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## Gettysburg: A Town Built on Tourism

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# Gettysburg: A Town Built on Tourism

## **Abstract**

In my most recent blog posts, I've adopted a rather unforgiving stance on the rampant consumerism that pervades the town of Gettysburg. Essentially, I have argued that the borough's tacky gift shops sell odious little trinkets to gullible tourists and profiteer from the public's morbid obsession with war and death. But while I firmly believe that this zealous consumerism is a persistent threat to healthy historical engagement, there is another side to the issue that demands to be recognized: Gettysburg kitsch is part of what has made Gettysburg into a town brimming with opportunities to broaden the public's historical consciousness.  
[*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

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### Gettysburg: A Town Built on Tourism

November 14, 2014

by Kevin Lavery '16

In my most recent blog posts, I've adopted a rather unforgiving stance on the rampant consumerism that pervades the town of Gettysburg. Essentially, I have argued that the borough's tacky gift shops sell odious little trinkets to gullible tourists and profiteer from the public's morbid obsession with war and death. But while I firmly believe that this zealous consumerism is a persistent threat to healthy historical engagement, there is another side to the issue that demands to be recognized: Gettysburg kitsch is part of what has made Gettysburg into a town brimming with opportunities to broaden the public's historical consciousness.



Photo credit to the author.

Gettysburg is among the most prominent sites in Civil War memory, if not *the* most prominent. No other battlefield has quite the same name-brand power in the public mind. It is no surprise, therefore, that Gettysburg's reputation perennially yields a large crop of tourists and pilgrims.

When you drive into the tourist district, you are greeted by signs for gift shops, independent museums, tour companies, motels, restaurants, and more. They are a vital – if unfortunate – component of the Gettysburg experience. Parents take their children to Gettysburg knowing that their family will not only receive exposure to a site of critical historical importance, but also to great food, comfortable accommodations, and fun souvenirs. Gettysburg is the complete package; more than a battlefield, it is a destination – for better *and* for worse.

Gettysburg's reputation as a tourist town is part of what makes it such a wonderful place to introduce people to the Civil War. Visitors do not need to be professional historians or reenactors in order to enjoy a visit to Gettysburg. Its appeal lies largely in its accessibility.

How many times have you heard someone say, “Gettysburg? I love Gettysburg. My dad took me and my brother there when we were young, and I loved it!” Maybe they never returned but still fondly remember the experience, or maybe it kindled within them a lifelong passion for the Civil War. In either case, their trip to Gettysburg was a formative experience in the development of their historical consciousness, and this was made possible in part because of the complete package offered by the town’s tourism industry.



Photo credit to the author.

Cheap and essentially meaningless though they are, tacky souvenirs are nonetheless a fundamental part of the Gettysburg experience. After spending a day on the battlefield, parents drag their kids into town to buy them little kepis and cork guns and buy themselves ornaments and baubles. Those pieces of trash will soon gather dust in a closet somewhere, but in the meantime they will have reinforced that family’s memory of Gettysburg.

There is a thin line between using and abusing the history of Gettysburg. The memory of the men who fought here can never be used to justify commercial greed, but even the worst excesses of consumerism can unintentionally facilitate a genuine appreciation of history. The town’s commercialism has played a significant role in the creation of Gettysburg’s identity, but visitors and townsfolk alike should take care that the tourist industry always remains respectful of the men who fought here, and of subordinate importance to meaningful historical engagement.

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