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## The Specter of Gettysburg

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# The Specter of Gettysburg

## **Abstract**

The story I am about to tell is entirely true. Several weeks ago, as I departed Musselman Library after a long night of intensive research, a sudden presence roused me from my intellectual exhaustion. I was chilled to the bone as they appeared before me: shadowy figures silhouetted against the dimly lit façade of our beloved administration building. Now, I had, of course, heard of the campus' hauntings. Tales of the ghostly field hospital in Penn Hall's basement, the spectral sentry watching from its cupola, and the Blue Boy of Stevens Hall are well known stories throughout our campus community and beyond. But I had never expected that night to encounter one of the most frightening entities known to frequent our campus: ghost tour groups. As I passed between two separate tours – one sitting audaciously on the steps of Penn Hall – I tensed. [*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

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### The Specter of Gettysburg



This photo serves as an homage to the many inspirations for many Gettysburg ghost tours.  
Photo credit to the author.

October 29, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16

The story I am about to tell is entirely true. Several weeks ago, as I departed Musselman Library after a long night of intensive research, a sudden presence roused me from my intellectual exhaustion. I was chilled to the bone as they appeared before me: shadowy figures silhouetted against the dimly lit façade of our beloved administration building. Now, I had, of course, heard of the campus' hauntings. Tales of the ghostly field hospital in Penn Hall's basement, the spectral sentry watching from its cupola, and the Blue Boy of Stevens Hall are well known stories throughout our campus community and beyond. But I had never expected that night to encounter one of the most frightening entities known to frequent our

campus: *ghost tour groups*. As I passed between two separate tours – one sitting audaciously on the steps of Penn Hall – I tensed.

Since the establishment of Gettysburg's first ghost walk in 1994, the peculiar tours have become a familiar sight on the town's streets after dark. Proponents of the specialized tour format argue that it provides evening engagement for tourists, provides an outlet for typically suppressed spiritual beliefs, and offers a lighthearted conclusion to an emotionally and intellectually draining day on the battlefield.

These justifications offered by tour companies are merely a front for the snake oil they sell. They have no interest in providing a reverential interpretation of history for all their protesting otherwise. They are companies that are willing and eager to exploit the memory of this town's tragic past for their own gain. They care for neither historical accuracy nor scientific plausibility. They care for what lies within the wallets of their patrons.

Ghost stories are inherently dramatized and inaccurate, if not entirely fabricated. Such stories cannot possibly help to expand the public's historical consciousness in any meaningful way. At the most, these stories can provoke an interest in the past – but it is a twisted and poorly-informed interest that creates historical misunderstandings. Tour guides are storytellers, not trained historical interpreters. And their guests would do better to spend their evenings reflecting on what they learned that day, rather than to spend more money on a service with no moral value.

Let's humor these companies for one moment by assuming that ghosts are real. Let's assume there are actually spirits that were so tormented at their moment of death that they have remained trapped in a metaphysical plane between our world and the next. Let's assume that these charlatans are right about ghosts. If the claims they make about ghosts are true, then *how dare they* make light of such apparitions? *How dare they* profiteer from the pained souls of the past?

But let's return to our real and rational world. There are no ghosts to offend, but there *are* the memories of the soldiers who fought here. We claim to believe that the dead deserve respect; why, then, do so many visitors fall victim to the morbid curiosity that leads them along on ghost tours? Whether ghosts are real or whether they are not, ghost tours are a grossly irresponsible and disrespectful way to remember the approximately 50,000 casualties of the Battle of Gettysburg.

If guided by common sense and common decency, then tourists and townsfolk alike would exorcise this phantom menace from the streets of Gettysburg. But, if not, they should at least remember that they are contributing to or tolerating a form of business that takes the history of our nation and distorts it into a commercial and harmful misrepresentation of the past.

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