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Some Small Tribute: How Modern Americans Find Meaning in the National Cemetery

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Abstract

metry By Matt LaRoche '17 In anticipation of Remembrance Day and Dedication Day this week, we have asked our Fellows why and how they commemorate the Civil War. Read Megan's post below, then check back later in the week for more posts on commemoration and remembrance. In my last post, I appealed to the public to make good on the tragedies of Gettysburg in the same broad vein as President Clinton's appeal at the 20th anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica—to make the tragedy a “sacred trust” towards a better future. Needless to say, the material of the last piece stuck with me powerfully. In my musings I realized that I had, in my own experiences, stood witness to some small but remarkable efforts by visitors at Gettysburg to take something constructive and enduring from this tragedy.

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Gettysburg National Military Park, Gettysburg National Cemetery

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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November 19, 2015

By Matt LaRoche '17

In anticipation of Remembrance Day and Dedication Day this week, we have asked our Fellows why and how they commemorate the Civil War. Read Megan's post below, then check back later in the week for more posts on commemoration and remembrance.

In my last post, I appealed to the public to make good on the tragedies of Gettysburg in the same broad vein as President Clinton's appeal at the 20th anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica—to make the tragedy a “sacred trust” towards a better future. Needless to say, the material of the last piece stuck with me powerfully. In my musings I realized that I had, in my own experiences, stood witness to some small but remarkable efforts by visitors at Gettysburg to take something constructive and enduring from this tragedy.



Photograph courtesy of Kevin Lavery

Living in Gettysburg, I've learned that the town is many things to many people. It's the place where the Civil War most permeates the public imagination, most touches the lives of everyday Americans. It's a tourist trap. It's our greatest killing ground. But above all, it's a place where seekers from all segments of society come to *understand*—just what have we inherited from these men, and where do we take it from here? Once visitors step onto the field and learn the stories of what happened here—once they see the graves, the white stones and the sunken hollows of burial pits strewn across the field—many cannot help but start their search by trying to understand these men: their sorrow, their intentions, the sum total of their lives and the consequence of their actions.

June through August is the park's busiest time of year. Through this peak, my duties as a Pohanka intern at Gettysburg National Military Park saw me spending a couple hours every other day in the National Cemetery—perhaps the most frequented part of the battlefield. Spending so much time there, I started to notice odd little things about the cemetery that you wouldn't otherwise note. Families searching for relatives amongst the stones. Couples, young and old, meandering about, hoping to see a ghost. Strangest of all, however, were the small puddles of pennies that had somehow gathered atop the headstones.

This was odd. I had been coming to the park for fifteen years, and I'd never noticed anything like this before. It's not that I am unfamiliar with the act of leaving tokens by the graveside—every time I visit Antietam National Cemetery, I make a point of stopping by the grave of Fireman Patrick Howard Roy, USN, who died during the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. When I was little, the sight of little things his friends would leave every single year—letters, flags, whisky, coins—touched me. The grave was immaculately maintained each and every time I saw it. The dedication of his friends, family, and fellow servicemen is overwhelming and enduring, and rightfully so.

Still, I cannot say exactly why people leave pennies for the dead. The cynic in me says that someone left some change as an afterthought, and thousands followed suit. The romantic in me says that people are honoring the dead Union soldiers with small portraits of their Commander-in-Chief and fellow martyr. But perhaps the truth is much simpler and more profound than either option. Perhaps there is an element of symbolism, as well as an element of imitation. But above all, I see each penny left on a soldier's grave as a sign of a covenant between the living and the dead. Each little token is a reaffirmation, whether conscious or unconscious, of our dedication to the "great task remaining before us." It is in visiting these battlefields, and exposing ourselves to the horrors of Man that we find ourselves compelled to ensure that "these dead shall not have died in vain," that the painful birth of freedom endured 152 years ago shall one day deliver on its promises for all people in all places. That our better angels—including the ones that sleep beneath cemetery hill—will be heeded in the days to come.

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