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Beyond the Battlefield: The Park That Once Was Stevens's Furnace

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Abstract

If you're a frequent reader of the *Compiler*, it comes as no news to you that the Gettysburg area is historic for more than just its battlefield. From a [pre-war African American community](#) to the [World War I tank camp commanded by a young Dwight Eisenhower](#), Gettysburg has a rich and vibrant history that the time-frozen battlefield, however majestic in its own right, all too often obscures. One of my favorite places in the region, however, is a state park located just fourteen miles west of town. Nestled amidst the ridges of South Mountain, [Caledonia State Park](#) stands on land once part of the Caledonia Furnace complex owned by the famed congressman Thaddeus Stevens.

[*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Beyond the Battlefield: The Park That Once Was Stevens's Furnace

By *Kevin Lavery '16*

If you're a frequent reader of the *Compiler*, it comes as no news to you that the Gettysburg area is historic for more than just its battlefield. From a pre-war African American community to the World War I tank camp commanded by a young Dwight Eisenhower, Gettysburg has a rich and vibrant history that the time-frozen battlefield, however majestic in its own right, all too often obscures. One of my favorite places in the region, however, is a state park located just fourteen miles west of town. Nestled amidst the ridges of South Mountain, Caledonia State Park stands on land once part of the Caledonia Furnace complex owned by the famed congressman Thaddeus Stevens.



Evidence abounds of Caledonia's industrial origins. Photograph by the author.

In the last two years, I have tried whenever possible to get out to the park, which serves as a gateway to some of my favorite hiking trails. The Appalachian Trail runs right through Caledonia, and just

north of the park there is a vast network of trails that wind their way through the neighboring Michaux State Forest. Not only is it an excellent park for recreation, but it has a long and storied past that I've had the opportunity to explore for the *Compiler*, redoubling my appreciation for the scenic place.

A few years after establishing himself as a fixture in the Gettysburg community, a young Thaddeus Stevens entered a partnership with several prominent businessmen to establish the Maria Furnace at South Mountain. Unfortunately, the iron ore in the region was of lower quality than anticipated and the furnace proved something of a flop. Stevens did not pack it in, however, and instead purchased more land farther north and named it Caledonia after the Vermont county where he was raised. When Caledonia Furnace also proved to be a financial drain, Stevens moved to Lancaster to work as a lawyer to help pay off some of his debts. As his biographer, Bradley Hoch, put it, "Stevens the lawyer had often saved Stevens the iron master from bankruptcy." Even though the furnace continued to be a financial burden, Stevens did not give up the endeavor – he knew how many men it employed and claimed that he couldn't bear to abandon them.

During the Civil War, the demand for war materiel meant that the iron works finally became a profitable enterprise. However, in June 1863, the Confederate Army stumbled upon Caledonia Furnace while traveling through South Mountain during the Gettysburg campaign. Learning that it belonged to the despised Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens, Early ordered that the iron works be "put to the torch" as revenge for Stevens's support for "the most vindictive measures of confiscation and devastation" against the South.

The desolation was absolute, so bad that the Confederate commanders had to authorize one of their quartermasters to provide food for the civilians. When he learned of the damage, Stevens was distraught, more over the fate of his workers than because of the material damage. "I know not what the poor families will do," Stevens wrote. "I must provide for their present relief." It seems easy to be cynical about his attitude and dismiss him as paternalistic or guilt-ridden, but Stevens himself had faced poverty as a child. He knew firsthand the cold and hunger his employees and their families would endure if there was to be no relief.

In spite of the destruction wrought by Jubal Early, Stevens remained resolute in his hardline stance against the South. "We must all expect to suffer by this wicked war," he insisted. "I have not felt a moment's trouble for my share of it. If, finally, the government shall be reestablished over our whole territory; and not a vestige of Slavery left, I shall deem it a cheap purpose." The furnace was eventually rebuilt, but it continued to prove a financial burden throughout Stevens' life.



The scale-model monument to the original furnace, constructed in the early twentieth century.
Photograph by the author.

Today, as Caledonia is primarily a recreation park, its historical interpretation leaves much to be wanted. A scale model of the furnace stands at the entrance to the park as a monument to the original furnace. The blacksmith shop used while the land was a furnace still stands amidst playgrounds, a pool, and picnic grounds. However, apart from several interpretive signs discussing the process of ironmaking, a wayside discussing the history of the Lincoln Highway, and a brief overview of the site's Civil War history, there is not much to explain the significance and use of the land that would become Caledonia State Park. One trail follows a historic millrace once used to channel water to power a watermill. Several charcoal hearths are visible along a trail that winds its way up Graeffenburg Hill. Ruins of an old building of some sort or another are hidden away behind trees off another main trail. None of these sites has adequate interpretation to help visitors realize that they are standing in a place that is special for multiple reasons, both natural and historic.



Stevens's blacksmith shop stands at the front of the park along Route 30. Photograph by the author.

There is likewise disappointingly scant information on site about the area's fascinating social history, and because it left less of an imprint on the land than industrial activity it appears even more invisible to visitors. For instance, the Underground Railroad ran straight through Caledonia. The furnace foreman was even suspected of harboring slaves overnight, perhaps even with Stevens' knowledge and approval. While it is difficult to know for certain the routes taken so long ago, as a hiker going north on the Appalachian Trail it is tempting to imagine following in the footsteps of fugitive slaves who crept across South Mountain to get over the Mason-Dixon Line and then to push farther into the safety of the North.

History lives, though, even where it is not prominently on display. My research made each of my hiking trips even more enjoyable, for I knew that I was not merely hiking through vibrant forests and challenging mountains, but also walking on historic ground. I believe that if we are able to better shine a light on hidden history, visitors to the Gettysburg area and beyond can be better equipped to ask not *where history happened* but *what history happened at any given site*. History is, after all, all around us, whether it is emphasized or not.

For those interested in learning more about Caledonia Furnace, there is a pamphlet in the park welcome center that provides a brief self-guided walking tour of the site and its historic use.

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