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Meaningless Landscapes Yield Meaningless Graffiti: Are We All to Blame?

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Abstract

It is a juvenile bit of graffiti. Someone has slathered spray paint across the chest and mustache of one of those iconic Gettysburg monuments: the 2nd company, Andrews (Massachusetts) Sharpshooters monument along "the Loop" just to the west of the Wheatfield. The news hit Facebook for me yesterday afternoon, when local historian and house history sleuth Kendra Debany posted the shocking photo on her wall. The kneeling figure now has two cartoonish blue female breasts and a blue handlebar adorning his lip. It is ridiculous. It is uncalled for. [excerpt]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Battlefield Vandalism

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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THURSDAY, MARCH 1, 2012

It is a juvenile bit of graffiti. Someone has slathered spray paint across the chest and mustache of one of those iconic Gettysburg monuments: [the 2nd company, Andrews \(Massachusetts\) Sharpshooters monument](#) along "the Loop" just to the west of the Wheatfield. The news hit Facebook for me yesterday afternoon, when local historian and [house history sleuth](#) Kendra Debany posted the shocking photo on her wall. The kneeling figure now has two cartoonish blue female breasts and a blue handlebar adorning his lip. It is ridiculous. It is uncalled for.



And we should have seen it coming.

Why do I say that? What impels someone to commit such an act of wanton vandalism? The comments that bubble to the surface invariably when these things happen are, "Kids today, no respect for the past!" and, "This is sacred ground where men gave their lives for what they believed in!" But how helpful are these sentiments? Is shouting "Get off my lawn!" truly the right image we as a Civil War community need to portray to help prevent these types of crimes?

Who *did* this? Who *caused* this?
Are they the same people? /
Photo provided by [Kendra Debany](#)

I'd submit that the vandals in this case found no personal meaning in this (or any) Civil War landscape. And it's not because they're dumb or young or products of a broken educational system. They find no meaning in this landscape because we so often fail to *let them find it*. We lock landscapes into our personal resource meanings. "This place must be important because and only because two valiant armies bled here for their own beliefs," we shout from rooftops and the crests of rocky, wooded hills. And as we shout, we alienate.

When someone tells you exactly why you must find a place important, in rote language lining out the meaning like a mathematical equation, how invested in that place do you *truly* become? Now imagine slowly unfolding the meaning of that place yourself, bit by bit, discovering piece by piece why that place belongs in your soul, how and why it plucks your heart.

I didn't hold the spray paint can when the monument was vandalized. But I'm responsible; we all are.

I feel a twinge of shame in my heart. I didn't reach these people. None of us reached these people. We

failed to reach them not because they were unreachable, but because we are so often too bullheaded to see that someone might care about this place or that place for a different reason than *we do*.

Maybe they were a young woman, who saw the trees at the base of Little Round Top as a nice place to read their algebra quietly, but had an interpreter come up and inflict interpretation in them in a vain attempt to make them care about a landscape that already had value to them as a quiet respite. Maybe they were a father and son flying a kite in the fields of Pickett's Charge who were told by some interpreter or law enforcement officer that this type of valuing of the resource was a "disrespectful" or "wrong" use of that place. Or maybe we never got the chance to speak with them, turned off because they assumed, because of the Civil War world's bad reputation of telling the same old 1960s 'valor and shared sacrifice' story over and over, that they'd never find meaning in this place.



The monument in better days
/ [CC Michael Noirot](#)

from home in some hospital? And how did mother crumple to the floor in agony over the prospect of never seeing her darling boy again?

Humanity, empathy and finding universal meaning in these landscapes - our best tools for helping others to care about and thereby care for these special places. But they need to come to their own meanings, whatever they may be, or every monument on the field will be simply another granite *tabula rasa* for a spray can and idle hands.

They could have found meaning somehow, I am sure of it. But because this place meant nothing, they meaninglessly graffiti'd it.

So how should we now respond? Should we damn them? Alienate them? Extradite them to a foreign land where torture is legal? One comment on [our Facebook page](#) suggested stringing them up by their thumbs and bleeding them from their feet, before throwing them to gators (frankly, I'm hoping that was simply an enraged momentary misremembering of the [8th Amendment](#)).

I think that's all useless. Threats and fantasies of torture build no new audience. They don't explain *why* we as a community find this reprehensible.

What's the best way to deal with this? Tell some universally meaningful stories about the Andrews Sharpshooters, maybe juxtaposed with the photo of the graffiti'd monument. Who were those men? What were their dreams? What were their passions? Who did they love? Eleven of them died over the course of this war. Where were they wounded? How loud were their screams of pain? What did they write home to mother as they lay dying far