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Hidden in Plain Sight: The Coster Avenue Mural

Brianna E. Kirk
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

The Gettysburg Battlefield has over one thousand monuments dedicated to a host of brave men who fought and gave their lives during the three day engagement in July of 1863. Littered alongside well-traveled roads and points of attraction on the battlefield, most do not go unnoticed. There are a few, however, that do. One of them commemorates Captain Heckman's Battery K of the 1st Ohio Light Artillery, an oft-passed but unnoticed monument on Gettysburg College's campus and the focus of one of my previous blog posts . Another cluster of monuments in the vicinity of the Gettysburg College campus and Heckman's monument is just as much, if not more, removed from what one would consider the traditional battlefield and is often overlooked if not forgotten about. But if the readers of the Gettysburg Compiler are anything like me, the stories behind these forgotten monuments, the ones rarely told, are the most interesting ones of the battle. [excerpt]

Keywords

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

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Coster Avenue Mural

November 17, 2014

by Brianna Kirk '15

The Gettysburg Battlefield has over one thousand monuments dedicated to a host of brave men who fought and gave their lives during the three day engagement in July of 1863. Littered alongside well-traveled roads and points of attraction on the battlefield, most do not go unnoticed. There are a few, however, that do. One of them commemorates Captain Heckman's Battery K of the 1st Ohio Light Artillery, an oft-passed but unnoticed monument on Gettysburg College's campus and the focus of [one of my previous blog posts](#) . Another cluster of monuments in the vicinity of the Gettysburg College campus and Heckman's monument is just as much, if not more, removed from what one would consider the traditional battlefield and is often overlooked if not forgotten about. But if the readers of the *Gettysburg Compiler* are anything like me, the stories behind these forgotten monuments, the ones rarely told, are the most interesting ones of the battle.

If you were to turn down Stevens Street from Carlisle Street, you would eventually determine that you hit a dead end road. At least that was what I thought when the van carrying thirty Gettysburg College students on an unconventional battlefield tour turned down the street and came to a stop in front of a grassy area. Confusion set in as we were instructed to unload off the bus. This wasn't the battlefield; we were in a neighborhood.



Coster Avenue Mural, photo credit to Randy Drais.

Upon stepping off the bus, though, I realized how wrong my thoughts had been. There, in what could have been mistaken for a back yard, were three regimental monuments for the 134th New York, the 154th New York, and the 27th Pennsylvania and an eighty-foot long mural, called the Coster Avenue Mural. The mural depicts the fighting between Union Colonel Charles Coster's brigade and Confederate Brigadier General Garry Hays' and Colonel Isaac Avery's brigades. Upon arriving in Gettysburg around mid-afternoon on July 1, 1863 on Cemetery Hill, Coster's brigade was called into battle to cover the Eleventh Corps as it retreated through town, the result of Major General Jubal Early's division breaking the federal line. Fighting the tide against the flow of retreating Union troops, Coster's brigade ended their march in John Kuhn's brickyard, where they found temporary shelter from the advancing Confederates behind a wooden fence. Hays and Avery's brigades greatly outnumbered Coster's, almost three to one, making Coster's eventual retreat inevitable. For roughly twenty minutes, though, the men of the 27th Pennsylvania, 134th New York, and 154th New York were the rear guards of Union forces. With the First Corps retreating from the west of town to the east and the Eleventh Corps retreating from north to south, Coster's brigade essentially bought time for the Army of the Potomac, ensuring the Union fallback would have some semblance of order and not descend into mass chaos. Their ability to briefly hold off the Confederates allowed the Eleventh Corps to retreat to and secure the ground that General Oliver Otis Howard held, the very ground that Coster's brigade had left from – Cemetery Hill.

Although upwards of five hundred of Coster's men died at the hands of the Confederates on July 1, it was not done in vain, for the stance in Kuhn's brickyard gave Union forces the time they needed to make their way to Cemetery Hill and arrange themselves in the iconic fish hook position for the start of July 2. While the brickyard fight is not nearly as popular as other classic Gettysburg stories that led to Union victory in July 1863, the men who prolonged the Confederate attack on the Eleventh Corps deserve to be remembered. Their monuments and the beautiful mural dedicated to their courageous service in the face of almost certain defeat found on a seldom visited area of the battlefield should, just like Heckman and his men, be added to the list of brave and heroic men who fought and died during the first day of the battle of Gettysburg.

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