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Abstract

An examination of the myths of the Battle of Gettysburg relating to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the 20th Maine on Little Round Top. Examines the roots of several misconceptions relating to the fighting on Little Round Top on July 2, 1863.

Keywords

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Gettysburg, Little Round Top, Historiography, 20th Maine

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Hans G. Myers

History is written for the most part from the outside. Truth often suffers distortion by reason of the point of view of the narrator, some pre-occupation of his judgment or fancy not only as to relative merits but even as to facts in their real relations. An interior view may not be without some personal coloring. But it must be of interest, especially in important transactions, to know how things appeared to those actually engaged in them.

– Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies*¹

For nearly 150 years, much of the focus of the Battle of Gettysburg has lay with Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the 20th Maine during the fighting on Little Round Top. While it is impossible to deny the heroism of Chamberlain and his men – the boldness of a bayonet charge at the

¹ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies: An Account of the Final Campaign of the Army of the Potomac, Based upon Personal Reminiscences of the Fifth Army Corps* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915), xi

zenith of the fighting is unparalleled – the historical record is one built upon truth, and the whole truth has not been presented in relation to the stand of the 20th Maine on the rocky heights on July 2, 1863 – to the detriment of the other men of their brigade who suffered just as valiantly to maintain Federal control of the heights.

In his work *General Grant and the Rewriting of History*, Dr. Frank Varney establishes a template on how to rehabilitate the historical record when, for too long, historians have been reliant on one or a small handful of sources. In his work, discussing the scapegoating of William Rosecrans by Ulysses Grant, Varney writes that “The argument might be made that historians have not blindly followed Grant, but that they have instead formed their own conclusions based on the evidence. But a close look at the primary sources indicates a sharp discrepancy between what too many historians have said and what the sources tell us.”² Much as in Varney’s model in examining the historical record of Grant and Rosecrans, there exists evidence that several of the main sources for what hereafter shall be called The “Chamberlain Myth” – of Chamberlain’s heroic bayonet charge

² Frank P. Varney, *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2013), 269.

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being the saving grace of the Army of the Potomac – are highly questionable, if not outright duplicitous in their nature, chief among them the memoir and recollections of Theodore Gerrish and Chamberlain’s report on the battle contained in the *Official Records*, that have obscured the fact that the 20th Maine alone was not responsible for holding Little Round Top.

The “Chamberlain Myth,” however, has been promulgated beyond simply historians to the general public: novelist Michael Shaara magnified the already extant myth a hundred-fold with his work on Gettysburg, *The Killer Angels*. Jeff Daniels’ performance in the film *Gettysburg*, and documentarian Ken Burns’ heavy focus on Chamberlain additionally serve to only strengthen the myth to the detriment of actual historical fact.

How did myth come to dominate and suppress actual history? Firstly, it is evident that Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was not above promoting himself: in the years after the war, Chamberlain undertook an extensive speaking tour throughout New England, making himself into a celebrity delivering lectures on “The Left at Gettysburg” and his war experiences.³ A pair of

³ Glenn LaFantasie, “Joshua Chamberlain and the American Dream,” in *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 31; Alice Rains Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC:

articles were published in 1912 and 1913 – one in *Cosmopolitan*, one in *Hearst's Magazine* – by Chamberlain,⁴ which, coupled with the posthumous publication of *The Passing of the Armies*, provoked backlash by some. Ellis Spear, who had served Chamberlain and the 20th Maine as acting Major at Gettysburg, wrote bitterly that “I have not read it through; like yourself, I was disgusted though not unprepared. ... I knew Chamberlain in college in '54 to '58. He had the same infirmity then, notoriously of inability to tell the truth always.”⁵

But what did Chamberlain say in his articles and book which was so objectionable to Spear? It is apparent in a challenge laid in the introduction to Spear's unpublished memoirs: “It appears to me that the actors in these affairs owe to posterity a just and truthful account of what they saw without unjust disparag[e]ment to others and without boasting or misrepresentations of one[']s own services.”⁶ Ellis Spear, Chamberlain's one-time

The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 334; *Ibid*, 363-5.

⁴ *Ibid*, 373-4.

