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The Shifting Meaning of the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road

Lillian Shea
Gettysburg College

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The Shifting Meaning of the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road

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.

The part of the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road running through Appomattox Court House holds various meanings for those that have used it through the years. The early 19th-century inhabitants of Appomattox Court House viewed it as the source of prosperity for the town. By connecting the two wealthy cities of Richmond and Lynchburg, it ensured a steady flow of traffic that would spur construction of the town's first building, the Clover Hill Tavern, in 1819. Without the road, many of the non-agricultural businesses in the community could not function, thus making the road instrumental to the town's success. In 1854, a railroad stop was established 3 miles west of the town. The road which had once been a source of prosperity spelled the town's death sentence as people chose faster and smoother train travel over the stage road. Taverns went out of business and the population of 100 people in the 1860s decreased to just 10 by the 1890s. [*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

The Shifting Meaning of the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road

By [Lillian Shea '21](#)

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The author speaks to a tour group along the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road. Photo courtesy Lillian Shea.

The Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road held a different meaning for the Federal and Confederate troops that followed it into the village on April 8th, 1865. The road saw two days of fighting starting on April 8th and ending on the 9th with Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. For the men involved in these last, desperate battles of the Civil War, the road reminded them of the deaths of their comrades along with the battles that they had fought throughout the entire war.

Beyond being a place of death, it was also a site of acts of respect. On April 9th, the road literally led both generals to the surrender meeting that ensured generous terms for the Army of Northern Virginia. On April 10th, Lee and Grant met for a second time on horseback, this time on the road. In this meeting, Grant offered Lee's men parole passes to ensure safe passage home, rations, and transportation. April 12th saw the Stacking of Arms ceremony. Fifty-five thousand Federal infantrymen lined the stage road and saluted the Confederates as they laid down their guns. The Confederates returned the salute. Exhausted by the fighting and grateful for the generosity displayed on the stage road, these men were ready to go home along that same road and prepare for reunification.

Even though we at the park focus on the road's former uses, it is still active today as a pathway into the past, leading visitors through the town's history. No longer connecting two major cities, it now connects the past to the present. Rangers describe the deep ruts and blood red mud which characterized it 150 years ago, much different from the level, tan gravel of today. Rangers use the soldiers' own words to describe the men weeping from relief and others embracing one another in the middle of the road as brothers, no longer enemies. Each detail about the road adds nuance and makes the soldiers' experiences more tangible. The Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road acts almost like a river. Its function constantly changes, ebbing and flowing with fortune and failure, peace and war. Now it allows visitors to walk up and down its length, retracing the steps of those long forgotten so they can be remembered once again.