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## Improving the Present by Studying the Past: Killed at Gettysburg Remembers O'Rorke and Phelps

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## **Abstract**

This semester, I have had the honor of working on the Civil War Institute’s Killed at Gettysburg project, hosted at [killedatgettysburg.org](http://killedatgettysburg.org). The project seeks to document the lives and legacies of soldiers who died during the three days of fighting in July 1863. I am happy to be contributing to Killed at Gettysburg again, as I strongly connected with the project when I worked on it for Dr. Carmichael’s Gettysburg class last semester. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Charles Phelps, Memory, Patrick O’Rorke, Remembrance Day

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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## Improving the Present by Studying the Past: Killed at Gettysburg Remembers O'Rorke and Phelps

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

This semester, I have had the honor of working on the Civil War Institute's Killed at Gettysburg project, hosted at [killedatgettysburg.org](http://killedatgettysburg.org). The project seeks to document the lives and legacies of soldiers who died during the three days of fighting in July 1863. I am happy to be contributing to Killed at Gettysburg again, as I strongly connected with the project when I worked on it for Dr. Carmichael's Gettysburg class last semester.

In the course of my research and writing, I have dealt specifically with two men who gave their lives at Gettysburg. One, Colonel Patrick O'Rorke of the 140th New York Volunteer Infantry, is quite possibly one of the most well-known soldiers among the battle's dead. The other, Fourth Sergeant Charles Phelps of the 5th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry, may not be quite as famous but still has a great story of his own. Over the last couple of months, I have researched the lives and deaths of these two gallant soldiers and constructed narratives to inform readers about their experiences before Gettysburg; what happened to them on July 2, 1863; and how their deaths affected other people, both at home and beyond. Supplementary interactive maps will join these narrative texts in the final product, enabling viewers to explore the ground over which Patrick O'Rorke and Charles Phelps took their final steps and creating a more holistic reader experience.



*Colonel Patrick O'Rorke, 140th New York. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.*

My primary goal throughout my work on *Killed at Gettysburg* has always centered around putting flesh and blood behind these stories of the past. Rather than presenting O'Rorke and Phelps as ephemeral legends of a bygone era, I want to humanize them to the reader. These men who gave their lives so long ago had personalities that made them unique. In addition to remarkable heroism and bravery, they had hopes, dreams, worries, and fears, just as we do today. I hope that the *Killed at Gettysburg* project can help close the gap between the past and the present by making readers feel like they are truly getting to know the soldiers we are profiling on a level beyond their basic achievements in life.

In many ways, it is hard to believe that it has been 154 years since the Battle of Gettysburg and Abraham Lincoln's famed address. Living and learning in Gettysburg can sometimes make it feel as though these events took place not so long ago. This observation, and the commemorations that take place each year, beg a larger question: why bother remembering what happened at Gettysburg? What makes men like Patrick O'Rorke and Charles Phelps worthy of attention in a modern that is world far different from that which they inhabited?

To me, we should—and do still—care about the past because of how it can help us improve in our present and our future. O'Rorke and Phelps both demonstrated highly admirable qualities in their daily lives and on the battlefield at Gettysburg that we can learn from today, even across such a wide expanse of time. Patrick O'Rorke grew up as an Irish immigrant during a time when anti-Irish sentiment was at its absolute highest in the United States. Yet, he did not allow himself to be put in a box based on his background; he excelled as a student, graduated first in his class at West Point, and appeared poised for a sterling military career before a Confederate bullet tore through his neck on Little Round Top. Charles Phelps demonstrated great loyalty and tenacity by striking down the enemy soldier who had mortally wounded his brigade commander

before being killed near the Wheatfield. Only nineteen years old at the time of his enlistment, Phelps displayed strength beyond his years in his final hours. Both men ultimately put their lives on the line for the cause of the Union in which they so dearly believed. When the time came, as Lincoln said, they gave their last full measure of devotion, and that ultimate sacrifice cannot be forgotten. Patrick O'Rorke and Charles Phelps stand as prime examples of courage and devotion that we can still learn from, and to me, that makes their stories matter even today.

Each year, Remembrance Day provides us with a perfect opportunity to consider these lessons and sacrifices from so long ago. The luminaria candles that adorn the gravestones in the Soldiers National Cemetery represent the everlasting public memory of those who gave their lives so that the nation might live. Though Patrick O'Rorke and Charles Phelps are both buried in their home states rather than the national cemetery, I believe that those candles burn for them as well. Beyond the immediate stimulus of Remembrance Day, I hope that the Killed at Gettysburg project will also keep these flames of memory alive. O'Rorke and Phelps deserve secure places in the public mind so that we in the present can continue to learn from their exemplary lives and legacies. Remembrance Day and Killed at Gettysburg both serve as important reminders of these lessons from the past, and this year we should take the opportunity to remind ourselves once again.