⁵ Ellis Spear to Oliver Willcox Norton, January 18, 1916, in *With a Flash of His Sword: The Writings of Major Holman S. Melcher, 20th Maine Infantry*, ed. William B. Styple (Kearny, NJ: Belle Grove Publishing, 1994), 297.

⁶ Ellis Spear, *The Civil War Recollections of General Ellis Spear*, ed. Abbott Spear, Andrea C. Hawkes, Marie H. McCosh, Craig L. Symonds, and Michael H. Alpert (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1997), 3.

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second in command, charged that his commander had distorted the truth to give “unjust disparag[e]ment to others” and filled it with “boasting or misrepresentations” in order to benefit himself. Spear, however, was not the only vocal critic of Chamberlain’s truthfulness. Oliver Willcox Norton, who has served on the brigade headquarters staff at Gettysburg, similarly believed that Chamberlain had overreached: “It should be possible for those who remain ... to recognize the sincerity and the valor of their foes, to put aside all hatred and prejudice... In what the author has to say he hopes to do this. This attitude will not oblige him, in cases where writers have in his opinion deliberately misrepresented the facts to cover their own misconduct, to refrain from pointing this out.”⁷ This veiled reference to Chamberlain – and to Norval Welch, the commander of the 16th Michigan – is borne out in Norton’s strident defenses of brigade commander Colonel Strong Vincent. Indeed, it was with Norton that Spear was corresponding in 1916 when he commented that Chamberlain was “notoriously of inability to tell the truth always.”⁸

⁷⁷ Oliver Willcox Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top, Gettysburg, July 2, 1863* (New York: Neale Publishing, 1913; Reprint Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1992), 12. Citations refer to the Stan Clark Military Books edition.

⁸ Spear to Norton, January 18, 1916.

In that same letter, Spear continues discussing *The Passing of the Armies* – Chamberlain’s reminiscences of the Appomattox campaign which had just been posthumously published a few months before:

So far as I have read, “The Passing of the Armies” is a tissue of lies. He was not wounded on the Quaker road. I know that absolutely, as I was with him part of the time and not far off any time. His coat was torn by a bullet. Of his wound at Petersburg I know, as I went back to the Hospital after dark and was with him. He was in charge of our regimental surgeon and was sitting up, but making some fuss. He was wounded in the penis. Of course I made no examination but the surgeon explained the wound to me. It was a painful wound of course, as a catheter had to be introduced to carry urine past the wound. This was the only time he was touched by iron or lead. He artfully made much out of that wound, and by adroit and persistent lecturing and writing after the war. His literary ability was of a high order, and he always had a gracious manner, but was absolutely unable to tell the truth and

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was of inordinate vanity.⁹

Even Thomas Desjardin, the modern-day historian of the 20th Maine, calls the Chamberlain myth “a story full of easily disproved details. A story that is as much construction as it is fact.”¹⁰ The birth of the myth of Chamberlain as the consummate hero of Little Round Top is, ironically, from Chamberlain’s opponents: specifically a feud between James Longstreet and William C. Oates carried out in the pages of the *Southern Historical Society Papers* in the 1870’s. Oates’ rebuttal to Longstreet formed the bedrock of the Chamberlain myth as not only the first widespread account of the fighting to be published, but also because so focused had Oates been on blaming Longstreet for the loss of “343 men and 19 officers” of the 15th Alabama’s 644 men¹¹ that he had neglected to actually conduct thorough research into the strength he possessed at Gettysburg, leading to Oates – by his own later admission¹² – *doubling* the number of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo, 2003), 130.

¹¹ William C. Oates, “Gettysburg: The Battle on the Right,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 6 (1878): quoted in Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 131.

¹² William C. Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy and its Lost Opportunities; With a History of the*

men he actually took into battle against the 20th Maine.¹³

But the damage had been done: Howard Prince, the regimental historian of the 20th Maine, and Chamberlain both seized upon Oates' 644 men as evidence of the overwhelming number of the Confederate force they had fought.¹⁴ This bedrock laid, by Oates, colored histories of the war for decades: his paper for the Southern Historical Society would be the reference that men such as Chamberlain would turn to for troop numbers of the 15th Alabama for decades. And it was upon this bedrock that the foundation of myth was laid by Theodore Gerrish, a minister who had served as a private soldier in Company H, 20th Maine.

