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In the Shadow of the Twentieth: Maine Regiments at Gettysburg

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Abstract

On my first of many tours of the Gettysburg Battlefield, my tour guide was thrilled to learn that my family is from Maine. He made sure to show us the monument to the Twentieth Maine and talk about their valiant stand at Little Round Top. Joshua Chamberlain and his Twentieth Maine regiment have become known as the heroes of Little Round Top and are what most would readily identify when asked about Maine's role in the Battle of Gettysburg. One might think that Maine's only contribution to the battle was Chamberlain's charge. However, Maine units played a larger role in the battle and were present from the very beginning of the battle until the very end. They were not only present, however; they were engaged at key points of the battle such as Devil's Den, the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, the Copse of Trees, Cemetery Hill, and, of course, Little Round Top. There were 4,000 Maine soldiers at the battle, one in four of whom was killed.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, battlefield, The Gettysburg Compiler, Maine

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

In the Shadow of the Twentieth: Maine Regiments at Gettysburg

By *Savannah Labbe '19*

On my first of many tours of the Gettysburg Battlefield, my tour guide was thrilled to learn that my family is from Maine. He made sure to show us the monument to the Twentieth Maine and talk about their valiant stand at Little Round Top. Joshua Chamberlain and his Twentieth Maine regiment have become known as the heroes of Little Round Top and are what most would readily identify when asked about Maine's role in the Battle of Gettysburg. One might think that Maine's only contribution to the battle was Chamberlain's charge. However, Maine units played a larger role in the battle and were present from the very beginning of the battle until the very end. They were not only present, however; they were engaged at key points of the battle such as Devil's Den, the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, the Copse of Trees, Cemetery Hill, and, of course, Little Round Top. There were 4,000 Maine soldiers at the battle, one in four of whom was killed.



Pickett's charge on the center of the Union line near the Copse of Trees where the Nineteenth Maine was positioned. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Despite the fact that Maine contributed a larger number of soldiers in proportion to its population than any other state in the Union, the efforts of Maine men in the war are not widely remembered or acknowledged. Perhaps to remedy this, a committee was formed to investigate and prepare a report on Maine's contributions to the Battle of Gettysburg. This large work is

entitled *Maine at Gettysburg*. It was prepared in 1898 by a committee made up of Maine officers that participated in the war as well as some Maine politicians. They did this to “[set] forth the facts more fully, accurately and reliably, and in a manner justly due to the memory of those who so freely gave their lives to their country on this eventful field.” The report begins with an overview of the battle, making sure to highlight each Maine regiment and its role. After this, each unit is given a chapter to discuss its monument on the battlefield and to describe in detail the role that regiment played in the battle. These chapters were usually written by an officer of each regiment. The Twentieth Maine’s, for example, was written in part by Joshua Chamberlain.

One learns a lot about Maine’s contributions to the battle from reading this account. For example, the Second Maine Battery fired one of the first cannon shots of the battle. The Sixteenth Maine made a suicidal stand, alone, in the face of a vastly superior Confederate force so the Union First Corps could have some time to retreat. Out of the 275 men that made up the regiment, 104 were captured, but not before tearing up and distributing their colors among the men to make sure the enemy didn’t capture them. Another regiment that made significant contributions at this battle was the Nineteenth Maine. On the second day of the battle, the Nineteenth Maine was in position on Cemetery Ridge. General Sickles had moved the line too far ahead, causing the Confederates to take advantage of the bump in the line, but the men of the Nineteenth stood their ground in the wake of the Confederate attack. They were ordered to lie prone on the ground and then to rise and shoot when the Confederates were thirty-five yards away. The Confederates staggered, and their color bearer tried to rally them, but before he could accomplish this, he was shot down by the men of the Nineteenth. The Nineteenth then charged the Confederates, who broke and ran. The Nineteenth were able to take many prisoners and an enemy flag and recapture three cannons and four caissons. In addition to this, the Nineteenth Maine was also positioned near the Copse of Trees on the third day of battle. They were at the center of the line, at the Confederacy’s high water mark. The Nineteenth endured bloody and intense hand-to-hand fighting that caused them to suffer heavy losses. They lost more than half of their men and became one of the ten regiments with the greatest number of wounded at Gettysburg.

The sacrifices and valor of the men of the Nineteenth, Sixteenth, Second, and other Maine regiments are not given as much attention as the Twentieth Maine. The charge of the Twentieth Maine is glorified in books and movies such as *Gettysburg*, and while it is deserving of this glory, it often distracts from the importance of the other Maine regiments. The stand of the Sixteenth Maine provided the First Corps with the precious minutes it needed to escape. The Nineteenth Maine was able to take prisoners and recapture many needed supplies as well as help repulse Pickett’s charge. *Maine at Gettysburg* is meant to honor the sacrifices of the Maine men and make sure they are not forgotten in the shadow of the Twentieth Maine. Maine clearly played a large role in the Battle of Gettysburg, and some even go as far as to call Gettysburg a Maine

Battlefield. *Maine at Gettysburg* is an attempt to record the efforts of the Maine men to ensure that their sacrifices will not be forgotten.

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