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Once Upon a Time in Gettysburg: Sometimes It Works

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Once Upon a Time in Gettysburg: Sometimes It Works

Abstract

Monday night, I took my class out on the 'battlefield.' I know some of them are taking my class because, "it's Gettysburg College and I should take a Civil War class before I leave." I couldn't resist the siren call to show them where they have lived for four years and transform the meanings of that ground for them. So we went on a campus tour, the battlefield they walk everyday when they go to class or dinner or out to party on a Friday night. [excerpt]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Pennsylvania College

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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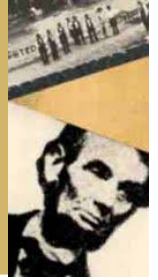
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THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2012

Monday night, I took my class out on the 'battlefield.' I know some of them are taking my class because, "it's Gettysburg College and I should take a Civil War class before I leave." I couldn't resist the siren call to show them where they have lived for four years and transform the meanings of that ground for them. So we went on a campus tour, the battlefield they walk everyday when they go to class or dinner or out to party on a Friday night.

I showed them the Beachem portico, where construction workers once unearthed human bones, the remnants of a long forgotten amputation. I showed them the quad in front of the Library where Jack Hopkins' house stood during the battle, while Hopkins himself ran from the oncoming Confederates, unable to hide from the color of his own skin. I showed them the south portico of Pennsylvania Hall, where amputations took place in the open air and men nearly drowned in rivulets of water from the rains following the battle. I showed them the doorway where Alice Baugher, the College President's daughter stared coldly into the eyes of Robert E. Lee. I showed them the dining room where President Baugher sat down to a cordial dinner with former favorite student turned Confederate soldier James Crocker in the bloody aftermath of the battle.

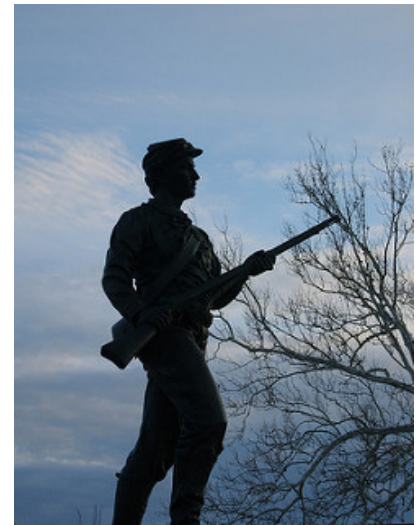
This semester has been tough on me. It has felt like a never ending struggle to [reach these kids](#), to show them that history can be exciting and personal and deeply human. On the first night of class, after going through the syllabus, I asked the question I ask of anyone with a desire to study history: "why do you hate history?"

Typically it conjures answers swirling around lists of dates and names with no context, no meaning.

Back in January, after we had reviewed the required reading and research paper for the course, it elicited a different response from one student: "I hate reading and I hate writing."

I was incensed that night, a holy fire lit within my gut. I didn't know how I would make it through the semester. I didn't know how I could reach out to these students. That night has haunted me this whole semester, constantly nagging at me and making me doubt that I could get through.

Monday night, I got an e-mail from the same student who said she hates reading and writing:



The College Boys who broke and ran: one of my keystone tales on the campus. / CC Deb Pittenturf

I come home to write science papers, but instead find myself googling Crocker and Hopkins! There is so much interesting stuff documented from the war.... This stuff is so cool!"

As we all walked back from the President's House toward Weidensall Hall, she admitted to me that as she started reading Drew Gilpin Faust's [*This Republic of Suffering*](#) for class, she was already thinking how "gross" it must have been on the campus in 1863.

I guess that's as good enough a reason as any to do this. She closed her note Monday night with a simple comment: "Hope that wasn't the last of the tours...."

I hope so too.