John J. Pullen, the regimental historian of the 20th Maine whose Twentieth Century history of the regiment remains a seminal work in the field of

15th Alabama Regiment and the Forty-Eight Battles in which it was Engaged (New York: Neale, 1905), 222.

¹³ Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 132; The 15th Alabama, in actuality, took 499 men into battle at Little Round Top, losing 18 killed, 55 wounded, and 19 missing, J. David Petruzzi and Steven A. Stanley, *The Gettysburg Campaign in Numbers and Losses: Synopses, Orders of Battle, Strengths, Casualties, and Maps, June 9-July 14, 1863* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2012).

¹⁴ Howard Prince, "Twentieth Maine Regiment" in *Maine at Gettysburg: Report of Maine Commissioners, Prepared by The Executive Committee*, ed. Charles Hamlin, Greenlief T. Stevens and George W. Verrill (Portland, ME: Lakeside Press, 1898), 255-6.

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Civil War regimental histories, is quoted in *These Honored Dead* as stating that “many books are built upon other books; and in writings on the Civil War, few books have been built upon more often than those of Theodore Gerrish.”¹⁵ Gerrish’s history of the fighting at Gettysburg appeared in his memoirs, *Army Life: A Private’s Reminiscences of the Civil War*, first published in 1882. In an introduction, Gerrish’s publisher writes:

It was first mainly published as newspaper articles, and read by hundreds who participated in the events of which MR. GERRISH has written. If there were any material errors in his statements, they would have been challenged at once by those properly jealous of their own reputation, and that of their officers; so that the author has really had the advantage of the criticism and indorsement of very many, equally as familiar with the facts as himself, and, on that account, his history may be taken as unusually reliable.¹⁶

¹⁵ John J. Pullen: quoted in Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 134.

¹⁶ J.H.D. in Theodore Gerrish, *Army Life: A Private’s Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Portland, ME: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, 1882), 11.

In his memoirs, Gerrish possesses a simple, direct narrative style: he writes frequently of what he saw, and what he felt – making use of the personal “I” throughout the entire work. Suddenly, however, the personal tone vanishes entirely as Gerrish begins to describe the fighting at Gettysburg. “We” takes its place. Yet it is from Gerrish’s account of Gettysburg that everyone from Pullen to Ken Burns to Michael Shaara has drawn their inspiration.

What could explain the sudden shift in the tonality of Gerrish’s recollections? The answer is shockingly simple: Gerrish was not with the 20th Maine at Gettysburg, and was instead in an army hospital in Philadelphia – a bombshell revelation uncovered by Thomas Desjardin in his history of the 20th Maine at Gettysburg.¹⁷ Gerrish’s account of Gettysburg is then – at least, and at best – a second-hand accounting of events to which he was not a witness, and at worst a fabrication built around the framework of what others told him. Indeed, in Gerrish’s memoirs, several stories which have no other reference in primary materials find their root: that there were ten Confederates for every man from Maine,¹⁸ that the Federal and Confederate gun

¹⁷ Thomas A. Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys from Maine: The 20th Maine and the Gettysburg Campaign* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127.

¹⁸ Gerrish, *Army Life*, 108.

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barrels were close enough to touch at the height of the fighting,¹⁹ that the 20th Maine hesitated before making their famous bayonet charge,²⁰ and that Holman Melcher rather than Joshua Chamberlain was the officer who led the charge.²¹

What makes the account presented by Gerrish all the more salacious is that the author inserts himself into a narrative at which he was not present: He presents the ‘dying words’ of Captain Land, describes how his tent mate staggered about from a mortal wound, and how two wounded sergeants fell together – scenes he clearly could *not* have witnessed, yet presents as if he had. The “I” makes a sudden return in the midst of the chapter while discussing the beginnings of the fighting, as if he were desperate to earn for himself a piece of fame:

I know not who gave the first fire, or which line received the first lead. I only know that the carnage began. I wish that I could picture with my pen the awful details of that hour, -- how rapidly the cartridges were torn from the boxes and stuffed in the smoking muzzles of the guns; how the steel rammers clashed and clanged in the heated barrels;

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 110.

