The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History

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Making Photographs Speak

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Abstract

It has often been said that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Making that picture spit out those mythical thousand words, as we can all attest, is no easy task. Over the course of the first half of the fall semester, the three of us were tasked with developing brief interpretive captions for two Civil War photographs each, with the end goal to display our work at the Civil War Institute's 2019 Summer Conference. What initially appeared as a simple project quickly revealed itself to be a difficult, yet rewarding, challenge that taught us all important lessons concerning history, photography, and writing that we will not soon forget. Producing the photography exhibit enhanced our skills as historical writers, introduced us to the challenge of writing for a popular audience, and deepened our understanding of Civil War photography. [*excerpt*]

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY
Making Photographs Speak

By James Goodman '20, Benjamin Roy '21, and Cameron Sauers '21

It has often been said that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Making that picture spit out those mythical thousand words, as we can all attest, is no easy task. Over the course of the first half of the fall semester, the three of us were tasked with developing brief interpretive captions for two Civil War photographs each, with the end goal to display our work at the Civil War Institute's 2019 Summer Conference. What initially appeared as a simple project quickly revealed itself to be a difficult, yet rewarding, challenge that taught us all important lessons concerning history, photography, and writing that we will not soon forget. Producing the photography exhibit enhanced our skills as historical writers, introduced us to the challenge of writing for a popular audience, and deepened our understanding of Civil War photography.

Benjamin – The first image I worked with was taken by Alexander Gardner on the Rose Farm a few days after the battle. In the photograph, four South Carolina officers lay in a rubbish heap, set on the edge of the Rose property, far away from the home and outbuildings. In a grotesque state of bloat and mutilation, the four bodies are unidentifiable, which highlights the importance of the headboards that lay atop and beside the dead. The haphazard nature of how the bodies and headboards have been laid out offers important insights into the struggles of civilians after the battle. After the Battle of Gettysburg, civilians had to deal with mass casualties and the challenges it posed to their ideologies about death and warfare. Primary accounts from visitors to the Rose farm after the battle reveal that these four soldiers were likely originally buried near John Rose's well. John Rose disinterred the four corpses in the image and relocated them away from his water supply to ensure its safety. Already swamped with some 500 dead scattered about his property, Rose did not immediately rebury them, but placed them alongside the rest of the refuse to be dealt with later. This was far from the proper 19th-century burial, which was a Christian burial effected by loved ones or comrades and culminating in a quiet, unassuming funeral centered on the memory of the individual. John Rose's discarding of these attitudes, graphically captured in Gardner's image, is indicative of how the horrors of war, exhaustion, and pragmatism came together in the decisions of civilians like John Rose that broke from strict 19th-century traditions for treatment of the dead.

My second image was another photograph of South Carolina dead on the Rose farm. Three rebel officers lay exposed in an incomplete grave. Horse-drawn carts on a sloping hill occupy the background and the bodies are slightly hidden by the walls of the grave, but viewers' eyes are drawn to the headboards. 19th-century beliefs about death placed

heavy emphasis on personal identification and the humanization of the dead. Comrades of the fallen sought to ensure a proper battlefield burial by identifying the fallen's remains so that they might be retrieved, or even brought home for burial with all the correct ceremonies that 19th-century sentimentalism required. Although these dead soldiers were not buried by their comrades, nor were their graves mourned over by loved ones, the headboards and Gardner's choice to feature them speaks volumes about the resilience of sentimental attitudes about death. The headboards and the identities scrawled upon them stand like lighthouses of sentimentalism amid a sea of the impersonal destructive forces of war. A 19th-century viewer could take this horror and comfort in equal measure in the image of these three South Carolina dead, knowing that although these men had died far from home and loved ones, they would be remembered.

Frequently while developing these captions, I confronted ideas about mortality and identification after death. The South Carolina soldiers must have confronted these questions regularly in the lead-up to their fate at Gettysburg. This same morbid reflection must have consumed most Victorian Americans, soldiers and civilians alike, as images like this hasty grave became commonplace and challenged some of their most cherished cultural tenets of death, as well as the meaning and cost of war. My thoughts also turned to the families of the soldiers, and what their reactions would be if they ever saw these images. Would they be outraged that their son had become the object of a northern voyeuristic curiosity? Working on these captions left me with more questions than answers. This project illustrated to me that it is impossible to comprehend all the questions these images ask, and that I can only provide the best answers from the sources at my disposal. Similarly, I may never fully understand the overwhelming experiences of John Rose in the wake of a great battle, nor how a broader northern audience made sense of the horror they confronted in the twin images of South Carolina dead from the Rose farm.

The three authors working with Ron Perisho,
who generously provided the photographs for the project.

Cameron – For me, Civil War photography was what sparked my interest in the Civil War, so the opportunity to work on a photography-based project was truly an opportunity to relish. This project challenged me to look closer at these images and to dig deeper into the stories of the individuals photographed, both known and unidentified. The first of the two images that I worked with was from Alexander Gardner's collection of death studies done near Devil's Den. The image features one lone soldier lying on his back, with noticeable brain matter spilled out from his head and a posed rifle next to his side. The only background in the image is a rock. I had to piece together what I could about this individual: What unit was he from? When did he fall in the fighting? I only knew for certain that the soldier was a Confederate who died near the Slaughter Pen; everything else would have to be informed speculation based on Victorian norms.

