



10-20-2014

The Right to be Forgotten... from History?

Kevin P. Lavery
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Lavery, Kevin P., "The Right to be Forgotten... from History?" (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 67.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/67>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/67>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Right to be Forgotten... from History?

Abstract

Some people seek to leave a legacy. They want to be remembered by others for doing something great, whether it be good or evil. But not everyone is alike in this respect. Others want nothing more than to go quietly about their business. They do not want friends or strangers prying into their lives. They do not want their inner, personal thoughts to be read and judged by those around them. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

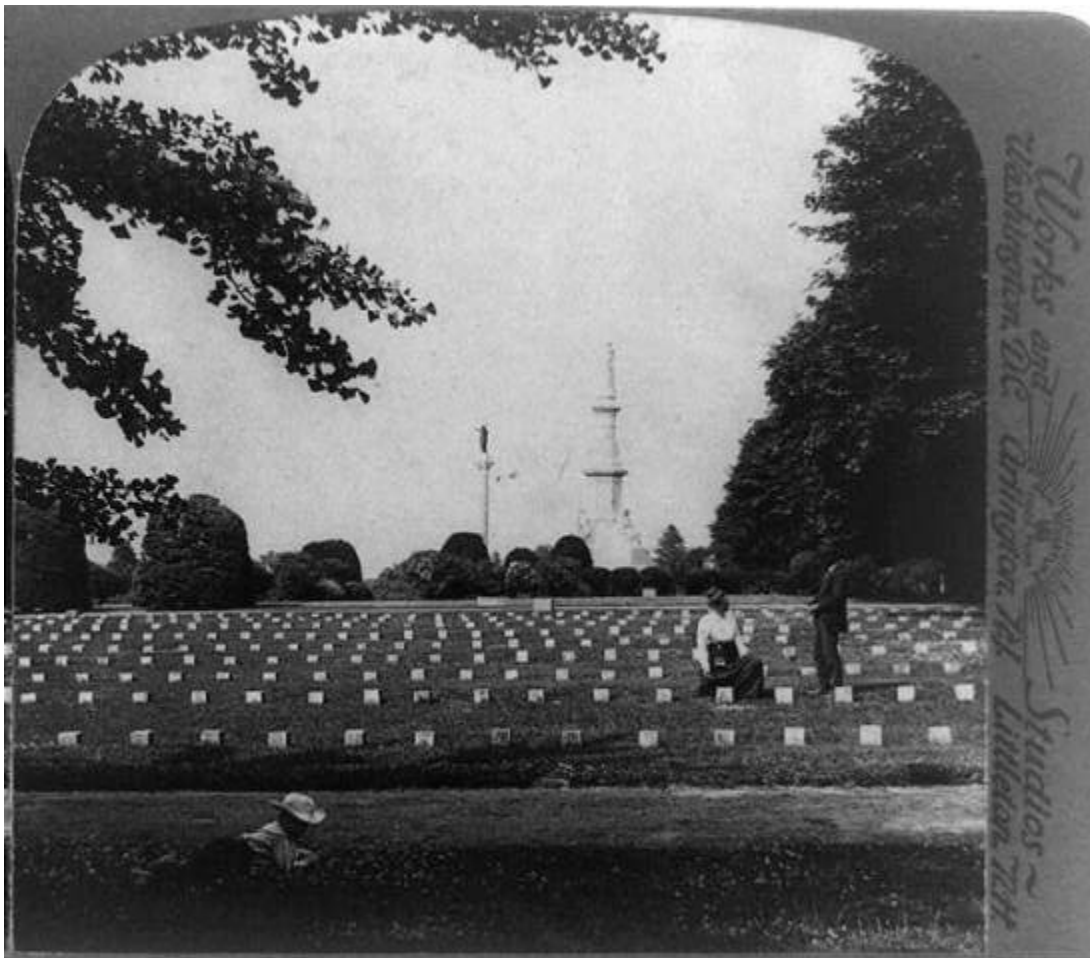
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Right to be Forgotten . . . from History?

October 20, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16



Underwood & Underwood. Monument where Lincoln's famous address was made – 979 of the great battle's unknown dead, Gettysburg. 1903.
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Some people seek to leave a legacy. They want to be remembered by others for doing something great, whether it be good or evil. But not everyone is alike in this respect. Others want nothing more than to go quietly about their business. They do not want friends or strangers prying into their lives. They do not want their inner, personal thoughts to be read and judged by those around them.



William H. Lebkicher's Gravestone.
Via FindAGrave.com, courtesy of Linda Stienstra.

But when they die, their personal belongings may pass to their children and perhaps eventually reach a local archive or historical society. There, their most private reflections become tools for professional and amateur historians seeking a greater understanding of these individuals and the past in general.

Imagine your own letters and diaries falling into the hands of an academic with no connection to you but for their passion for the past. Every complaint against your parents or griping about your boss might be on display for the world to read. How would you feel about a historian trying to deconstruct your spontaneous musings in pursuit of an objective understanding of your times? In this situation, your death would open the floodgates of your life to intense scrutiny.

Manuscript collections, with their diaries and letters, are among

historians' most sacred caches of resources. But the private and personal nature of these documents – the same elements that make them so valuable for researchers – also generate an ethical problem:

What responsibilities do historians have when dealing with the unpublished writings of private individuals?

The question struck me as I completed my most recent blog series on William Henry Lebkicher. Lebkicher was a quiet and modest fellow who spurned the spotlight, according to the *Hershey Press*. As I worked to redefine his legacy, I couldn't help wondering: Would Lebkicher resent me for trying to understand how his early experiences as a Civil War soldier shaped his life? I certainly hope not, for I had the best intentions. But the question is so personal that it feels almost wrong to pore over his personal correspondence and try to force his writings into some coherent narrative, using his death as a justification for this invasion of privacy.

On the one hand, the public community has a right to a thorough body of historical knowledge; on the other, individuals might deserve the right to retain their privacy even beyond death. So how do we find a balance between these two interests? It is an especially difficult question when the dead have no one to speak for them.

If tomorrow the diaries and letters of non-public figures were declared off-limits, countless historians and archivists would be out of their jobs. The noble work of social history – telling the story of our world from bottom-up perspectives – would be all but defunct without access to unpublished sources from everyday individuals. Only the loudest voices – those of public figures – would remain present in our history texts, and humanity's body of knowledge would be forever crippled by this imbalance of perspectives. Constraining the study of the Civil War to published accounts would present an elitist and dangerously narrow view of the subject matter. History is too important a subject to yield to qualms about the privacy of the dead.

But historians should never forget that they are responsible for the legacy of individuals and groups – some of whom lusted for a place in history and others who might rather have been forgotten. They must always keep in mind the limitations of their craft – and the dangers presented by assuming that we can comprehensively understand any individual or group of people based on a simple set of documents. Historians daily violate the privacy of our ancestors for the collective good; they must never forget the weighty responsibility that this entails.

Sources:

“How a Merry Halloween Became Lebkicher Night.” *Supplement to Hershey Press*, November 4, 1915.

“No Other Order Like It: Membership in the G. A. R. Means Very Exclusive Honors.” *Hershey Press*, May 25, 1916.

“Our Own People and Their Friends.” *Hershey Press*, September 30, 1915.

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2014/10/20/the-right-to-be-forgotten-from-history/>