²¹ Ibid.

how the men's hands and faces grew grim and black with burning powder; how our little line, baptized with fire, reeled to and fro as it advanced or was pressed back; how our officers bravely encouraged the men to hold on and recklessly exposed themselves to the enemy's fire, -- a terrible medley of cries, shouts, cheers, groans, prayers, curses, bursting shells, whizzing rifle bullets and clanging steel.²²

Gerrish's 'account' of Gettysburg – truthfully, it cannot even be *called* an account given his absence from the regiment – is unreliable and peppered with falsehood given his apparent literary license with facts which he cannot have witnessed, and likely did not get from other veterans of the regiment given how strenuously and how furiously many other veterans of the 20th Maine countered his assertions following the publication of his memoir.²³ James Nichols, the commander of Company K at Little Round Top, went so far as to write an open letter to Gerrish in the *Lincoln County News* in which he accused Gerrish's account of being “a work of fiction” and challenged Gerrish's

²² Ibid, 108.

²³ Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys from Maine*, 128-9.

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story virtually point by point.²⁴ In spite of the efforts of Nichols and others to correct the record, Gerrish’s memoirs began to circulate around the nation, and began to lay the groundwork of a myth upon which the next builder would be Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain himself.

Curiously, Chamberlain’s official report on the fighting, printed in the *Official Records* as dated July 6, 1863, refers to the hill as “Little Round Top.”²⁵ While to modern readers, this may seem perfectly normal – indeed, natural – for an author in 1863, it presents an interesting discrepancy. In his contemporaneous correspondence – two dated the same day as the report and one dated roughly two weeks later – Chamberlain refers to the hill twice as “Wolf Hill”,²⁶ and once as either “Sugar Loaf

²⁴ James Nichols in *Lincoln County News*, April 1882.

²⁵ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, “Report of Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain, Twentieth Maine Infantry,” in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), vol. 27, part 1, 622-626.

²⁶ Joshua Chamberlain to Lieutenant George Herendeen, July 6, 1863, in *Through Blood & Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Major General Joshua Chamberlain*, ed. Mark Nesbitt (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1996), 87.; Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, July 18, 1863, in *Joshua L. Chamberlain: A Life in Letters*, ed. Thomas Desjardin (Oxford: Osprey Press, 2012), 202.

Hill”²⁷ or “Wolf Hill.”²⁸ Only once, in his letter to division commander James Barnes does Chamberlain use the name “Round Top”²⁹ before dismissing that name to refer to it as “Wolf Hill” once more.³⁰ There is a simple reason for this discrepancy: the name “Little Round Top” was not used to refer to the hill until 1867: indeed, until 1867, the hill did not *have* a name.³¹ Additionally, Chamberlain notes – as Desjardin illustrates in *These Honored Dead* – that “Captain Billings, Lieutenant Kendall, and Lieutenant Linscott are officers whose loss we deeply mourn...”³² Desjardin explains that by July 6, only Lieutenant Kendall had died, while Billings would not die until July 15 and Linscott until July 27.³³ This immediately calls into question the veracity of Chamberlain’s report as printed in the *Official Records*, and Desjardin has unearthed the answer to the unspoken question of just *when* the report was written:

²⁷ Joshua Chamberlain to James Barnes, July 6, 1863, in *Joshua L. Chamberlain: A Life in Letters*, ed. Thomas Desjardin (Oxford: Osprey Press, 2012), 201.

²⁸ Wolf Hill does exist at Gettysburg, but is approximately a mile to the north and east of Little Round Top.

²⁹ Referring to “Big Round Top,” which was simply called “Round Top” at the time.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 202 n. 30.

³² Chamberlain, “Report...”, 626.

³³ Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 139.