At moments, it was emotional writing about the life of a soldier who might have been no older than myself when he fell in battle. When I finished the final draft of the caption, I went and found the location of the image. It was powerful and moving to visit the site of the image I had spent so much time with. That portion of the Slaughter Pen will never be the same for me when I visit the battlefield. Thinking about this image and all the other scenes from Gettysburg viewed by northern audiences who were so curious to catch a glimpse of the "real war" on camera, I wondered if they ever realized that the corpse captured in the image was someone's loved one? Did they think about who this man was before the war and what led him to Gettysburg? Northern audiences may have seen the photo and thought they had experienced the war. Doubtless, the graphic image was profoundly troubling to many who held cherished ideas about the romance of war and the "Good Death." Yet, as unsettled as these viewers may have been after gazing upon this gory image, the reality was that only those who participated in the fighting could truly understand the brutal experience of war.

The second image I worked with is a lesser known image taken by Frederick Gutekunst of a field hospital following the battle. The challenge of that image was an interesting juxtaposition to the other image. So much was already known about the numerous figures who appear in the image and who have published works about their experiences. Determining what narrative I wanted to focus on in my caption was difficult since there were numerous stories I could have honed in on. The experience of being able to explore the primary sources of individuals whom I had never previously considered, such as surgeons and nurses, provided a new depth to my understanding of the battle of Gettysburg and its impacts. The caption encouraged me to think about the experiences of those who were not traditional, rifle-carrying soldiers nor helpless civilians caught in the crossfire. They were humanitarians who willingly exposed themselves to danger to provide aid to soldiers on both sides of the battlefield. After the armies marched away, the army surgeons stayed with volunteer nurses to care for the wounded.

This photo also forced me to think more deeply about the specific message the photographer was trying to convey by depicting the hospital scene as he did, as well as the reaction he sought to provoke from his viewers. By photographing an array of tents

and medical personnel milling about instead of the countless corpses lying on the battlefield, Gutekunst was trying to galvanize public support for Union soldiers and their caretakers: Many of Gutekunst's images sought specifically to appeal to northerners' patriotism as well as their purses in order to inspire civilians to donate money and supplies to the Union war effort. Such medical supplies and volunteers were essential to aid the brave wounded. By capturing the heroic surgeons and nurses, who stand in between the viewer and the gruesome scenes of a field hospital, Gutekunst showed the public the patriotic sacrifice of civilians, while sparing them the direct sensory affronts of the interior hospital scenes, in the hope that such an image might inspire others to similarly patriotic and self-sacrificing action.

James – This project presented a unique set of challenges for me. I tend to write in a leaner style and therefore needed to develop a more elaborate and interpretive writing style. I was also pushed to think more interpretively about my photographs, which had an extra layer of difficulty in that they were of landscapes, not people. I worked with two images photographed by Samuel Fischer Corlies, an amateur photographer from Philadelphia who did not arrive in Gettysburg until November 1863. The images I chose depicted destroyed landscapes at East Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill. In order to do justice to these photos, I needed to go beyond simply what was shown in them to what Corlies intended his audience to feel, including the pain felt by civilians and soldiers alike in the aftermath of the battle. Due to the lack of actual bodies extant on the battlefield by November of 1863, he allowed the natural landscape to speak for those impacted by war, with the scarred landscape embodying the long-lasting pain and destruction upon bodies, families, and livelihoods alike.

Corlies's image of East Cemetery Hill depicts a war-torn, devastated landscape. The focal point was a trench dug by Federal troops, with pieces of lumber strewn haphazardly along the earthwork. The land around the trench, which was probably vibrant with healthy grass and vegetation before the battle, was desolate and trampled. Looking at the image, I could only imagine what the aftermath of the battle was like for the people of Gettysburg. The field in this photo looks as if it were completely destroyed. Huge quantities of earth were moved to create the defenses or for artillery fire. Crops were eaten or trampled by marching troops. With their homes, fields, and livelihoods ravaged and forever changed by the clashing of two great armies in July, the people of Gettysburg faced a new, somber reality. This point was even more poignant when I learned Corlies's images were from November of 1863, four months after the battle was fought. At this point, the land was ripped apart once again as citizens of Gettysburg began exhuming the bodies of dead soldiers and relocating them to their final resting places in the National Cemetery or the South. By exhuming the soldiers' bodies, the town essentially reopened its only recently closed wounds. It must have felt like the nightmare would never end, and yet that disruptive burial process, compounded by Lincoln's address that same month, also sought to provide healing, comfort, and a higher meaning for the suffering endured by soldiers and civilians alike.

In the image of Culp's Hill, Corlies again captured the battle's long-lasting destruction. Culp's Hill looks like a barren wasteland filled with the trunks of trees. The trees were either intentionally cut down to be used as defenses or fell victim to the Confederate attempts to take the hill. As with East Cemetery Hill, this devastation occurred on someone's property. A private citizen was forced to clean up the carnage left behind. They saw trees that had been growing for decades cut down in mere hours. The image of bullet ridden and devastated trees on Culp's Hill reflected a common sentiment in the Victorian Era to find human symbolism in natural landscapes, and in this case, compare the decimated trees to slain human bodies. As the trees were destroyed or felled in some way, it made sense that Corlies attempted to replace the bodies of soldiers that would have been present on the landscape months prior with these trees. It truly represented how quickly and deeply the battle's destruction was inflicted on Gettysburg and how long it would take for the area to heal.

We have learned much from developing these captions. Our skills as writers have been keenly developed, as we confronted and surmounted the challenges of creating attractive and digestible captions for a public audience. Furthermore, we gained a deeper appreciation for an interdisciplinary approach to history, as it allowed us to make the unspoken contents of each photograph visceral again. As we struggled to piece together the background stories for these photos, we often wondered how future generations will view our own pictures. Will they get the story 100% right? Only time will tell. Our hope is that on this project we were able to successfully capture the stories that are represented in each photograph.