. General Daniel Butterfield opened the dedication ceremony. New York Governor Roswell Pettibone Flower spoke, followed by the ninety-three year old General George Sears Greene, whose remarks were understandably brief. Sickles addressed the crowd, too, reprising his arguments against long-deceased George Gordon Meade.<sup>38</sup>

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37 Ibid.

38 "Dedication of Monument - 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Infantry, July 3, 1893,"

Photographers had lined up to capture images of the veterans and dignitaries gathered around the monument's walls. Ready with a camera from his studio at the base of the hill was William H. Tipton. Butterfield and Sickles both noticed Tipton, the stalwart supporter of the trolley they so vehemently hated, focusing his lens. "General Butterfield," the *New York Tribune* reported in describing what happened next, "pulled his hat down over his eyes and General Sickles turned around



*44th New York Monument on Little Round Top. Adams County Historical Society.*

sideways, so his face could not be seen." A perplexed Tipton asked the men what they meant by their movements. "It means that you cannot photograph this group," Butterfield snarled.<sup>39</sup>

"By whose orders?" Tipton demanded, as Colonel Freeman Connor and a handful of men from the 44<sup>th</sup> New York moved toward the photographer. Butterfield quickly retorted that he and General Sickles were issuing the order. The crowd of veterans became noticeably agitated. "Take your machine out of the way," one among the crowd bellowed. Another ex-

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in New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, *Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg*, 3 vols. (Albany, NY.: J.B. Lyon Company, Printers, 1902), Volume 1: 340-344.

39 "Sued by a Snapshot Man," *New York Times*, 04 July 1893; "A Fighting Photographer," *New York Tribune*, 04 July 1893.

soldier threatened that if Tipton refused to move his camera, “we will tumble it and you with it down the hill.” Before he could muster a response, however, the veterans made good on their promise. Two or three New Yorkers rushed down the hill and toppled Tipton’s camera, rendering it “broken and unfit for use.” After collecting his broken equipment, Tipton avowed that they had not heard the last of him. With a mock bow, Tipton, referencing Sickles’ panning of Meade earlier in the ceremonies, challenged the group: “Gentlemen, you may fight dead generals, but you now have got a live photographer to fight.”<sup>40</sup>

Somewhat anticlimactically, the veterans returned to the borough, and General Sickles retired to his Pullman coach. While Sickles slumbered, however, the Gettysburg sheriff served him with a writ. Tipton had filed a law suit against the general, seeking damages of \$10,000. Sickles dismissed the suit with a sense of levity, boasting to a *New York Times* reporter, “behold me in chains . . . . You see me in the meshes of the Pennsylvania law.”<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Tipton’s actions hardly discouraged Sickles from fighting the trolley line; if anything, they steeled his resolve. The following day, at a meeting of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, he took drastic action. Sickles announced his intentions to “bring about the adoption of a law which would make the Gettysburg battlefield a national park.” With Sickles’ personality behind the bill, and “the Grand Army posts throughout the country [urging] their Congressmen to vote in [its] favor,” the goal of preserving the whole battlefield, and not just select portions, seemed within reach.<sup>42</sup>

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40 “A Fighting Photographer,” *Ibid.*

41 “Sued by a Snapshot Man,” *New York Times*, 04 July 1893.

42 “Fight The Vandals,” *Syracuse Daily Journal*, 05 July 1893.



The bill that Sickles shepherded through Congress, based upon previous legislation that had languished in committee, was House Resolution 185, introduced on the first day of June 1894. President Grover Cleveland signed the measure into law on June 7, 1894, granting the Secretary of War the express power to condemn historic land for seizure by the federal government. The very next year, Congress officially created the Gettysburg National Military Park. And before the decade was out, thanks to Sickles' legislation, the federal government had preserved battlefield land at Antietam, Shiloh, Vicksburg, Chickamauga, and Chattanooga.<sup>43</sup>

Tipton's actions in promoting the trolley line—and his attempt to photograph the New Yorkers on July 3, 1893—ultimately led to his business' demise. The magic of Tipton Park inexorably faded, its sheen tarnished. For its part, the Gettysburg Electric Railway Company suffered a slow, protracted death. The advent of the automobile ultimately snuffed out its operations. Sickles was pleased. Two decades after the spat on the slope of Little Round Top, the aging commander mused to a friend that if the state of New York wished to erect a memorial to him, it should be poised atop the high ground he commanded at the Peach Orchard. Still, a grand statue was not really necessary. In the general's own estimation, "The whole damned battlefield is my memorial!"<sup>44</sup>

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43 Gary E. Adelman and Timothy H. Smith, *Devil's Den: a History and Guide* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1997), 86-91; Rufus Wheeler Peckham, "Decision in U S v. GETTYSBURG ELECTRIC R. CO., 160 U.S. 668 (1896)," *FindLaw* [on-line]; available from <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=160&invol=668>; Internet; accessed 23 April 2009.

44 As quoted in Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How The Story Of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory*, (Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo Press, 2003), 194.