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Abstract

An analysis of the memorialization of the land on and around Cemetery Hill on the Gettysburg battlefield as it pertained to the Union Eleventh Corps.

Keywords

Gettysburg, Memory, Cemetery Hill, Eleventh Corps

Disciplines

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Comments

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Interpreting a Commemorative Landscape: The Eleventh Corps and Cemetery Hill

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History 347

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By midday on July 1st, 1863, what had begun as a small skirmish in the farmland north of Gettysburg had escalated into a full-blown conflict. Around noon on July 1st, the leading division of the Union army's Eleventh Corps, a predominantly German-American force commanded by Oliver Howard, arrived at the field. Despite being exhausted from marching at a double-quick pace to reach the battlefield, the men of the Eleventh Corps were assigned a critical yet daunting task. In an effort to buy time for the rest of the Army of the Potomac to arrive and, more importantly, to prevent Confederate forces from occupying the favorable defensive terrain just south of Gettysburg, two divisions of the Eleventh corps were tasked with repulsing Confederate assaults from the north, with a third division positioned directly south in support, on Cemetery Hill.¹

The two divisions, commanded by Brigadier Generals Alexander Schimmelfennig and Francis Barlow, positioned themselves in the farm valley to the north of town. With the majority of the Army of the Potomac still several hours of marching away from combat, these two divisions were the right flank of the Union defense. With the Union First Corps positioned just due east along Oak Ridge and McPherson's Ridge, the Eleventh extended from the Mummasburg Road for approximately three quarters of a mile northwest, its extreme right flank positioned just west of Rock Creek and the Heidlersburg Road.²

The landscape in the valley was less than ideal for a sustained defensive effort. It was largely featureless, consisting of little more than a square mile of flat farmland with little to no areas for troops to take cover. Frustrated by the disadvantageous terrain, Barlow advanced his division, which stood as the right flank of the entire Union force, onto a small wooded knoll, the

¹ David L. Valuska and Christian Keller, *Damn Dutch: Pennsylvania Germans at Gettysburg* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), 81-91.

² Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign, A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 287-8.

only position of measurable elevation in the valley. Despite attempting to justify the movement by claiming that he could not let the Confederate attackers occupy the knoll for an artillery position, Barlow's decision to advance his troops further than orders stated proved to be a significant strategic blunder. With the majority of his division several hundred yards ahead of the rest of the Eleventh Corps' line, Barlow's position on the knoll created a salient in the Union line that was vulnerable to attack from the north, east, and west.

By mid-afternoon, Confederate General Jubal Early had begun his assault on the right flank of the Union line. Recognizing the vulnerability of the Barlow's 900 troops positioned on the knoll, Brigadier General John Gordon's Georgian troops spilled across Rock Creek and mercilessly assaulted the exposed right flank of Barlow's division. Despite mounting a fierce resistance against superior numbers, the men of the 54th and 68th New York were eventually forced to flee their position. In just 20 minutes of fighting, the extreme right flank of the Union line had dissolved and collapsed. With Gordon's men now occupying Barlow's Knoll to the east and Early's divisions still launching frontal assaults from the north, the remaining Union defenders were now enduring Confederate assaults from two fronts. The collapse of the Barlow's Knoll position created a snowball effect that resulted in the Eleventh Corps defenses collapsing from right to left, with survivors fleeing in confusion and terror southward through the town. By 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the Eleventh Corps' lines had completely dissolved. The fighting had been impressively lopsided: In little over an hour, the Eleventh Corps had suffered approximately 3,200 casualties, including 1,400 prisoners. Confederate casualties amounted to less than 750.³

Despite the failure of the Eleventh Corps to repulse Early's assault, the first day of fighting at Gettysburg still ended on a somewhat positive note for Union command. Already held

³ Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 212-7.