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In March 1884, the War Department got around to the Gettysburg portion of the *Official Records*. A clerk noticed that the report of the 20th Maine Regiment was not in the files, and he wrote to the unit’s former commander to see about getting a copy. Chamberlain replied that he did not have one but would be happy to supply something since ‘justice to that regiment demands that so important a portion of their listing should be preserved.’ The War Department agreed and asked for the report along with a formal certificate ‘that it is an exact copy of the report made by you in the first instance.’ Desiring to give his regiment its just mention in these important records, Chamberlain shortly submitted what he called a ‘copy’ or ‘draft’ of his original July 6, 1863, report along with the requested certificate of authenticity... This copy of his report was in Chamberlain’s handwriting and had very few corrections – strange when considering that he wrote it in haste just a few days after the battle while the army was on the march. Despite these conditions, he

wrote it in eloquent style comprising just over 2,500 words.³⁴

But, Desjardin then informs us that Chamberlain’s true official report on the Battle of Gettysburg does still exist, attached to a letter addressed to Brigadier General John Hodson, the Adjutant General of Maine, that is dated to November 4, 1863, and which resides currently in the Maine State Archives in Augusta.³⁵ The report – nearly a thousand words shorter than the report contained in the *Official Records* is dated July 6, 1863 and makes no reference to the name “Little Round Top,” or to the deaths of two officers who were yet alive. Additionally, the document lacks many of the rhetorical flourishes present in the “official” report filed by Chamberlain.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid, 139-40.

³⁵ Joshua Chamberlain to John Hodson, November 4, 1863, in *Through Blood & Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Major General Joshua Chamberlain*, ed. Mark Nesbitt (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1996), 113; citation for the location of Chamberlain’s report: Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 140.

³⁶ Joshua Chamberlain to George Herendeen, July 6, 1863 “Letter from Chamberlain – Gettysburg battle report” Letter. From Maine State Archives, *Joshua L. Chamberlain Correspondence*.
https://digitalmaine.com/chamberlain_corr/4/.

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In other words, the single most important document ever written by Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain – his official report of the fighting on Little Round Top within the *Official Records* – is a forgery insofar as it was written 21 years after the fighting despite being postdated to only four days after the 20th Maine’s most famous battle. This report clearly draws upon the troop estimates of Oates’ 1878 paper for the Southern Historical Society, as well as some of the more lurid details contained in Gerrish’s account, and – no doubt – ephemera and memories gleaned from decades of conversation with other veterans. We can confirm, however, that Chamberlain *was* familiar with Gerrish’s account, as a fragment of a letter from Chamberlain to Gerrish is preserved in the Maine State Archives, wherein Chamberlain discusses the bayonet charge of the 20th Maine: “When I gave that shout, it was not exactly a command: Bayonet; I passed rapidly among the ranks of men forming our shattered line they caught up the word, and gave no chance to add “Forward” for the movement as a whole began as soon as they could get their bayonets fixed.”³⁷ This correspondence is evident in

³⁷ Joshua Chamberlain to Theodore Gerrish, circa 1882
“*Letter from Chamberlain to Rev. Theodore Gerrish Regarding His Recollection of Gettysburg, circa 1882*” Letter. From Maine State Archives, *Joshua L. Chamberlain Correspondence*.
https://digitalmaine.com/chamberlain_corr/56/.

Chamberlain's 'official' report in the *Official Records*, as he references "The word was enough. It ran like fire along the line, from man to man, and rose into a shout, with which they sprang forward upon the enemy, now not 30 yards away."³⁸

Chamberlain's report is, thus, an anomaly when compared to the other reports and correspondence contained within the *Official Records*, as it was fabricated with two decades of retrospection, and with a clear eye towards shoring up not only the importance of the 20th Maine, but also himself – as speaking tours depend upon having fantastic stories to tell. It was this behavior which so disgusted Spear and Norton in 1916 after the publication of *The Passing of the Armies* and his two articles for *Cosmopolitan* and *Hearst's*.

Not content with sensationalizing the official report of the battle based upon Oates' spur-of-the-moment troop calculations and Gerrish's spurious "memories" of Gettysburg, Chamberlain doubled down on the creation of his own myth. In June of 1913, Chamberlain's byline appeared on the article "Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg," published in *Hearst's Magazine*. Containing sensationalism mixed with Chamberlain's usually unflappable rhetoric – at one point, he alludes to the ghost of George Washington having been seen

³⁸ Chamberlain, "Report...", 624.

