



10-31-2016

# The Moment We've all Been Waiting For: Lee's Gettysburg Headquarters Opens

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Rose, Savannah, "The Moment We've all Been Waiting For: Lee's Gettysburg Headquarters Opens" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 178.  
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## **Abstract**

On October 28, 2016, the doors of the Mary Thompson house located on Seminary Ridge in Gettysburg opened before a crowd of over one thousand Civil War Trust members and Civil War enthusiasts. In 2013, the Civil War Trust purchased a portion of land on Seminary Ridge, land covered with a motel, a brewery, a restaurant, and the Mary Thompson house, which some know as the headquarters of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Since purchasing the land the Civil War Trust, in partnership with other organizations, has worked to restore the Thompson property to its 1863 appearance by tearing down numerous contemporary buildings and restoring the house used by Lee during the Battle of Gettysburg. This past Friday, I walked my way up to Seminary Ridge, excited to see the finished project after watching the spot's restoration for years.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War, The Gettysburg Compiler

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### **The Moment We've all Been Waiting For: Lee's Gettysburg Headquarters Opens**

By *Savannah Rose '17*

On October 28, 2016, the doors of the Mary Thompson house located on Seminary Ridge in Gettysburg opened before a crowd of over one thousand Civil War Trust members and Civil War enthusiasts. In 2013, the Civil War Trust purchased a portion of land on Seminary Ridge, land covered with a motel, a brewery, a restaurant, and the Mary Thompson house, which some know as the headquarters of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Since purchasing the land the Civil War Trust, in partnership with other organizations, has worked to restore the Thompson property to its 1863 appearance by tearing down numerous contemporary buildings and restoring the house used by Lee during the Battle of Gettysburg. This past Friday, I walked my way up to Seminary Ridge, excited to see the finished project after watching the spot's restoration for years.



Visitors wait in line to enter the newly restored Mary Thompson House. Visitors will now see the structure as Confederate General Robert E. Lee would have seen it when he arrived on July 1, 1863. Photo courtesy of the author.

When I got to the top of the ridge, braving the cold and the wind, I found the attendees surrounding a small stone house. The scene seem so different than it did just a few years ago when I entered the restaurant that once stood on the site. The crowd amassed near the house where the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Regimental Band stood with a small podium, filling the air with Civil War music. Lee's headquarters remained closed as more people began to arrive.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony then began with opening remarks from Jim Lighthizer, president of the Civil War Trust. This speech was dedicated to thanking the members of the Civil War Trust and others who had donated to the project, saying that these donations were the backbone of its completion. Next to speak was Gettysburg National Military Park Superintendent Ed Clark, who mentioned that he hoped to have the newly restored land within the park's boundary by 2017 to help the National Park Service grow during it next century of operation. Speakers Robert Kinsley of the Gettysburg Foundation and David Williams of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership spoke about the heritage tourism the site will bring in and the economic benefits of the structure's restoration.

The final speaker was Reverend Michael Cooper-White of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg who spoke about the importance of Gettysburg's history and its connection to the physical structures that remain on the fields. Jim Lightizer had the final word, saying, "If Robert E. Lee rode up today on his horse Traveller, he'd know where he was." The ribbon in front of the door was cut, and the first visitors of the Mary Thompson house entered, ready to see the newly constructed and preserved building.

Would Robert E. Lee recognize the building? It's quite possible. The Civil War Trust used numerous photographs of the Thompson house immediately following the Battle of Gettysburg in their restoration of the structure. During the restoration project, additions to the house made after the end of the battle were removed from the house, and the structure was re-enforced to ensure its buildings survival for years to come. The interior of the building hardly represents an 1863 appearance as the walls and floors are finished to contemporary standards, it lack furniture, and there are numerous signs thanking the Civil War Trust donors. Two artifacts stand in the house, one of which has a small interpretive label; the other does not a word of description.



Confederate General Robert E. Lee stands outside the door of the Mary Thompson house, commonly referred to as Lee's Headquarters. Photo courtesy of author.

It was difficult to ignore the abundance of Confederate flags, Confederate living historians, and, of course Robert E. Lee. Though these symbols were present, no one seemed to blink an eye. This was a proud moment for all who were there, a moment meant to save a structure whose

history is intertwined with the Confederacy. This was not an event for protest or political gain, but one of the preservation of memory, giving the Confederate symbols a different meaning than they are interpreted in other contexts. Overall, the ribbon-cutting ceremony was an excellent occasion, one filled with hope for the future of historical preservation. The event provided the presentation of hard work and diligence to save a historical site, effective speeches about the future of Civil War battlefield preservation, and of course, excellent muffins.

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