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## Remembrance Day... But Remembering What?

S. Marianne Johnson  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Remembrance Day... But Remembering What?

## **Abstract**

In conversation with other CWI Fellows last week, we began discussing the strangeness of the annual Remembrance Day Parade. Originally conceived as a way to recreate the procession to the cemetery in 1863 to hear the Gettysburg Address at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery, it seems to have morphed into something different all together. If we are honoring a recommitment to the preservation of Union, why do Confederate reenactors march in the parade? If we are simply celebrating the soldiers of both sides of the Civil War, why does the parade end at the site of the address that rededicated the nation to Union emancipationist victory and a "new birth of freedom?" [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Dedication Day

## **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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### Remembrance Day...But Remembering What?

November 21, 2014

by Sarah Johnson '15

In conversation with other CWI Fellows last week, we began discussing the strangeness of the annual Remembrance Day Parade. Originally conceived as a way to recreate the procession to the cemetery in 1863 to hear the Gettysburg Address at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery, it seems to have morphed into something different all together. If we are honoring a recommitment to the preservation of Union, why do Confederate reenactors march in the parade? If we are simply celebrating the soldiers of both sides of the Civil War, why does the parade end at the site of the address that rededicated the nation to Union emancipationist victory and a "new birth of freedom?" To sate my curiosity, I decided to go out on assignment and interview people before the parade began. I interviewed spectators and reenactors alike and asked them the following questions: 1) Is the parade a yearly tradition for you? and 2) What are you here celebrating and remembering today? Here is what I found:



Photo credit to the author.

Spectators gave a wide variety of answers. All but four said that it was a yearly tradition for them, but those four said that they had marked in on the calendar for next year and were planning on making it a tradition. The most common theme among the spectators was an idea of a tangible connection to history. Many people felt as if the parade connected them to the past and helped keep history alive. Most were not interested in the larger questions of the legacy of the Civil War, but the majority emphasized the need to remember all Civil War soldiers simply because they fought and died for freedom (somewhat ironic, because while Confederate soldiers may have been fighting for their personal freedom, the entire system of chattel slavery undergirds the Southern antebellum political economy). Many made references to “ragged and barefoot” Confederate reenactors; one man said it just about made him cry. One woman said, “...although we are certainly glad the Union won, we have compassion on Southern soldiers.”



Photo credit to the author.

Other spectators I spoke with referenced the proximity to Veterans Day and seeing the parade as a natural extension of honoring veterans of all wars. I approached a few gentlemen wearing “Vietnam Veteran” hats and asked them my questions. When I asked what they were remembering, the man in the middle stared me down and gruffly replied, “VETERANS.” As I could tell the conversation was over, I thanked them for their service and walked away. As I left, I heard another man say firmly to him, “Good Answer.” The strangeness of this, however, is that few reenactors are actually soldiers. Sure, some reenactors are veterans, but seeing men who have actually seen combat stand on the sidewalk and salute random people dressing up in uniforms is strange when one actually thinks about it. Shouldn’t it be the other way around?



Photo credit to the author.

Surprisingly, the most disappointing responses came from reenactors themselves. The responses I received were almost wholly superficial, like “It’s Gettysburg, this is what we do,” “I love dressing up!” and “This is the last great reenacting event. It’s like a party—we get to see everyone before the close of the season.” This last comment came from a long haired, hardcore Confederate reenactor. After he shared his thoughts with me, however, one of his comrades nervously said, “...Well, and I guess remembering...something...” The only person who refused to speak to me was a reenactor resplendently clad in a Confederate Cavalry Colonel’s uniform. When I explained who I was and asked if I could ask him some questions, he grunted “Depends,” and promptly walked away.



Photo credit to the author.

For the majority of participants, Remembrance Day has become an excuse to strut one's stuff and "keep history alive" without really explaining what that means. I did, however, have a refreshing conversation with a group of African American USCT reenactors that made the whole day worth it. They told me that they were here to honor Lincoln and the dedication of the cemetery. They told me this was where it all started, Civil War to Civil Rights, and also told me about their plans to honor their USCT ancestors at a recreation of the Grand Review March in D.C. in May.

My conversations with people before the parade were very interesting and shed light on the ambiguity of the event itself.

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