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Point/Counterpoint: The Gettysburg Battlefield Marathon

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Abstract

Jeff: On November 6, the small town of Gettysburg will be swarmed by runners during [the first ever Gettysburg Battlefield Marathon](#). The event has provoked heated discussion from many in the Civil War community, bringing up many questions regarding the use of our most hallowed grounds for recreational use. In this post, Matt and I will engage in a back and forth conversation about the concerns and advantages of the race. I'd like to begin by noting that the views that we each express in this piece may not necessarily be our own and that we may merely be bringing them up to contribute to the conversation surrounding the marathon.

[excerpt]

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Point/Counterpoint: The Gettysburg Battlefield Marathon



By [Jeff Lauck '18](#) and [Matt LaRoche '17](#)

Jeff: On November 6, the small town of Gettysburg will be swarmed by runners during [the first ever Gettysburg Battlefield Marathon](#). The event has provoked heated discussion from many in the Civil War community, bringing up many questions regarding the use of our most hallowed grounds for recreational use. In this post, Matt and I will engage in a back and forth conversation about the concerns and advantages of the race. I'd like to begin by noting that the views that we each express in this piece may not necessarily be our own and that we may merely be bringing them up to contribute to the conversation surrounding the marathon. My first concern about the marathon is an obvious one. The Gettysburg battlefield was the site of unspeakable horror and suffering. Is it appropriate that this sacred space be used for "fun" activities like a marathon? [Runners will cross](#) areas whose names have been immortalized for pain, agony, and death: McPherson's Ridge, Little Round Top, the Wheatfield, the Angle. Few would view a marathon through the hallowed ground at Arlington National Cemetery as appropriate. Indeed, the Gettysburg marathon itself avoids the Soldiers' National Cemetery. However, the Gettysburg battlefield is [likely still a final resting place for hundreds of soldiers](#), so in reality, a marathon running through the battlefield is itself a marathon running in a massive

cemetery. The battlefield was [preserved as a memorial to those who fell](#). It should not now be trampled on by hundreds of runners in a spectacle marathon.

Matt: Well, Jeff, your point about the space's sacredness is certainly well taken. However, I think the underlying question here may be what kinds of history we choose to preserve and commemorate, and why. No one can deny the world is an old and embattled place. Recognizing this begs serious questions of our traditional efforts at memorializing loss and sacrifice. First, what metrics determine what sufferings are legitimately worth remembering? For example, people the world over clearly feel a duty to remember their soldiers, but what about the civilian dead? Wars almost always cost more civilian than combatant lives, but the public's imagination almost always centers on soldiers. Indeed, [the ongoing scholarly debate](#) as to the specific ratio is a testament to not just how overwhelming the reality of civilian deaths is, but also how little we like to think about this particularly senseless aspect of human conflict. Bringing civilians into the mix robs war of what glory it had, as one man's honorable sacrifice is undone by a child's meaningless slaughter. It becomes a story few really want to hear, and a serious problem for historical interpretation. And yet this is a key part of war's story.

So what we choose to commemorate clearly has inherent problems. But I believe we can turn this disadvantage into a strength. Knowing that any presentation of history will be expressionistic, rather than a perfect recreation, lends itself to another question—why assume that history's stories (or lessons) must have strict dates for bookends? If the past shapes the present, then why would the past's lessons not change with the times? [People have come to Gettysburg for countless reasons over the years](#), and that's not a bad thing—it means people are still searching for their souls out in those sacred fields. The fact that they are able to do so in a Gettysburg so thoroughly at peace that it can host a marathon is a tribute to the men who fought here. Here, the nation gathers to fulfill the two great wishes often expressed by the Civil War generation. First, that they be remembered. Second, that their children enjoy the peace they themselves were denied.



Sunset at the Brian Farm, Gettysburg Battlefield. Photo courtesy of Kevin Lavery '16.

Jeff: I definitely agree with your point regarding civilian deaths, Matt. However, I would venture to say that any place of mass suffering and death should be considered sacred, whether those deaths be soldiers or civilians. Gettysburg is not hallowed ground simply because soldiers fought there, but rather it is sacred because human lives were lost and forever changed there, regardless of whether or not they carried a rifle or wore a uniform.

I also like that you brought up the notion of peace. Gettysburg was once a place of unfashionable horror but is now one of serene peace. Many visitors come to Gettysburg to partake in that serenity. They come to this hallowed ground to reflect upon the honored dead who gave “the last full measure of devotion” on the fields around Gettysburg. They come to seek inspiration on how to fulfill their own unfinished work. In a practical sense, the presence of hundreds of runners and scores of spectators and attendants disturbs that peace.

