



8-10-2018

## Antietam's Dunker Church: Meaning in the Viewpoint of the Beholder

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Bilger, Ryan, "Antietam's Dunker Church: Meaning in the Viewpoint of the Beholder" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 299.

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# Antietam's Dunker Church: Meaning in the Viewpoint of the Beholder

## **Abstract**

*This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.*

Antietam National Battlefield's venerable Dunker Church stands out today as one of the battlefield's most recognizable landmarks. While visitors to the park commonly seek it out as a place to explore today, the church has held several different meanings for those who have interacted with it over the years. These varying perspectives on the simple white brick structure provide great insight into how material objects influenced the attitudes and beliefs of historical actors. Across the decades, the Dunker Church has remained a key object in this regard, even as its meaning has changed depending upon the viewpoint of the beholder. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

## **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

## [Antietam's Dunker Church: Meaning in the Viewpoint of the Beholder](#)

By [Ryan Bilger '19](#)

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Antietam National Battlefield's venerable Dunker Church stands out today as one of the battlefield's most recognizable landmarks. While visitors to the park commonly seek it out as a place to explore today, the church has held several different meanings for those who have interacted with it over the years. These varying perspectives on the simple white brick structure provide great insight into how material objects influenced the attitudes and beliefs of historical actors. Across the decades, the Dunker Church has remained a key object in this regard, even as its meaning has changed depending upon the viewpoint of the beholder.



*Dunker Church is one of Antietam National Battlefield's most recognizable landmarks. Photo courtesy Ryan Bilger.*

When Sharpsburg farmer Samuel Mumma donated the land on which the Dunker Church would be built in 1851, he surely intended for the new place of worship to become a peaceful refuge and a communal gathering place. The Mumma family occupied a position near the center of the tight-knit local community, which included several of members of the pacifist German Baptist Brethren church, better known as the Dunkers. In its first decade of existence, the church filled its intended niche as an anchor for the local congregation. Its simple design and sparse furnishings reflected the devout religious beliefs and relative focus on austerity held by those who met there each Sunday, further contributing to its status in the community as a place of peace and solemnity. This meaning largely defined the Dunker Church in its early years. However, the arrival of two powerful armies at its doorstep would alter that meaning for some, and change overall perspectives on the structure forever.

On September 17, 1862, the Dunker Church stood in the center of the single bloodiest day in American history, and assumed totally different meanings for those who fought at Antietam. For the Union generals and soldiers attacking Robert E. Lee's Confederates, the church became a landmark to guide their advance. Their hopes and goals for the day, in many cases, fixated upon it as the symbol of the victory they desperately desired. After the chaos and carnage of battle ravaged the fields of Sharpsburg, the Dunker Church transformed once again. It became a hospital aid station for wounded Confederate soldiers desperately in need of treatment, and, according to one account, an embalming facility for Union dead. The pacifist meeting house became a scene of suffering and death, creating experiences that surely shaped how the soldiers and surgeons who passed through it thought about the maelstrom of war. The Battle of Antietam radically altered the meaning of the Dunker Church for those who interacted with it in September 1862.

Today, Antietam National Battlefield works effectively to stimulate visitor thinking on the different meanings ascribed to the Dunker Church and how people have interacted with it throughout history. The church occupies the position of Stop #1 on the battlefield auto tour, ensuring that visitors take time to observe the structure and reflect on its significance. Additional related artifacts in the Visitor Center museum highlight the dichotomy of uses and meanings, and interpretive signs and markers, as well as the Battlefield Ambassadors program on weekends, further contribute to promoting visitor reflection on the variation in the relationship between the Dunker Church and those who used it across the years. Overall, this targeted interpretation contributes well to ensuring that visitors remain mindful of how historical objects interacted with the people who used them in different, nuanced ways, and it should continue to do so into the future at Antietam.