



11-12-2014

Lost: Sesquicentennial Sanity. If found, please contact Borough of Gettysburg.

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

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Lavery, Kevin P., "Lost: Sesquicentennial Sanity. If found, please contact Borough of Gettysburg." (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 73.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/73>

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/73>

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.

Lost: Sesquicentennial Sanity. If found, please contact Borough of Gettysburg.

Abstract

If you were in Gettysburg during the summer of 2013, you surely encountered the ubiquitous 150th Gettysburg logo branded on everything from promotional materials to souvenirs. The latter – tacky at best and irreverent at worst – filled the town to the point of excess, making some of us wonder how many people completely missed the point of the sesquicentennial. Anniversaries exert a powerful force on the American historical psyche, but it is dubious whether Gettysburg’s celebration exerted an appropriate one. The sesquicentennial was a wonderful opportunity to refocus on the events of July 1863, but sadly many businesses in Gettysburg seemed unable to look past their profit margins. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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

Disciplines

Cultural History | 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

Lost: Sesquicentennial Sanity. If found, please contact Borough of Gettysburg.

November 12, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16

If you were in Gettysburg during the summer of 2013, you surely encountered the ubiquitous *150th Gettysburg* logo branded on everything from promotional materials to souvenirs. The latter – tacky at best and irreverent at worst – filled the town to the point of excess, making some of us wonder how many people completely missed the point of the sesquicentennial. Anniversaries exert a powerful force on the American historical psyche, but it is dubious whether Gettysburg's celebration exerted an appropriate one. The sesquicentennial was a wonderful opportunity to refocus on the events of July 1863, but sadly many businesses in Gettysburg seemed unable to look past their profit margins.

Two summers ago, huge crowds of tourists flocked to Gettysburg in order to experience reenactments, tour the national park, and engage with our sacred past. But the stench of unrestrained consumerism wafted incessantly from the heart of the town, threatening to draw these pilgrims away from hallowed fields and reverent ruminations. Who could concentrate on such abstract ideas like *Freedom, Equality, Justice, and Patriotism* with shelves of useless merchandise beckoning from just a few miles away?

Why leave time in your day to reflect upon the sacrifice of the men who fought and died when you could have spent that time perusing flashy merchandise? You would have made great discoveries in every store, like a kepi with the *150th* logo emblazoned upon it. For those who preferred a more subtle way to broadcast their love of Gettysburg, stores carried tank tops, t-shirts, hoodies, and ball caps. Of course, if you weren't interested in apparel, you could have taken home *150th Gettysburg* shot glasses, playing cards, mouse pads, holiday ornaments, license plates, ceramic plates, and whatever else manufacturers could fit a logo on. For distinguished professionals, golf balls and lapel pins. For those with a passion for cooking, an unbearably gaudy *150th Gettysburg* apron, complete with matching pot holder and oven mitt. If nothing else, the commemoration was inclusive, in that its wares included something for everyone – provided that they could afford to pay inflated prices for cheap trinkets.



Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.



Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.



Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.

What better way to remember the men who fell so long ago than with a toast? And why use any cheap wine when you could purchase bottles of “Traveller,” “Turning Point,” or “The Engagement?” If you were having any trouble opening that bottle of “Tears of Gettysburg,” you might have purchased the official *150th Gettysburg* bottle opener. Never mind that tears – not to mention blood – were actually shed at Gettysburg, or that naming a wine “Rebel Red” is unbelievably distasteful.



Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.

Even more mortifying is that many of the sesquicentennial souvenirs were relatively tame compared to some of the especially ridiculous products that you can find in town. Can't decide between the two types of Gettysburg backscratchers offered in souvenir shops? Get both – you can scratch two spots simultaneously while demonstrating your love of Gettysburg with *both* hands. And while you're at it, you really should consider investing in an official Gettysburg nail file to keep yourself well-manicured.

Sigh. So I ask again: is dropping money on such junk really the best way to honor the memory of the men who died here?

Admittedly, the 150th Commemoration website includes links to resources intended to help tourists engage with history. But the prominence of merchandise and lodging on the site makes it clear that the anniversary and the history were seen merely as bait with which to lure in more tourists for milking. The determination of local businesses to profit from the anniversary threatened to distract the public from what really mattered. Of course, the public is likewise at fault for buying into the idea that they needed to purchase souvenirs in order to fully experience the Sesquicentennial Commemoration.

There are forty-nine years until the bicentennial. Shall we repeat these mistakes? Or shall we challenge ourselves to do better to remember the real reason for commemorating what should be a solemn and reverent occasion?

Sources:

150th Gettysburg. Accessed October 9, 2014. <http://www.gettysburgcivilwar150.com/>.

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

Americana Souvenirs & Gifts. Accessed October 9, 2014. <http://americanasouvenirs.com/>.

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

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2014/11/12/lost-sesquicentennial-sanity-if-found-please-contact-borough-of-gettysburg/>