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Remembrance Day: History, Memory and the 20th Maine

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Abstract

Every November, on the Saturday closest to the 19th, the town of Gettysburg celebrates Remembrance Day. This day is held in memory of those who fought and died at the Battle of Gettysburg and during the Civil War as a whole. On November 19th, crowds gather to celebrate Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery. These events pose a few very important questions: why do we still remember the Civil War in this manner? Why do we find it so important to have an entire day dedicated just to Civil War soldiers? Why does Civil War memory matter? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

20th Maine, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Little Round Top, Memory, Remembrance Day

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Remembrance Day: History, Memory and the 20th Maine

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

Every November, on the Saturday closest to the 19th, the town of Gettysburg celebrates Remembrance Day. This day is held in memory of those who fought and died at the Battle of Gettysburg and during the Civil War as a whole. On November 19th, crowds gather to celebrate Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery. These events pose a few very important questions: why do we still remember the Civil War in this manner? Why do we find it so important to have an entire day dedicated just to Civil War soldiers? Why does Civil War memory matter?

Over the semester, I have been working on a project in which similar questions have arisen. I am working to create a new wayside for the 20th Maine on the Gettysburg Battlefield. The one that currently sits there is more a wayside to Colonel Joshua Chamberlain than it is to the men of the regiment. Why do officers seem to loom so far above regular soldiers? During Remembrance Day, the ordinary soldiers who sacrificed their lives are remembered, which is very important because without them, the generals who are usually highlighted would not have been able to accomplish the feats they are best remembered for. Something I have been attempting to do in developing the text for the wayside is remember the ordinary soldier and shift the 20th Maine's story away from only being about Joshua Chamberlain. This has proved a challenging task, as the ghosts of the movie *Gettysburg* that propelled Chamberlain to fame do not seem to want to leave.



20th Maine memorial on Little Round Top. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

As I am from Maine, this project has been a special one for me. I am helping shape the legacy of fellow Mainers. I am also working to write a text that will influence visitor's perceptions of the battle and Maine's role in it. While Maine did have many other

regiments at Gettysburg, the 20th is the one that is best remembered and most likely offers battlefield visitors' only glimpse of the state. I want to do my fellow Mainers and their sacrifice at Little Round Top justice while at the same time making sure I am not being plagued by Chamberlain's ghost and the idea that the 20th Maine saved the Union. In addition to all of this, I am left with the question of why this matters. Why is the 20th Maine so important, and how will the words I write shape their memory? This is not an easy question to grapple with, but as a history major, I believe that history matters and the way we remember it is important.

History helps us learn from our past and gives us context for the problems in the present, and thus, how we tell this history and how we shape the past has important contemporary implications. Do we present a past that paints the Maine men as noble and dedicated heroes, or do we portray them as men who had flaws and may not even have wanted to fight? I believe the solution is a combination of both. The 20th Maine was made up of regular men, but they did do something heroic and important. Theirs was a critical position in the Union line but, at the same time, the battle raged on for another day and the war for another two years, so by no means did the 20th Maine save the Union. This question of how to best remember is an important one, and I believe it is raised in both my wayside project and on Remembrance Day. Is it right to remember the men who died through reenactments and parades? How do we shape memory in a way that is true to history, and how do we do justice to the men that died at Gettysburg while at the same time being careful not to make them akin to gods?