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Little Round Top: Remembering What They Did Here

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Abstract

At Dedication Day, we remember Lincoln's dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery. At the dedication ceremony, Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, a speech that has become enshrined in the American consciousness. In just a few short minutes, Lincoln delivered a speech that evoked the spirit of the Founding Fathers, honored the sacrifice of the dead, and challenged the living to commit themselves to the young nation and the principles upon which it was founded. Through the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln shaped the collective memory of the Civil War and of American ideals. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

20th Maine, Dedication Day, Gettysburg Address, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Little Round Top

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Little Round Top: Remembering What They Did Here

By [Abigail Cocco '19](#)

At Dedication Day, we remember Lincoln's dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery. At the dedication ceremony, Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, a speech that has become enshrined in the American consciousness. In just a few short minutes, Lincoln delivered a speech that evoked the spirit of the Founding Fathers, honored the sacrifice of the dead, and challenged the living to commit themselves to the young nation and the principles upon which it was founded. Through the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln shaped the collective memory of the Civil War and of American ideals.

Monuments and wayside markers also shape public memory. When asked to develop a wayside marker for Little Round Top, my colleague, Savannah, and I hoped to fully honor the sacrifice of the 20th Maine men by avoiding a purely romantic interpretation of their heroism and instead acknowledging their humanness. Like the rest of us, the Maine men were imperfect. Though many fought for high ideals like patriotism and duty, others fought for less noble reasons. They fought because desertion was a crime, because everyone else did, or because they craved adventure. We wanted our wayside to show that the men who fought on Little Round Top were individuals with their own lives and motivations.



Photo courtesy of the author.

Whatever their reasons for fighting, the Maine men experienced the brutal reality of war on Little Round Top. We felt that it would do these men a disservice if we used our wayside to tell a comfortable tale about heroic action or tactical maneuvers. Instead, we hoped to develop a wayside that illustrated the savagery of war. Men were killed indiscriminately, their bodies strewn across the rocks. Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain described the men, “torn and broken, staggering, creeping, quivering on the earth, and dead faces with strangely fixed eyes staring stark into the sky.”

The battle at Little Round Top was incredibly brutal, but in no way did we want to suggest that the casualties were senseless. The 20th Maine men died for a purpose much higher than themselves. They were sacrificed for the freedom of millions of enslaved people and for the preservation of a country that was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”



Photo courtesy of the author.

The Gettysburg Address is surrounded by myths. It is a widely-held belief that Lincoln wrote the Address on the back of an envelope on the train to Gettysburg. This story remains popular in the public imagination because people want to remember Lincoln as a common man with a great gift that allowed him to assume the highest office in the

United States. The ways in which people alter memory are often reflective of how they *want* to remember historic moments.

Many want to remember Little Round Top as the place where Colonel Chamberlain led the 20th Maine to a victory that saved the Union. Popular culture, specifically the movie *Gettysburg*, has reinforced this version of events in the nation's collective memory. When designing our wayside, Savannah and I had to contend with the preconceptions that tourists bring to Little Round Top. There is no doubt that Joshua Chamberlain was an able leader, but he was nothing without the dedication of his men. The 20th Maine did not save the Union, but it was one of many vital parts that contributed to the Union victory. We hope to use our wayside to complicate the traditional story of the 20th Maine.

Making our vision for the wayside text a reality proved to be a challenge. Savannah and I were given 250 words to tell a nuanced version of the events at Little Round Top, and it seemed an impossible task. But then we remembered the Gettysburg Address. In 272 words, Abraham Lincoln both inspired and redefined the nation. Surely, we could give park visitors a better understanding of the 20th Maine men and their fight for a hilltop.