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Remembering the Violence of Antietam

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Abstract

Saturday, September 8th, saw a powerful collaboration between the Civil War Institute, Antietam National Battlefield, Eastern National, and Shepherd University. Together, these organizations hosted an event titled “Remembering the Violence of Antietam” which had a morning session at Shepherd University’s Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education. Those fortunate enough to have secured a seat in the auditorium were treated to a thought-provoking and informative string of talks. The afternoon session took place at different sites around Antietam National Battlefield. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Remembering the Violence of Antietam

By Cameron Sauers '21



Ranger Keith Snyder from Antietam National Battlefield delivering his program Saturday afternoon in Antietam National Cemetery. (photo via Cameron Sauers)

Saturday, September 8th, saw a powerful collaboration between the Civil War Institute, Antietam National Battlefield, Eastern National, and Shepherd University. Together, these organizations hosted an event titled "Remembering the Violence of Antietam" which had a morning session at Shepherd University's Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education. Those fortunate enough to have secured a seat in the auditorium were treated to a thought-provoking and informative string of talks. The afternoon session took place at different sites around Antietam National Battlefield.

The day began in earnest with an insightful lecture from Amelia Grabowski, a Gettysburg College alumna from the class of 2013. Grabowski's lecture, "The Making of the Angel of the Battlefield," focused on Clara Barton, a school teacher and clerk in the patent office who became a nurse at the outset of the war. The lecturer paid special attention to how Barton's experience at Antietam field hospitals influenced her later work with the Missing Soldiers Office and the foundation of the American Red Cross. Clara Barton's early life was illuminated for the audience, dispelling the common notion that Barton was some angel just dropped on the Antietam battlefield. One of the events in Barton's early life that was highlighted was Barton's experience nursing her brother to health for two years after he fell from a roof. This gave Barton the rudimentary knowledge of nursing that she would take to the battlefield with her.

Following Grabowski was CWI Director, Dr. Peter Carmichael, who delivered a talk entitled, "Where is the Blood? Imagination, Violence, and the Sunken Lane." Dr. Carmichael detailed the sanitization of the famous Alexander Gardiner photos of Antietam before public consumption. Gardiner's original photos of carnage were stripped of their blood and gore before being published as woodcuts for Northern newspapers. This editing of the photos prevented Northerners from seeing the true carnage in Gardiner's original photos of the battle. Dr. Carmichael also provided the case study of David Beam, who served in the 24th Indiana and fought at the Sunken Lane who wrote a series of emotional and revealing letters home in the days and weeks following Antietam. Carmichael's example served to prove his point that Civil War soldiers were emotional and would share their feelings with those on the home front.

After concluding his talk, Dr. Carmichael introduced his good friend and newly appointed director of the Nau Center for Civil War History at the University of Virginia, Dr. Caroline Janney. Dr. Janney's achievement as a Civil War historian is well known. She is the author of *Burying the Dead But Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* and *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*. Janney's lecture, "On this Field Died Slavery: Remembering and Reconciling at Antietam," captivated the assembled audience. One of the fascinating aspects of Dr. Janney's talk was her detailing of how many soldiers, both northern and Southern, did not want to go to Blue/Grey reunions because they did not want to tone down their rhetoric about the war's causes. Blue/Grey reunions were reconciliation meetings that sought to commemorate the valor of individual soldiers and units but ignored larger political forces of the war. Union veterans may have preferred to

lambaste the South's secession, but would have been hesitant to do it on Southern ground in front of Southern veterans.

Janney also made the interesting argument that Antietam is a memorial park to the Union itself because many veterans of the Battle of Antietam, especially those who did not fight at Gettysburg, viewed the battle as the triumph that ended slavery. Following the war, many soldiers would take great pride in the fact that their sacrifice and victory at the battle of Antietam led to the Emancipation Proclamation. After the war, this sense of pride would lead to clashes between Union and Confederate veterans over what caused the war and what ended it, especially as former Confederates developed the Lost Cause mythology. Janney ended with Robert Penn Warren's quote, "in the moment of death the Confederacy entered upon its immortality," which was a perfect example of this new mythology. The Confederacy, when it surrendered, still had ardent supporters who were not yet willing to admit defeat. They vowed to perpetuate "the lost cause," which promotes Confederate honor and dignity and attempts to manipulate the historical memory of the war. For example, a common example of the lost cause is to say that 'states rights' caused the war, instead of slavery, or to sterilize the horrors of the institution of slavery. The sense of awe in the room was palpable as seminar participants headed for lunch.

In the afternoon, visitors were treated to a unique talk from Dr. James Broomall, the Director of the George Tyler Moore Center for the Study of the Civil War and Assistant Professor of History at Shepherd University. Broomall admittedly stepped out of his comfort zone to deliver a lecture on James Hope's paintings of the battle of Antietam. Broomall claimed to not be an art historian, but his speech had the audience (myself included) captivated by the subject. Broomall focused on how Hope's return to the battlefield two decades after the battle inspired him to begin painting once again. The resulting works capture the field of Antietam at its most brutal – from the fighting near Dunker Church, to piles of bodies in the Sunken lane. Seeing how a painter remembered the violence at Antietam was an interesting contrast to how photography and monuments commemorated the violence. Broomall's talk about painting the battlefield was especially helpful as seminar attendees headed out onto the battlefield.

After Broomall's talk, a brave few ventured out in the rain for the first of two battlefield tours. Park ranger Brian Baracz's tour, "Memory in Bronze and Stone," built on the morning talks, especially that of Dr. Janney. Baracz focused on the monuments erected at Antietam and how their stories differ from Gettysburg's battlefield. Antietam has less monuments on the battlefield than Gettysburg because many states wanted to put monuments only at Gettysburg and considered the monuments erected at Antietam to be second in terms of importance. Fortunately, the rain started to disappear towards the end of Baracz's talk and held off for Keith Snyder's tour. Snyder's tour, "The Global Sacrifice for Freedom at Antietam National Cemetery," expanded the day beyond the Civil War. Snyder detailed, for the assembled audience, the stories behind a few of the graves at the cemetery. Included were the graves of Civil War soldiers, African American soldiers who battled against segregation during the first World War, and soldiers who

fought on both fronts during the second World War. Snyder's tour was moving, and it was hard not to become emotional. Even Snyder struggled to hold back tears as he recounted powerful stories of heroism and sacrifice . One story that impacted me personally was the story of Staff Sgt. Maxwell Leo Swain who was killed at the battle of the Bulge on Dec. 19, 1944. Swain's youth at age 19 years old when he died particularly resonated with me, being 19 myself. The tour was a thought-provoking and appropriate end to a day focused on the remembrance of sacrifice, and the far-ranging impact of battlefield violence.