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# Joshua Chamberlain on Mars: Chambermania and Beyond!

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# Joshua Chamberlain on Mars: Chambermania and Beyond!

## **Abstract**

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to observe one fact about Mars: it has a lot of rocks. While each is typically given a name based on protocols of scientific classification, many are known by informal, often humorous names like "Grandma" and "Space Ghost." And now on Mars, there's a rock for fans of Civil War history—"Chamberlain," named of course for Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the hero of Little Round Top [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Joshua Chamberlain, Mars, Little Round Top

## **Disciplines**

History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Joshua Chamberlain on Mars: Chambermania and Beyond!

*December 7, 2016*

*By Ryan Nadeau '16*

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to observe one fact about Mars: it has a lot of rocks. While each is typically given a name based on protocols of scientific classification, many are known by informal, often humorous names like "Grandma" and "Space Ghost." And now on Mars, there's a rock for fans of Civil War history—"Chamberlain," named of course for Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the hero of Little Round Top.



*Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is now on Mars.*

Aileen Yingst, the NASA scientist who named the rock, is a resident of Brunswick, Maine—the southern Maine town where JLC notably spent most of his adult life. And to this day, his presence there is inescapable. In Brunswick’s old town center, one can find pictures honoring him in numerous nearby restaurants, including one explicitly named for him. A local ice cream store reminds visitors to recycle their dishes because “Joshua Chamberlain would.” A bronze statue of him stands in a highly visible location close to the gates of the local Bowdoin College—the institution which Chamberlain attended as a student, taught at as a professor, and later served as president.



*Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is now on Mars.*

Bowdoin College also serves as the traditional summer home of the Maine State Music Theater, the organization which commissioned and premiered a musical based on Chamberlain’s—[\*Chamberlain: A Civil War Romance\*](#). While only staged once more since then (in 2014), the show served to raise Chamberlain’s local profile even higher. Chamberlain’s Brunswick residence, a location featured in the musical, is within spitting distance of Bowdoin’s campus as well. Today, it is lovingly preserved as a museum by the local [Pejepscot Historical Society](#). Avid followers of Civil War news may recognize that name—it was to the PHS that Chamberlain’s rediscovered Medal of Honor was donated in 2013. While a modest organization, the PHS makes a strong effort to make sure Chamberlain’s legacy is remembered, hosting a week of Civil War events each August to entertain and educate the public. The week is affectionately known as “Chamberlain Days.”

And even to this day, Brunswick remains Chamberlain’s home. He is buried just east of the college’s campus, in the somber Pine Grove Cemetery. The grave of his wife, Fanny, rests just next to his. Every so often, small flags are placed by the headstone out of respect—a fitting tribute, in my view, to one of the many men who we can thank for the fact that there are a full fifty stars on it.



*Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is now on Mars.*

Now, Brunswick is no Gettysburg. Despite all this, you won't find Chamberlain's face staring down at you from five different angles as you walk down the street. But for a small town in small state, geographically far removed from the Civil War's actual events? It doesn't do too badly. "Chambermania" isn't monopolized by Brunswick, either. His birthplace of Brewer, much farther north in the state, also maintains his original homestead and a memorial statue. And to Mainers from across the rest of the state, he remains a heroic figure whom they can be proud to call their own. And honestly, is it any wonder we've latched on to him with such reverence? Only so many people of note have risen out of Maine—and I wouldn't count on James G. Blaine or Oliver Otis Howard becoming overnight celebrities anytime soon.

Still, we cannot lay full claim to him. Since the massive success of Michael Shaara's 1974 novel *The Killer Angels* and its 1993 film adaption *Gettysburg*, Chamberlain has attracted a wide national following. As one of the principle characters in both the novel and the film, each helped to popularize the story of Chamberlain's defense of Little Round Top at Gettysburg, as well as his personal character, among Civil War buffs. Also to be credited is Ken Burns' 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, which too prominently featured Chamberlain, and helped usher in a resurgence of interest in the Civil War era. Altogether, it's why I would bet it's thanks to these materials that I don't actually need to explain Chamberlain's story here—his defense of Little Round Top has become one of the classic and enduring tales of both the Battle of Gettysburg and

the war itself. It's perhaps for these reasons as well that Dr. Yingst was a Chamberlain fan even before she moved to Brunswick and sent him to Mars.

On the whole, it's completely unsurprising that the Chamberlain story has become as popular as it is. It has all the makings of a good story: a professor turned amateur officer risks it all going to war to protect his country for high ideals. In doing so, he becomes an underdog in one of the most dramatic moments of one of the war's most dramatic battles—fix bayonets!—and by many accounts, saves the day in one of the most critical battles of the war. It's a romantic story that's perhaps a better fit for a novel than the actual pages of history at first glance.

But while history is not a literary novel, it can still occasionally produce storybook moments. Chamberlain was not the perfect man. His frequently inflated ego, marital troubles, and difficulties adjusting to a non-military life are well documented. While his imperfections may frequently be drowned out by the mania surrounding his heroism, they are far from forgotten. And this is not strictly a bad thing. No historical figure is free from imperfection, but that shouldn't prevent us from celebrating their heroic moments and virtues. It remains a job of responsible historians, meanwhile, to ensure that historical memory is not twisted and warped by these celebrations.

Detractors may say that the Chamberlain case has descended into that territory—it seems an exaggerated claim, for instance, to say that it was his actions that determined the Union army's fate at Gettysburg. And yet, even this sort of distortion does not significantly damage the narrative of history, such as Lost Cause movements do. Rather, it only inflates the importance of one man, who as truth of fact *did* play an important role. Thus, it may be the responsible route of historians to remind people of the complexities surrounding such moments in history. Yet, even such a complex understanding would not diminish the pride and reverence felt by the citizens of Brunswick, Maine, and Civil War buffs towards Chamberlain. To us, he would still remain a hero, fully deserving of the honor of lasting celebration.

Including a rock on Mars.

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Sources:

Wuthmann, Walter. "[Mars rover scientist agrees: Brunswick's Chamberlain rocks](#)," *The Forecaster*, October 16, 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015.

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