and anchored by a third division of the Eleventh Corps, Cemetery Hill stood as the rallying point for the surviving elements of the Eleventh fleeing from the valley below. Despite being criticized for keeping the majority of his third division defending Cemetery Hill rather than engaging with the enemy near Barlow's Knoll, Howard recognized the strategic importance of occupying the hill. Rising over 100 feet tall, it offered Union forces a fortified, elevated position with a commanding view of the battlefield and a perfect location to place artillery batteries. With Culp's Hill rising to the northeast and Cemetery Ridge directly to the south, Cemetery Hill was considered the "keystone" of the Union line: its occupation and defense was thus imperative to maintaining a strong and uniform defensive position on the ridges and hills south of the town. Lastly, Cemetery Hill shielded the Baltimore Pike just east of the hill. Keeping the Baltimore Pike clear, secured, and in Union hands ensured that it would remain usable for the Army of the Potomac's extensive supply trains, as well as an emergency route out of the area if necessary. While Jubal Early's defeat of the Eleventh Corps was demoralizing and left many of its units as shells of their former selves, the Army of Northern Virginia's failure to continue their momentum from its victories on the first day through overtaking Cemetery Hill ensured that the Union forces at Gettysburg would continue to prevent Lee's forces from occupying the high ground south of the town that would prove to be essential for victory during the next two days.⁴

When visiting Cemetery Hill and Barlow's Knoll in the present day, there is very little information presented by the National Park Service that sheds any light on the strategic importance of the hill, the ill-advised advance of General Barlow, the bloodshed that occurred on and around the hill, nor the impact that the Eleventh Corps' retreat had on the widespread stigma and prejudice surrounding German American soldiers in the Union army. The failure of the

⁴ Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: Culp's Hill & Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 25.

National Park Service to fully acknowledge every narrative tied to this landscape inevitably results in visitors misunderstanding not only the true story of the fighting that transpired, but also its significance for the collective German-American identity in the United States.

One of the most obvious aspects of the interpretive landscape around Cemetery Hill is the absence of nearly any commemoration of the Army of Northern Virginia's role in the fighting. While monuments dedicated to Union commanders and soldiers alike are numerous, there are none respectively for their Confederate counterparts. By placing an overt emphasis on Union monumentation, the Park Service is subsequently causing visitors to be oblivious of the lopsided victory that the Confederates achieved on July 1st, and more importantly of the extensive human suffering that occurred in the valley below.

The absence of Confederate commemoration anywhere around Cemetery Hill, as well as the grandeur monuments commemorating Generals Howard and Hancock on the summit results in the casual visitor interpreting the site as a symbol of Union military dominance and prestige. The position did indeed hold a critically important role in Union strategy for the rest of the battle, and Howard's recognition of the hill's importance should not go unnoticed. This, however is only half the story. The National Park Service fails to mention anywhere on site Cemetery Hill's importance as a rallying point for the retreating men for the Eleventh Corps and ignores the strategic misjudgement that led to these men fleeing up the slopes of the hill.

Another aspect of the Cemetery Hill landscape that skews the visitor's interpretation of the battle is the manner in which Francis Barlow is memorialized. The monument portrays Barlow as a dashing, heroic figure who stands honorably towards an advancing enemy. Nowhere does it mention Barlow's catastrophic decision to advance his own division forward and creating a salient in the Union line. Left only with this sole monument to interpret at the site of Barlow's

Knoll and no wayside in proximity, visitors are presented with only one side of Barlow's story. Similar to the grand monuments on the summit of Cemetery Hill, the presence of Barlow's monument, coupled with the absence of any other interpretive markers, allows visitors to ignore the fact that Barlow's strategic error arguably led to the success of the Confederate assaults on the first day of combat. Again, no mention is ever made regarding the loss of life that was a direct result of Barlow's decision making, nor his anti-German prejudice that helped contribute to the stigma surrounding the Eleventh Corps' identity as a German-American unit.

Lastly, the National Park Service fails to present what the fighting on and around Cemetery Hill meant for the thousands of German-Americans that were involved in the combat. The stigma surrounding German-American soldiers in the Union army, especially after the humiliating defeat at Chancellorsville is a theme that is often not realized by the casual visitor. No monument stands in dedication to the hundreds of German-Americans who fell as casualties on the first day of Gettysburg. By failing to acknowledge how the first day's fighting perpetuated the cowardly stereotype surrounding German-American troops, the Park Service is further contributing to a narrative of Union moral purity and preventing visitors to come to terms with a rather ugly undertone to life in the Union army.