Matt: Well, I will admit that a marathon may not seem like the perfect teaching environment on the face of it. However, if my experience in the public history field has taught me anything, it is the need for a holistic approach. The hardest part of teaching history is that it is visually just not around in most of our day to day lives. The reality is that in most places the modern has built over the historic in every conceivable way, hence the need for these watersheds of memory we call historic sites. But our real challenge is *getting people to visit* historic sites. There are, of course, logistical obstacles that we are largely stuck with—the vast majority of Americans live

beyond a reasonable drive from Gettysburg, and that will not change. But clearly people will come if they care. Millions make Gettysburg their vacation choice every year. So the impetus becomes finding ways to convince people to make the journey.

Now, I assume different people have different priorities in life. And that is not at all a bad thing—it is just something else to take into account. It makes perfect sense that if parks like Gettysburg aim to serve the American people in all their variety, it cannot hurt to bring some variation to the programs and attractions they offer. Now, I am certainly not advocating any sort of drastic change that cheats sacred sites of their value. Making a massacre site into a theme park is clearly inexcusable. But when historic sites introduce small, largely unobtrusive changes that make themselves more accessible and enticing for the general public, that is a very good thing. It individualizes the experience to fit the visitor. A marathon is just another of these attractions that can bring people to the place where vital conversations can finally happen—where interpreters can help humanize the past for those who are convinced it has nothing to teach.



Battlefield hawk with Cemetery Ridge in foreground. Photo courtesy of Kevin Lavery '16.

Jeff: I agree with you completely on making Gettysburg more accessible and relatable to our modern world. However, I hesitate to call a marathon an “unobtrusive change.” Marathons shut down roads and runners can obscure vistas of the battlefield. Anyone who has ever driven in Gettysburg knows that it is a traffic nightmare. Now imagine the added chaos and congestion that a marathon will bring to the town. Gettysburg is a destination for many casual tourists and pilgrims alike throughout the year. Many come from all across the nation (or world) to visit. Think of the family from North Dakota who drove dozens of hours to arrive in Gettysburg only to spend more time stuck in the car before they even set foot on the battlefield. Then, once they finally get on the tour road, the scene is mobbed by runners and spectators. There is a certain expectation for visitors who come to Gettysburg and it is the park’s responsibility to meet or

exceed those expectations. On top of the diluted visitor experience, consider the environmental impact of an already imperiled ecosystem in the park. When I look across the pristine battlefield today and think about this weekend's race, all I can see are thousands of plastic water bottles all along the marathon route. While I certainly agree with expanding interest in the battle, I only ask at what cost?

Matt: I admit it is unfortunate whenever a person's one-time-only visit is ruined by unforeseen circumstances. But this is, I think, the nature of the beast. As a public space—both the park and the town—Gettysburg is bound to have its fair share of disturbances. And, really, while these are annoying and sometimes disappointing occurrences, I see them as signs that this is a well-loved land.

Let me be clear—I do worry when the overwhelming press of summer visitors leads to water and power shortages. I do regret that our town's status as a centuries-old road network hub means we simply have too much traffic. But let's not kid ourselves—it is this very hyper-activity that has made Gettysburg such a significant town in the American story. The roads that bring uncomfortable numbers of cars, trucks, and eighteen-wheelers through the center of town [also brought the armies here](#). And those same roads bring the visitors today. No, the logistics of it all are far from ideal. But they have a lot to do with Gettysburg's status as *the* Civil War site all Americans must go to at some point in their lives.

As for the ecological cost of the park's high visitation, that is a serious question that does not have easy answers. The park is a resource that, by definition, exists to be enjoyed by the American public. Where the line between protecting the resource and utilizing it lies is constantly being reevaluated by all the interested parties. With funding and manpower a constant challenge, and visitation on the rise, I expect the public will have to play a larger role in the future. Someone has to pick up the trash and root out the invasive plants, but it *is* a big park, after all. It would be wonderful if we could harness the energy and enthusiasm of the public even more than we already do—if more average people were willing to lend their time. In fact, I think nothing could be truer to the park's mission statement—it is their park, after all. But they will not come if they are not made welcome.

Let's not miss any more opportunities.

<https://gettysburgcompiler.com/2016/11/04/pointcounterpoint-the-gettysburg-battlefield-marathon/>