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Bringing the Past into the Present: Joshua Chamberlain's Legacy in Maine

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Abstract

In recent years Maine's role in the Civil War—especially in the Battle of Gettysburg—has gained increased renown due in part to movies and books such as *Gettysburg* and Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Maine's fame has grown mostly due to one famous figure: Joshua Chamberlain. Chamberlain has become almost a legend in Maine, a historical figure that most Mainers are familiar with and are proud of. His legacy can still be felt in the state today and provides a way for people from Maine to connect with the past. History is often the cause of boredom for many, but when the past can be brought into the present, and when people can really connect with history on a personal level, that's when it becomes more tangible and enjoyable.

Keywords

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Maine, Memory, Savannah Labbe

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Bringing the Past into the Present: Joshua Chamberlain's Legacy in Maine

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

In recent years Maine's role in the Civil War—especially in the Battle of Gettysburg—has gained increased renown due in part to movies and books such as *Gettysburg* and Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Maine's fame has grown mostly due to one famous figure: Joshua Chamberlain. Chamberlain has become almost a legend in Maine, a historical figure that most Mainers are familiar with and are proud of. His legacy can still be felt in the state today and provides a way for people from Maine to connect with the past. History is often the cause of boredom for many, but when the past can be brought into the present, and when people can really connect with history on a personal level, that's when it becomes more tangible and enjoyable.



A statue of Chamberlain in Brewer, Maine. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Chamberlain provides a way for Mainers to interact with the past and to enjoy learning about it. His importance and his legacy in the state are easily seen. For example, one can take a walking tour of Chamberlain's home town of Brunswick, stopping at all the places that were meaningful to him or had something to do with his life—from the dorm he lived in while at Bowdoin College to the cemetery in which he was buried. There is even an entire museum dedicated to Chamberlain, reflecting how important his legacy is to the town of Brunswick and the state of Maine as a whole. Walking tours and museums are the kinds of things that make the past more tangible and allow people to connect with and interact with it. They are able to go and actually see the dorm room that Chamberlain stayed in and imagine him in there, bringing the past into the present by allowing people to visualize what it would have been like to see Brunswick as Chamberlain saw it.

Another example of Chamberlain's lasting legacy in Maine is an award named in his honor given by the Maine Masons. The Joshua Chamberlain Medal is given to a Maine citizen "who best exemplifies the characteristics of leadership, citizenship, honor and integrity, as repeatedly demonstrated by that great Maine man and Mason, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain." The award is given to someone who best exemplifies Chamberlain's actions during the Civil War. While Chamberlain is probably best known for his stand at the Battle of Gettysburg with the Twentieth Maine, during the surrender at Appomattox, Chamberlain showed the defeated Confederates the utmost respect, allowing the "downtrodden foe reason to hold their backs straight and heads high." This "act of valor earned him great respect and helped mightily to heal a deeply divided Union." Chamberlain is credited with helping the nation heal and with helping reunite the two halves of the country, an important job in the wake of a devastating civil war. This role that Chamberlain played is a lesser known one and this award brings attention to it, broadening Mainers' understanding and knowledge about this important historical figure.

The fact that there is an award named for Chamberlain shows how meaningful a legacy he has left in Maine. This medal is also a way of bringing the past into the present. Not only does it draw a connection between the receiver of the award and Chamberlain, it provides a way for one to discuss Chamberlain, the Civil War, and history in general. This medal provides an opportunity to teach people about Chamberlain and to get them more interested in his role by connecting him to the medal, making it more personal and tangible. It is a way of making history interesting and making people want to learn more about it. Knowledge of the past helps one better understand the present, making knowledge of history vital and important. Things like this medal bring the past into the present, which is what makes it so meaningful and necessary.

Sources:

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