The first "big question" one should ask themselves when visiting Cemetery Hill is how the commemorative landscape ignores the cultural significance that the fighting on the first day had on the German-Americans of the Eleventh Corps. Historian Christian Keller explains that "the battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War as a whole enhanced Pennsylvania Germans' conceptions of ethnic identity....German-Americans, especially, emerged from the conflict more aware of their ethnicity and how they differed from the greater Anglo-American population."⁵ In light of Keller's insight into the significance that fighting at Gettysburg had on German-

⁵ Keller, 193.

Americans, visitors must ask themselves why there are no monuments nor waysides commemorating the sacrifices that thousands of German-Americans made for the Union cause.

The second question that visitors should ask themselves is how the preservation of a serene and pastoral landscape around Cemetery Hill shifts visitors' attention away from the dehumanizing carnage that Civil War combat brought to the men who fought it. In his book *Interpreting Sacred Ground*, historian Christian Spielvogel explains that maintaining a lush natural landscape "creates a pastoral memory of the war that discourages reflection about the intrusion of modernization and its effects on shattering 'courage's war' as a masculine ideology and military strategy."⁶ Using Spielvogel's analysis as a guide, visitors should ask themselves how the monuments at the site of the fighting impose a macro-history perspective on the landscape by emphasizing strategic decisions by generals over the confused, chaotic terror that individual soldiers were experiencing in the valley below.

There are several monuments on the Cemetery Hill landscape that do in fact honor the soldiers who fought rather than the generals commanding from above. When viewing these monuments, guests should analyze how the structures emphasize the the legitimization of manliness and patriotism by glorifying virtuous suffering and displaying courage in the face of dehumanizing combat. In his landmark work *Embattled Courage*, Gerald Linderman explains that "the primacy of courage promised the soldier that no matter how immense the war, how distant the fumbling the directing generals, or how powerful enemy forces seeking his destruction, his fate would continue to rest on his inner qualities."⁷ Juxtaposing Linderman's analysis next to the portrayal of Union citizen soldiers on the monuments, guests must think

⁶J. Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 113.

⁷Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 61.

about how a monuments' depiction of Union soldiers fighting and dying in pursuit of duty, courage, and manliness distracts visitors from understanding that Civil War combat was chaotic and random, with no method or reason as to whom would be torn apart by enemy bullets in fields of smoke.

There are several themes surrounding the Cemetery Hill landscape that should guide a visitor's interpretation of the area. The first theme centers around the disconnect between the Northern public's perception of why Union soldiers fought and died on the battlefield and the actual reasons why many of German-Americans took up arms to defend the country that had stigmatized them so frequently. This avoidance of the full truth of the Eleventh Corps' experience both at Gettysburg and during the entire war is explained by post-war Northern narratives that desired to portray the Union army as one that held a moral high ground over a Southern slave oligarchy.⁸ By claiming that all soldiers in the Union army were morally virtuous, tolerant, and fought for the same reasons, the narrative ignores a narrative surrounding the Eleventh Corps that makes the unit so unique. For many of the German-Americans who fought and died in the fields around Cemetery Hill, their service was not an effort to preserve the Union, but rather a cultural necessity to quell the negative stereotypes surrounding the German population in America and legitimize their patriotism through sacrifice on the battlefield.⁹

A second theme embodied within the commemorative landscape has to do with nativism, and how Northern xenophobia towards German-Americans is reflected upon the landscape. More specifically, an analysis of the various monuments on the landscape can help visitors understand how specifically German-American prejudice was used to justify the failures of men like Francis Barlow on the battlefield. By stereotyping German-American soldiers as cowardly and

⁸ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 156.

⁹ Keller, 21.

incompetent soldiers and using them as a scapegoat for the some of the strategic failures on the first day, prejudiced Northerners such as Barlow could advance their own narratives of personal fulfilment of duty and courage, using the cowardly reputation of the Eleventh Corps' Germans to shift blame away from his leadership and onto an entire culture of people.