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riding with the army³⁹ – it is this article which includes the famous Chamberlain story wherein he informs his brothers as a Confederate shell burst overhead that “Another such shot might make it hard for mother.”⁴⁰ John Chamberlain had died in 1867,⁴¹ and Tom Chamberlain had died in 1896,⁴² both without leaving their own accounts of the fighting at Gettysburg in publication, leaving us Joshua’s article of fifty years later as the only widespread source for this story, though it may appear in the correspondence of one or the other.

Among other claims in the article is that the brigade was deployed below the summit because “the shot so rake [sic] the crest that we had to keep our men below it to save our heads,”⁴³ which is false; that he had been given orders to shoot the mutineers of the 2nd Maine “the moment they refused” to obey orders;⁴⁴ that the 20th Maine was the first of the regiments to form on Little Round Top (it was, in fact, the last);⁴⁵ that Gouverneur

³⁹ Joshua Chamberlain, “Through Blood and Fire at Gettysburg,” in *“Bayonet! Forward:” My Civil War Reminiscences*, ed Stan Clark (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

⁴¹ Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence*, 340.

⁴² *Ibid*, 368.

⁴³ Chamberlain, “Through Blood and Fire,” 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 25; Spear, *Civil War Recollections*, 33; Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys from Maine*, 42.

Warren had gone looking for reinforcements for Vincent's Brigade;⁴⁶ that brigade commander Colonel Strong Vincent "felt that all was lost, unless the very gods should intervene,"⁴⁷ Chamberlain giving a field promotion to a dying sergeant who had been demoted to the ranks, George Washington Buck (curiously, most sources regarding his promotion cite either Gerrish or Chamberlain's article);⁴⁸ a letter received years later from a marksman in the 15th Alabama who twice tried to kill Chamberlain, but hesitated both times (Desjardin notes that no such letter was ever found in Chamberlain's voluminous files of received correspondence, and that Chamberlain was notorious for holding onto nearly every scrap of paper he received);⁴⁹ and again the famous claim of having taken four hundred prisoners – a number not borne out by any examination of the records of the Confederate regiments.⁵⁰

Of course, one need only see the name of the publication which carried Chamberlain's article to immediately become suspicious of its veracity. *Hearst's Magazine*, owned by the "father of Yellow Journalism," William Randolph Hearst, should immediately arouse skepticism that some incidents

⁴⁶ Chamberlain, "Through Blood and Fire," 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid; Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 143.

⁵⁰ Chamberlain, "Through Blood and Fire," 34.

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contained within its pages may not be the whole truth: something on which Chamberlain agreed, writing to someone requesting a copy of the article from him that “The Hearst editors mutilated and ‘corrected’ my ‘Gettysburg,’ so I have not tried to get copies.”⁵¹ When Elliot Dill, then Adjutant General of Maine, wrote to Chamberlain in praise of the article, Chamberlain responded bluntly: “[it] is much curtailed and changed by the insertion of ‘connective tissue’ by the editor.”⁵²

Regardless of Chamberlain believing that the editors at *Hearst’s* had “mutilated” his story, the article inspired a furor among veterans of his brigade. “His literary ability was of a high order, and he always had a gracious manner, but was absolutely unable to tell the truth and was of inordinate vanity. As far as he could, he robbed Vincent,” Ellis Spear wrote to Oliver Norton after Chamberlain’s death.⁵³ Norton, who had served as Vincent’s headquarters brigade color bearer and bugler, clearly agreed even without the later correspondence with Spear: inspired partially by Chamberlain’s previous articles and speeches on the fighting for Little Round Top, Norton produced *The*

⁵¹ Joshua Chamberlain to “Mrs. Eckstrom,” May 28, 1913, Fogler Library Special Collections, University of Maine, *Chamberlain Family Papers*.

⁵² Joshua Chamberlain to Elliot Dill, June 12, 1913, Maine State Archives, *Records of the Adjutant General of Maine*.

⁵³ Ellis Spear to Oliver Willcox Norton, January 18, 1916.

