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On the Road: A Summer Odyssey in Dixie

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Abstract

All summer long, readers of *The Gettysburg Compiler* were treated to posts from Pohanka interns documenting their research and experiences at historical sites across the country. While I did not participate in the Pohanka internship program this summer, I did take a few of my friends on a week-long camping trip to visit a couple of the interns and see them in action. Our plan was to drive from Connecticut to Harrisburg, PA, where we would stay with friends for the night, then drive to Fredericksburg, VA to tour the Civil War battlefields there and around Richmond [*excerpt*].

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Pohanka internship program

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

On the Road: A Summer Odyssey in Dixie

November 9, 2015

By Jeff Lauck '18



My friends Julia Kerr '18, Meredith Staats '18, and Cameron Kinard '18 at our campsite in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Photo courtesy of the author.

All summer long, readers of *The Gettysburg Compiler* were treated to posts from Pohanka interns documenting their research and experiences at historical sites across the country. While I did not participate in the Pohanka internship program this summer, I did take a few of my friends on a week-long camping trip to visit a couple of the interns and see them in action. Our plan was to drive from Connecticut to Harrisburg, PA, where we would stay with friends for the night, then drive to Fredericksburg, VA to tour the Civil War battlefields there and around Richmond.

The trip was memorable for a number of reasons. First, a camping trip with friends presents its own slew of challenges and opportunities. As the only experienced camper and trip planner, I

quickly gained the nickname “mom,” a name that has stuck long since we made it back home. We also learned that summers in Virginia are hot, humid, and prone to scattered thunderstorms. All of these challenges were made worse by the fact that we were staying in a tent and two of our party had never before been on a camping trip. Despite one near-collision with a dump truck on a narrow back road in Virginia and a single case of Lyme disease, we all managed to make it home safely.

The experience was also an anthropological journey of sorts. As someone who was born and raised in New England, I found that jumping into the heart of Dixie was a straight shot of culture shock. Along Lafayette Boulevard in Fredericksburg, we drove past street after street named for Confederate commanders. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this was not that there were streets named for them, but how many there were. It started with the big generals – Lee, Hill, Jackson – but eventually those names gave way to brigadier generals and even colonels. While driving on the Jefferson Davis Highway, we were cut off by a pickup truck featuring two huge smokestacks and a very prominent Confederate battle flag secured to the truck bed. I had expected to see elements of the Confederacy still poking through 150 years after its fall, but I had not anticipated how ‘in your face’ it would be.

But perhaps the most memorable encounter I had occurred in a little doughnut shop in Henrico County. A local guy named “Juan,” who described himself as “the only non-white kid” in his entire schooling career, struck up friendly conversation with our group. A bit uncomfortable with the friendliness of this stranger, but not wanting to be rude, we talked for a while over some of the best (and cheapest) donuts I’ve ever eaten. When he asked where we were from, we told him we went to school in Gettysburg. “Gettysburg?” he replied, “Isn’t that where the Yankees surrendered?” We all laughed, but we quickly realized that Juan wasn’t joking. While I certainly don’t want to insult Juan’s ignorance of basic Civil War facts (I’m sure plenty of Gettysburg College students themselves might be hard-pressed to explain Gettysburg’s significance in the course of the war), his answer certainly gives us a good idea of how culture can shape how we view historical events that we may not know much about. Juan was very clearly not a card-carrying member of the Klan, nor was he a subscriber to the ‘Lost Cause.’ He was just an Average Joe who assumed that Gettysburg must have been a great victory for the South based on the culture he encounters in his daily life.

Road trips with friends can be some of the greatest opportunities for memories. They can both test the limits of patience and temper the bonds of friendship. But more than that, they can be an incredible anthropological journey, offering a view into how others across the country live their daily lives. As I found this summer, you can step into an entirely different world just by crossing the Potomac.

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