A third broad theme related to the Cemetery Hill battlefield is the emphasis that the National Park Service places on a macro-historical perspective. This perspective shifts a visitor's focus away from the chaotic hell that individual soldiers experienced on the battlefield, focussing instead on the strategic decisions of horse-mounted generals who sat far from the fighting. This again distracts visitors from the "savage" interpretation of battle that Christian Spielvogel explains, focussing rather on a broader perspective that views units comprised of thousands of individuals as one, homogeneous group who all experienced combat in the exact same way.¹⁰

The first stop on the tour of Cemetery Hill is the Francis Barlow monument, located at Barlow's Knoll. The monument portrays Barlow as a dashing leader who stands unflappably facing the advancing Confederates to the North. Left with only a large monument commemorating a dashing commander, the Barlow monument leads visitors to believe that he was an able and flawless general who bravely defended the knoll that became his namesake. At the dedication of the monument in 1922, Colonel Lewis Stegman proudly asserted that "Barlow, with characteristic vision, quickly realized that a knob in his front offered an invaluable salient for his two brigades and with characteristic daring he did not hesitate in trying to seize it."¹¹ Combined with the lush pastoral setting of the knoll, the site of the monument portrays Barlow as a wise and strategic commander whose defeat on the first day of fighting could never be in vain.

¹⁰ Spielvogel, 108.

¹¹ The New York Monuments Commission, *In Memoriam: Francis Channing Barlow, 1834-1896* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1923), 29.

While Barlow is immortalized as a man of duty and courage, the absence of any acknowledgement to German-American troops around Barlow's Knoll allows visitors to ignore both the sacrifices that the Germans in Barlow's division made on July 1st, nor the cultural struggle that these Germans had to fight against their prejudiced commander. The commemorative landscape fails to mention anywhere that Barlow used his German troops as an excuse for the defeat at Barlow's Knoll. In a post-war letter written to one of his classmates, Barlow wrote that "these Dutch won't fight. Their officers say so and they say so themselves and they ruin all with whom they come in contact."¹² The commemorative landscape around the Barlow monument makes no mention regarding Barlow's prejudiced comments about German-Americans, nor admits that his decision to advance forward onto the knoll likely spurred the collapse of the Union position. By refusing to discuss the tension between Barlow and his troops, the National Park Service is ensuring that Barlow is remembered the same way as every other Union soldier would be: as an honorable and morally sound citizen soldier, who made great sacrifices for the sake of freedom and equality.

The landscape around Barlow's Knoll fails to mention its role as a setting where German-American troops sought to legitimize their status as Americans in the face of an outspoken and prejudiced commander. Christian Keller explains that "immigrants recognized that participation in the war was their route to full recognition as American citizens."¹³ As a result, Barlow's Knoll would be a key location where hundreds of Germans would take up arms and fight in horrendous, dehumanizing combat in order to prove their worth as Americans to prejudiced men like Barlow. By maintaining only one historical narrative at the site, that of Barlow courageously commanding his troops in battle, the visitor will never realize that Barlow's Knoll was a setting

¹² Francis Barlow, letter to Robert Treat Paine, August 12th, 1863.

¹³ Keller, 21.

in which German-Americans were tasked with fighting their own separate war: that against their own Union comrades who labeled them as cowards.

The decision to exclude the German-American narrative from Barlow's Knoll can be attributed to the postwar North's efforts to materialize the memory of the Union war effort into a single cohesive narrative: that of valiant citizen soldiers who took up arms to fight for equality and reunion.¹⁴ Thus, shedding light on the fierce stigma that many German-American troops faced during the war would prove the Union army to be a hypocritical mass of xenophobes who were forcing their comrades to legitimize themselves through bloodshed. In order to keep the morally straight, citizen-soldier narrative intact, commemoration efforts established a collective memory about the identity of the Union soldier, thus ignoring the prejudice that German-Americans faced from their own comrades.

The second stop on the tour brings the visitor to the 74th Pennsylvania monument. The monument features a Union soldier who appears to be wounded. He is laying on the ground, with an American flag draped over his shoulder and a wreath, a symbol frequently associated with victory, at his side. The intent of the monument is to portray a typical Union citizen soldier who has been wounded in battle in an attempt to defend his country and achieve victory, the symbols for which are kept closely at his side.

The 74th Pennsylvania monument is a commemorative tool that celebrates citizen soldiers of the Union dying the "Good Death" that Victorian America placed so much importance upon.¹⁵ The 74th Pennsylvania monument portrays Union soldiers as ordinary citizens, whose love for their country and desire for victory drove them to make the ultimate sacrifice in battle. Additionally, by including the symbols of the wreath and American flag in the

¹⁴ Gallagher, 157.

