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Bearing the Battle, Binding the Wounds

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Bearing the Battle, Binding the Wounds

Abstract

When I arrived at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park for my summer 2016 internship orientation, I introduced myself as being from Yorktown, VA. The ranger quipped “you must have a thing for surrender towns.” I hadn’t really thought about it, but I suppose I do. I’ve lived in and around historic towns my entire life. I was born in Richmond, graduated high school in Yorktown, attended college in Gettysburg, and completed internships in New Market, Appomattox, and in the Hampton Roads area. I never seem to be far from a battlefield or a battle town, physically or emotionally. I love these towns and the stories of the ordinary people who fought within them. I have some relatives who fought for the Union and others who fought for the Confederacy, and although not a family relation, I feel a special connection to James Greenleaf of Pennsylvania.

Keywords

Appomattox Court House, Commemoration, Kaylyn Sawyer, Memory, Surrender at Appomattox

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Bearing the Battle, Binding the Wounds

By [Kaylyn Sawyer '17](#)

When I arrived at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park for my summer 2016 internship orientation, I introduced myself as being from Yorktown, VA. The ranger quipped “you must have a thing for surrender towns.” I hadn’t really thought about it, but I suppose I do. I’ve lived in and around historic towns my entire life. I was born in Richmond, graduated high school in Yorktown, attended college in Gettysburg, and completed internships in New Market, Appomattox, and in the Hampton Roads area. I never seem to be far from a battlefield or a battle town, physically or emotionally. I love these towns and the stories of the ordinary people who fought within them. I have some relatives who fought for the Union and others who fought for the Confederacy, and although not a family relation, I feel a special connection to James Greenleaf of Pennsylvania.



The Wilmer McLean House in 1865, where Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant. Photo via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Private James M. Greenleaf, a soldier in Company C of the 145th Pennsylvania Volunteers suffered wounds in the Civil War that would affect his functioning for the rest of his life. He wrote “my hip has pained very much... it still slips in the joint ... I can’t walk without great trouble.” However, it was an injury to his right eye received in the 1862 battle of Fredericksburg that would be most devastating. The right eye wound was “constantly open, suppurating and discharging...with loss of strength and increasing blindness in the left eye.” Acquaintances would concur that his eye injury was more debilitating than any loss of limb would have been. I feel a certain kinship with Private Greenleaf and other common soldiers like him who struggled for normalcy and healing. They are my soul mates.

Every sports team has at least one player who is considered injury-prone, and if the Fellows of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College were a sports team, I am the player who would most often occupy a slot on the injured reserve list. Those who know me understand this and have watched me recover from both a hip injury and from an eye injury during my years at Gettysburg. I deeply understand Private Greenleaf’s struggle, and I know that an eye injury is far more disabling than a hip injury. Like him, I searched for healing and normalcy throughout my years at Gettysburg, all the while completing my academic studies on history and the Civil War. Private Greenleaf’s life matters to me because I have walked in his shoes. In a literal sense, I have walked in the worn out shoes of many soldiers.



The Sunken Road at Fredericksburg, where Private Greenleaf was wounded in 1862. Photo via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

I have walked across the field of Pickett's Charge. I have participated in Gettysburg College's traditional First Year Walk, trekking from the college to the Soldier's National Cemetery in commemoration of the students who walked the same path with President Lincoln in 1863 to hear his "few appropriate remarks." I have walked across the "Field of Lost Shoes" in New Market, along the Stage Road at Appomattox Court House, along the Sunken Road at Fredericksburg, and along the battlefield roads in Yorktown. I could have driven some of these routes, and was certainly tempted to do so when my hip was hurting. But I walked, because they walked.

Walking is a kinetic event that requires an investment of energy and time, but walking a historic route is more than blisters and burned calories. It is an emotional investment. When I take these walks, I don't think of the "great men" of history, but consider the struggles of the countless ordinary men and women in whose footsteps I follow. These soul mates are now my sole-mates. Like Private Greenleaf, the war didn't end when they left the battlefield. By 1893, nearly one million Union veterans would claim some form of disabling injury from the war. They carried the war with them, physically and/or emotionally, for the rest of their lives.



The Moore House in Yorktown, Virginia, where terms for the surrender of Lord Cornwallis' British Army to George Washington were drafted. Photo courtesy of the author.

I will soon walk away from Gettysburg, my personal battle injuries healed, and I will carry with me lasting impressions from this college and this battle town. As I head back to Richmond to intern at the Richmond National Battlefield Park, I will take with me fond college memories along with the academic knowledge I have gained from the expert scholars here at Gettysburg College with whom I have been privileged to study. I suppose I do have a thing for battle towns and ordinary soldiers. I plan to keep walking along with them, sometimes with lingering pain that reminds me of their pain, but most times without. I will remember the soldiers who fought for freedom in all the nation's wars, with special appreciation for those, like James Greenleaf, who are currently serving because they volunteered to do so. The importance of these veterans' sacrifices, of providing for those "who shall have borne the battle," cannot be forgotten.

Sources

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