



3-27-2012

## Playing with Time and Contradictions: Warfield and Barksdale at Gettysburg

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Dinkelaker, Jacob, "Playing with Time and Contradictions: Warfield and Barksdale at Gettysburg" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 147.  
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/147>

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## Abstract

There is a small white farmhouse that sits a mile or so outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. During the time of the battle of Gettysburg, a blacksmith known as James Warfield owned it. Warfield, a 42 year old widower, had just moved to Gettysburg the year prior, 1862, from Maryland with his four daughters. Once in Gettysburg, he opened up a blacksmith shop adjoining his farm. In a county full of carriage makers, you could be assured that there was plenty of work for blacksmiths, and Warfield's shop was touted as one of the best. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Battle of Gettysburg, James Warfield

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military 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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## Playing with Time and Contradictions: Warfield and Barksdale at Gettysburg

**TUESDAY, MARCH 27, 2012**

There is a small white farmhouse that sits a mile or so outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. During the time of the battle of Gettysburg, a blacksmith known as James Warfield owned it. Warfield, a 42 year old widower, had just moved to Gettysburg the year prior, 1862, from Maryland with his four daughters. Once in Gettysburg, he opened up a blacksmith shop adjoining his farm. In a county full of carriage makers, you could be assured that there was plenty of work for blacksmiths, and Warfield's shop was touted as one of the best.

It would seem to anybody who hears of James Warfield, that he was living the American dream. He owned his own 13 acre farm and blacksmith's shop, and although he had lost his wife, he still had his four daughters. With the Confederate invasion in the summer of 1863, that would all change. James Warfield's life and dreams would be shattered. Warfield and his family were forced to flee Gettysburg, because of fear of capture by the Confederates. Just because of the color of his skin, James Warfield, a free African American, was in danger. It didn't matter that James and his family were free blacks. If the Confederates found them, they would be captured and sent south into bondage, into slavery.

Although James Warfield was nowhere near his farm during the battle, his farm was far from being deserted. On July 2nd, General Barksdale and his Mississippi brigade briefly occupied the farm waiting for their orders to attack. General Barksdale, an imposing figure of a man, was a well known Southern planter. As a young man, Barksdale had studied at the University of Nashville, graduated, and eventually settled down at a plantation outside Columbus, Mississippi, where he took up the practice of law. An ardent supporter of State's Rights, Barksdale abandoned the study of law to become the editor of the Columbus Democrat. As editor, he used the paper as an organ to promote his pro-slavery views. When war broke out with Mexico, Barksdale joined up as an officer of the 2nd Mississippi. Returning home a hero, Barksdale took up politics, first as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention of 1852, later as a representative in Congress from 1853 to 1861. While in Congress, Barksdale gained prominence for being an fervent State's Rights Democrat, an ardent "Fire Eater" and later, a Secessionist. He would make a speech in 1856 declaring, "I deny the power of Congress to legislate upon the subject of slavery anywhere, except to protect it. That is my position..."

War hero. Accomplished planter and newspaper editor. Congressman. Some might say Barksdale was also living the American dream.

So, when Mississippi seceded, Barksdale thought nothing of resigning his seat in Congress, and returning to the South - to his home, his slaves, and his new country. He would offer his services to the Confederacy and now, two years later, July 2 1863 found Barksdale at the Warfield farm waiting to go into battle. Barksdale was once again a soldier, this time fighting against a country he had previously sworn to defend.

For William Barksdale, you could say that the very reason the battle of Gettysburg was being fought was over his idea of the American dream. Barksdale's version of the American dream was a dream of property - human property. Barksdale, was fighting at Gettysburg for State's Rights, for slavery's rights, and for his own right to own slaves, all 36 of his human property. Ranging from 2 to 40 years old, some of these human beings were the same ages as James Warfield, and his four daughters. In another world, James Warfield and his daughters, could have very well been, the reason, the property, that Barksdale was fighting for at Gettysburg.

General Barksdale and James Warfield probably never met though. But what would have happened if they did meet? What would they say each other? When they looked into each other's eyes, what would they see?

Would they have seen the antithesis of each other and their dreams?

What do you think Barksdale would have saw? What should have been a piece of his American dream – a piece of property, a slave, was in fact, a property owner himself, James Warfield was no property, he was a human being who owned property – land and a blacksmith shop.

What so you think James Warfield would have saw? A man that was fighting for his dreams? Or the devil that could take his family and freedom away?

Both Warfield's and Barksdale's dreams would be shattered later that day, July 2, 1863. Barksdale would be shot down during the attack, and die the next morning in enemy hands. The slave-holding country he fought for would also be struck down by a blow at Gettysburg, one from which it would never recover. After the battle, Warfield would return home with his freedom intact, but his farm ruined. During the battle, it sustained over 500 dollars in damage. 50 bushels of wheat, 60 bushels of corn, and 50 dollars of fences were all destroyed. 2 heads of cattle and 3 hogs went missing during Warfield's absence as well. Neither Barksdale's nor Warfield's dream survived the battle - no one really survived the battle.

The above is one of my favorite interpretive bits/stories that I used to tell to folks when I worked at Gettysburg. I loved playing with the possibilities of bending the fabric of time, throwing together weird contradictions, and generally just using history as a thought experiment. It doesn't matter that Barksdale and Warfield never met, or that the phrase "American dream" didn't come into usage until the 1960s (although versions of the idea are found within the ideology of Manifest Destiny). What matters, is we (the visitors and I) thought about it then during that moment. We looked at the story from a radically different perspective. We thought about things in a new way, from some different angle. What matters most, is we tried to create meaning.