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## Competing Memory Camp Colt's Place in Gettysburg History

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# Competing Memory Camp Colt's Place in Gettysburg History

## Abstract

I recently came face-to-face with the issue of relevance in my research on Camp Colt for a public history class, and in studying the tankers' noble intentions—preserving democracy, stemming German militarization, progressing American innovation—on an equally noble battlefield, I came to an troubling impasse: should America's first tank school, which operated on the same ground where men fell in droves during Pickett's Charge roughly fifty years prior, be recognized to the same degree as the Battle of Gettysburg? Is there a way to justify discussing Eisenhower's command over the fledgling tank corps, which never saw combat, in the same light as the Civil War's costliest land battle? To me, of course, the answer is yes. With my interests lying in the First World War, I think the Camp Colt experience proves imperative to understanding Gettysburg as a place, but I also see it as more than a neat anecdote. The training that occurred on the battlefield in 1918 paved the way for America's participation in modern, armored war and established Dwight D. Eisenhower as a notable leader. Moreover, the camp's trainees looked to Civil War era values of bravery and duty, memorialized in stories about Joshua Chamberlain and Pickett's Charge, to establish a new martial masculinity for the 20th century. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Camp Colt, Memory, WWI

## Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Competing Memory: Camp Colt's Place in Gettysburg History

By [Anika Jensen '18](#)

I recently came face-to-face with the issue of relevance in my research on Camp Colt for a public history class, and in studying the tankers' noble intentions—preserving democracy, stemming German militarization, progressing American innovation—on an equally noble battlefield, I came to a troubling impasse: should America's first tank school, which operated on the same ground where men fell in droves during Pickett's Charge roughly fifty years prior, be recognized to the same degree as the Battle of Gettysburg? Is there a way to justify discussing Eisenhower's command over the fledgling tank corps, which never saw combat, in the same light as the Civil War's costliest land battle? To me, of course, the answer is yes. With my interests lying in the First World War, I think the Camp Colt experience proves imperative to understanding Gettysburg as a place, but I also see it as more than a neat anecdote. The training that occurred on the battlefield in 1918 paved the way for America's participation in modern, armored war and established Dwight D. Eisenhower as a notable leader. Moreover, the camp's trainees looked to Civil War era values of bravery and duty, memorialized in stories about Joshua Chamberlain and Pickett's Charge, to establish a new martial masculinity for the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

That said, I understand the opposition. Gettysburg is the holy of holies, a national shrine, and the ultimate signifier of honor, duty, and sacrifice. To place its memory and its venerated dead beside a group of recruits who never saw combat, never really impacted the course of the Great War, would be to trivialize the battlefield that for so long has served to remember and consecrate. I understand the argument that they simply *cannot* be compared in scale and experience. If Gettysburg can only hold one group's memory, then, it should be those that fought and fell there in 1863.



*Camp Colt recruits trained with the Renault FT-17. Photo credit: Eisenhower National Historical Site, Gettysburg National Military Park*

The debate is one of static versus continuing history. Static history, in this case, focuses on Gettysburg as a Civil War site, a logical idea, given that the majority of this town's visitors are more interested in learning about the Bloody Angle than the Renault FT-17. Static history certainly evolves, evident in Gettysburg's increasing importance in Civil Rights and African American history, but it prioritizes singularity over collectivism. Here, many of us establish a sense of place based on a single battle and its aftermath, often overlooking any events or cultural phenomenon that do not connect to the Civil War directly. It makes it easier to understand the town in which we live.

But there is much to be said about continuing history, too. By studying Camp Colt and the Great War alongside the Civil War, we create a bigger picture of American history that absorbs both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and helps us understand things as they *are*. This approach works with history as a continuum. It uses the Battle of Gettysburg to interpret the Camp Colt experience, emphasizing the importance of both while creating a more complete, whole idea of "Gettysburg." While I recognize the necessity of preservation, I firmly believe that it can survive alongside a more continuous, all-encompassing historical narrative.

When I delivered an interpretive program on the Camp Colt experience, placing the summer of 1863 beside the summer of 1918, I received positive feedback (from Civil War buffs, no less). I realized that focusing on Camp Colt does not detract from the collective Gettysburg memory or trivialize the battle but rather enhances the sense of place and timelessness this town holds. It was this same sense of place, after all, that motivated Eisenhower's tank recruits to emulate the bravery and comradeship of Gettysburg's dead. By 1918, the young tankers knew what they would face in France, but they remained willing to serve, motivated by the ground on which they trained. It does not matter, then, that they never made it into combat; their willingness is enough to warrant their memory.

Eisenhower's tank recruits, selected specifically for their bravery and competence under pressure, build upon the Gettysburg we know and expanded our understanding of war, memory, suffering, martial masculinity, and duty. In a sense, the men of Camp Colt *were* casualties of war, as 150 died of the Spanish Flu, a testament to the truly global nature of the First World War. This point is combated; can we really call them casualties of the war if they never suffered in the trenches of France or the mountains of Italy? That is the tragedy and revelation of the Great War: there were no more illusions about nobility in death, no more Victorian ideas of grand self-sacrifice, no more *ars moriendi* as was perpetuated during the Civil War era.

Moreover, we cannot separate the two wars entirely. The Civil War was fresh in American minds in 1918, as demonstrated by a number of newspaper articles and editorials noting the importance of remembering the country's bloodiest conflict in the midst of global war. Furthermore, over the course of five years the battlefield had witnessed a fifty-year anniversary, the dedication of the Virginia memorial, a boom in tourism, and a tense attempt at reconciliation. With the Great Migration just beginning and an unwelcome atmosphere greeting African American soldiers returning from the front, it is clear that the race issues that impacted the Civil War were far from resolved. Moreover, many monuments erected from 1914 to 1918 spoke directly to the Great War; speeches, inscriptions, and the monuments themselves drew on Civil War stories and culture heroes—Bobby Lee, Chamberlain, Grant, and the like—to encourage steadfast patriotism amidst the threat of German militarism.

If Camp Colt has taught me anything, it is that memory is not exclusive but collective. Its space in the Gettysburg narrative may be contentious, but I hold that it is essential. In the same way that the memory of Pickett's Charge motivated young tankers to train harder and inspired them to serve on some of the world's deadliest battlefields, our memory of Camp Colt can be used to further consecrate Gettysburg and understand it as a place both remaining in history and continuing in time.