



11-10-2014

Gettysburg's Faustian Bargain

Kevin P. Lavery
Gettysburg College

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

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

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Lavery, Kevin P., "Gettysburg's Faustian Bargain" (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 72.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/72>

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/72>

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.

Gettysburg's Faustian Bargain

Abstract

A question to the reader: have you ever visited Gettysburg? Presumably most of the Gettysburg Compiler's audience will answer in the affirmative. A follow-up question: have you ever purchased a souvenir from one of the town's abundant gift shops? Perhaps it was a kepi or a cork gun for your child? Or maybe a bottle of "Rebel Red" wine? Or some tacky trinket or faux antique?

Let's face it: we live in a consumer society in which there is nothing too sacred to profit from. And, sadly, the Battle of Gettysburg is no exception. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Tourism, Tourist, Souvenir

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | Tourism | 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

Gettysburg's Faustian Bargain

November 10, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16

A question to the reader: have you ever visited Gettysburg? Presumably most of the *Gettysburg Compiler's* audience will answer in the affirmative. A follow-up question: have you ever purchased a souvenir from one of the town's abundant gift shops? Perhaps it was a kepi or a cork gun for your child? Or maybe a bottle of "Rebel Red" wine? Or some tacky trinket or faux antique?

Let's face it: we live in a consumer society in which there is nothing too sacred to profit from. And, sadly, the Battle of Gettysburg is no exception.



Photo credit to the author.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I have my own share of Gettysburg memorabilia. Looking now at my stuffed Lincoln, die-cast bullets, and soldier figurines, I am all too aware that I have also contributed to sustaining the kitschier side of the Gettysburg tourism industry.

Gettysburg's unique history has produced a sacred patch of land that is bordered by an unapologetic bastion of consumerism. Visitors may bow their heads reverently on the battlefield when they consider the scale of the battle and the number of lives lost. But a few hours later some of them will undoubtedly drive into town and have their choice between two different Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain clocks and countless other tacky souvenirs.

In anticipation of the Sesquicentennial Commemoration, Tony Horwitz wrote an article entitled "Has Gettysburg Kicked Its Kitsch Factor?" for *Smithsonian Magazine*. Some readers might recall that this article featured Peter Carmichael and Ian Isherwood of the Civil War Institute sharing their own thoughts on Gettysburg. While the article does an excellent job in drawing attention to the special attributes that make Gettysburg so unique, it avoids taking a critical look at the tourism industry that has over the years sprung up on the edges of the battlefield. Sadly, the bitter truth is that Gettysburg has not abandoned "its Kitsch Factor"—or at least the town hasn't.



Photo credit to the author.

The battlefield and other historical sites stand as testament to the devotion of the National Park Service, the Civil War Trust, and the other preservationist groups that have worked so hard to maintain the area's historic setting. Walk a few blocks down, however, and you'll find yourself in a bustling tourist trap. Gift stores pull out all the stops to ensure that their wares tempt Civil War amateurs and experts alike. Ignoring the solemnity rightfully due the events of 151 years ago, these stores hawk their wares to any tourists who can be convinced to lust for cheap trinkets.



Photo credit to the author.

But even though it is despicable to imagine that the town of Gettysburg prospers largely because men fought and died on its fields, I do not believe that the local merchants bear all of the blame. They are, after all, just people like you or me who are trying to make a living. Many of them are passionate about the Civil War, but fail to recognize that their work cheapens the meaning of this town's special history.

A great share of the responsibility also lies with the tourists who come each year and mindlessly patronize these stores. The problem is as simple as supply and demand. People want cheap souvenirs, so suppliers will arise. Cheap souvenirs are available, so people will buy them. A vicious cycle of consumerism has therefore emerged, one that perennially threatens to shift the town's focus from the Battle of Gettysburg to the

Battle of Tourists' Wallets.

The public must be helped to understand that Gettysburg is not Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, or Disney World. They should not come here simply planning to see the sights, get a t-shirt, and go home. Both townsfolk and tourists must embrace a new paradigm of enduring historical reverence. Otherwise the town shall become no more than a cheesy roadside attraction adjacent to one of the most important sites in American history. Gettysburg may have come a long way, but it has a long way left to go.

Sources:

Adams County Winery. "Gettysburg Winery 150th Gettysburg Commemoration." Accessed October 8, 2014. <http://www.adamscountywinery.com/150th.htm>.

Civil War in Memory. Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.

Horwitz, Tony. "Has Gettysburg Kicked Its Kitsch Factor?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2013. Accessed November 9, 2014. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/has-gettysburg-kicked-its-kitsch-factor-6420761/?no-ist=&page=1>.

Jennie Wade House. "General Joshua Chamberlain Merchandise." Accessed October 15, 2014. <http://www.jennie-wade-house.com/joshua-chamberlain.htm>.

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2014/11/10/gettysburgs-faustian-bargain/>