Attack and Defense of Little Round Top, Gettysburg, July 2, 1863 in 1913, beginning with a polemic against “writers [who] have in his opinion deliberately misrepresented the facts to cover their own misconduct...”⁵⁴

Norton mounted a one-man crusade to attempt to halt the dissemination of the “Chamberlain Myth,” but it would be long after his death that the legendary status of Joshua Chamberlain would explode: John J. Pullen’s regimental history of the 20th Maine would appear in 1957; Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels* would erupt onto the scene and popularize Chamberlain in 1974; and from that would come both Ken Burns’ 1990 documentary series *The Civil War* and the Ted Turner-Ronald F. Maxwell film *Gettysburg* starring Jeff Daniels as Chamberlain would open nationwide in 1993, cementing a “Cult of Chamberlain” in the pop history community. As Desjardin wryly notes:

A long list of Chamberlain-related items has appeared in the marketing mainstream since 1990. They range from the more subdued tributes such as sculptures and paintings, to

⁵⁴ Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top*, 12; In perhaps a bitter irony, the reprint edition from Stan Clark Military Books in Gettysburg features Chamberlain upon the cover.

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the more outrageous such as floatee pens, action figures, and even a Chamberlain night-light. A member of the now enormous Chamberlain fan club can drink Chamberlain pale ale from a Chamberlain coffee mug propped up against a Chamberlain pillow, spying a Chamberlain wall clock or wrist watch. If we once held our heroes aloft in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, we now measure them largely by the number of times their image adorns a T-shirt. By this measure of merchandise as hero worship, Chamberlain is, for now at least, the unchallenged ruler of the Civil War.⁵⁵

Writing in 1913, Norton bitterly claimed that “justice has never been done to Vincent.”⁵⁶ Continuing, he wrote that: “A glance at Little Round Top was enough for him to realize its importance in relation to the field of battle and the necessity of occupying it without delay. Minutes were precious. In spite of all that Warren, Sykes, and Barnes did, it would have been too late had not Vincent moved without waiting for an order from

⁵⁵ Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 129.

⁵⁶ Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top*, 266.

his immediate superior.”⁵⁷ Had Vincent delayed in waiting for an order from Barnes, he would have taken Oates’ place in fighting his way up the hill as the Confederates shot down upon them.

Norton summarized his purpose for writing his book on the very next page: “If I can show that the retention by the Union army of this key to the battlefield on July 2, 1863, is due to Strong Vincent and his gallant brigade, aided at the supreme moment by O’Rorke and his regiment, I shall feel that Vincent, O’Rorke, and the men of their commands who gave up their lives in that supreme effort did not die in vain.”⁵⁸ Norton assembled quite a repertoire of supporters for his claim. Daniel Butterfield wrote that “No man who lived and fought in the battle of Gettysburg did more for his country than Vincent.”⁵⁹ Daniel Sickles concurred: “Colonel Vincent’s part in the operations of that day, on the left of the Union lines, was distinguished by excellent judgement, prompt movements, and signal gallantry...”⁶⁰ Henry Tremain, commander of the 73rd New York of Sickles’ Excelsior Brigade during the battle, stated that “too much recognition cannot be given by this

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 267.

⁵⁹ Daniel Butterfield to Oliver Norton, February 19, 1901, in *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 55.

⁶⁰ Daniel E. Sickles to Oliver Norton, November 21, 1901, in *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 55-6.

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country to the skill and heroism of General Vincent’s supreme effort and sacrifice.”⁶¹ Even James Longstreet wrote to Norton in praise of Vincent: “It gives me pleasure to state in reference to the worth of Little Round Top to the Union army at Gettysburg, it was everything to the success of the Union battle. General Vincent’s prompt action in moving to save that point, held it, and was the means of getting the battle to his side.”⁶²

What is glossed over frequently is Chamberlain’s own naked ambition and vanity: in August, 1863, he began a very public campaign to be promoted to Brigadier General, organizing a “firestorm of endorsements” to the War Department while attempting to keep it appearing spontaneous.⁶³ He wrote bitterly that commanding a brigade without the extra pay and allowances of a general’s star was “an ‘injustice’ that ‘quite cancelled the complement’ of having been given responsibility for the brigade.”⁶⁴ After the war he would be welcomed to town halls and auditoriums to Handel’s *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, likening himself to the historic military leader Judas

⁶¹ Henry E. Tremain to Oliver Norton, November 23, 1901, in *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 56.

⁶² James Longstreet to Oliver Norton, December 6, 1901, in *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 57.

⁶³ LaFantasie “Joshua Chamberlain and the American Dream,” 39-40.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

Maccabee, whom Handel's oratorio was about.⁶⁵ As other writings about Gettysburg began to appear, and authors' memories began to challenge Chamberlain's story, whether intentionally or not, historian Glenn LaFantasie notes an "uncharacteristically defensive, and more than a little peevish" tone to Chamberlain's public remarks about Little Round Top throughout the 1880's.⁶⁶

Even Thomas Desjardin, the twentieth-and-twenty-first century historian of the 20th Maine admits that "the one person whose story embodies the elements of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and outright invention that the Gettysburg story has become is this Maine colonel – Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain."⁶⁷

Chamberlain himself would admit that he should not be the focus of all attention regarding Little Round Top: "I regret that these [Norton's gathering of official records and facts, published in his paper for MOLLUS] compel us to take account of the incidents connected with the actions of the regiment on the right of our brigade, some of the consequences of which led to so great a loss to the service as the fall of Vincent."⁶⁸ Chamberlain

⁶⁵ Ibid, 41.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 42-3.

⁶⁷ Desjardin, *These Honored Dead*, 129.

⁶⁸ Joshua L. Chamberlain to Oliver W. Norton, January 15, 1910, in *Army Letters, 1861-1865: Being Extracts from Private Letters to Relatives and Friends From a Soldier in the*

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continued to admit that he should not be the sole focus of histories of Little Round Top in his letter, writing of Vincent that: “He was a noble man, and I have not known an abler commander in his grade. Nothing could exceed his skill and energy in taking the position on Little Round Top and the confidence he inspired in his subordinates. To this the result of the fight on the left at Round Top is very largely due.”⁶⁹

To use Chamberlain’s own words: “the result of the fight on the left at Round Top is very largely due” to the actions and efforts of Strong Vincent on July 2, 1863. In a separate letter, Chamberlain wrote that “I regard the timely occupation of that position, [Little Round Top] which was at that stage of the battle the key of the Union defense, as due to the energy and skill of Colonel Vincent.”⁷⁰ In spite of whatever Oates or Spear would write of Chamberlain’s ego and sense of entitlement regarding the stories of the Battle of Gettysburg, Joshua Chamberlain was – at least – aware that the stories of his heroism and the

Field During the Late Civil War, With an Appendix Containing Copies of Some Official Documents, Papers and Addresses of Later Date by Oliver Willcox Norton, ed. James R. Wright (Dayton, OH: Morningside, 1990), 363.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Joshua L. Chamberlain to Oliver W. Norton, November 18, 1901, in *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 56.

heroism of the 20th Maine on Little Round Top required recognition of others.

Then why do historians continue to give such continued credence to the lionization of Joshua Chamberlain? It is, simply at the end of the day, part of human nature. History should be tidy, in the minds of the popular audience – and that means that existing narratives, such as Chamberlain’s self-aggrandizing after the war, become immutable after being the focus of so many books, television documentaries, and Hollywood movies. What has become fixed in the popular mindset cannot be easily dispelled – even from the mindset of academe. At the end of the day, human nature remains the same: stories of personal heroism and coolness under fire are difficult to remove, even when they are at best manipulative of facts, and at worse patently untrue. Chamberlain’s bravery is undeniable – wounded in the service of his country, ordering an unorthodox bayonet charge at his position at Gettysburg – but Chamberlain’s vanity must be remembered. It was not solely by his actions, as has been alleged for nearly 150 years, that the Federal left was saved at Gettysburg. The historical record of the battle is long overdue for a full reexamination in the vein of the research undertaken by Dr. Frank Varney regarding the acceptance of certain personal narratives as wholesale fact by earlier historians.

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