¹⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 6.

monument, visitors are deceived in believing that the main goal of combat in the Civil War was to achieve glory or strategic gain, when in reality war's goal is always to simply kill as many of the enemy as you can. Christian Spielvogel explains that monuments such as that of the 74th Pennsylvania are used to "deemphasize the centrality of war's killing and injuring," and thus shift the visitor's focus away from the "savage" interpretation of war and instead celebrate these soldier's fulfilment of courage and honor.¹⁶ What the monument of the 74th Pennsylvania doesn't explain is how the unit was one of the few all-German regiments in the Union army. Thus, similar to the Barlow's Knoll site, visitors are deceived into believing that the men in the 74th Pennsylvania were dying out of love for their country and not in an attempt to prove their worth as Americans.

The base of Cemetery Hill is the third stop on the tour. Originally the site of amazing bloodshed and confused retreat, the base of the hill today is a serene and pastoral landscape, featuring much of the same terrain that the men of the Eleventh Corps fought on. In preserving the base of the hill as a pleasant and natural setting, the Park Service is succeeding in evoking a feeling among visitors that "effaces war's savagery and uses nature to protect and promote a heroic interpretation of war as part of the natural order."¹⁷ Regimental memoirs written after the war prove that the fighting at the base of Cemetery Hill was far from being simply "natural order". Private Reuben Ruch of the 153rd New York described the scene of the fighting's brutal aftermath, claiming that bodies "were piled up in every shape, some on their backs, some on their faces, and other turned and twisted in every imaginable shape."¹⁸

¹⁶ Spielvogel, 104-5.

¹⁷ Ibid, 113.

¹⁸ William R. Kiefer, *History of the One Hundred Fifty-third Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry* (Easton, Pa, 1909), 214.

In preserving the pastoral nature of the base of Cemetery Hill, the National Park Service is succeeding in creating what Spielvogel describes as a “pastoral memory of the war that discourages reflection about the intrusion of modernization and its effects on shattering ‘courage’s war’ as a masculine ideology and military strategy.”¹⁹ Thus, the National Park Service is distracting visitors from coming to the realization that the Civil War was a modern, brutal war; one that pitted man against machine. There are no waysides in the area to help visitors come to grips with the bloodshed that occurred in the valley in front of them. Instead, visitors are left to picture what the battle may have looked at in their own way. Consequently, the base of Cemetery Hill encourages visitors to ignore what modern technology had done to the men of the Eleventh Corps on July 1st, allowing guests to remain under the impression that the men in the valley in front of them had died virtuously and peacefully, rather than torn to shreds by musket and cannon ball.

The final stop on the Cemetery Hill tour is the summit of the hill itself, where a massive statue of General Oliver Howard overlooks the valley below. At the summit, there are only two waysides which just briefly describe some of the fighting on the hill on July 2nd and 3rd, with no mention made to the carnage on the 1st. Similar to the pastoral interpretation of the landscape which was fostered at the base of the hill, the vast expanse of the valley below further depersonalizes the experiences of individual soldiers, instead clumping groups of thousands of men into regiments, brigades and divisions. Spielvogel says that this method of landscaping succeeds in “directing the visitor’s gaze outward over long stretches of the battlefield in order to understand broader battle strategy and outcome.”²⁰ The summit of Cemetery Hill is an attractive location for visitors to come to, since its serene views and absence of any Confederate

¹⁹ Spielvogel, 113.

²⁰ Spielvogel, 113.

monuments allow the visitor observe the battlefield in nostalgic peace, rather than pulling their attention towards the realities of bloodshed, retreat, and xenophobic stigma that all interplayed within the valley below. The broad projection of the valley that allows visitors to visualize Union soldiers as massive units rather than individuals further rejects the depersonalizing horrors of combat, and convincing visitors that the ultimate goal of the combat in the valley was something more than simply killing as many of the enemy as possible.

Historical narratives are never simple stories to tell, and the many layers of historical narration that reveal, or shield themselves, throughout the Cemetery Hill landscape are an excellent reflection of this. It is an unreasonable opinion to think that the National Park Service should have to tell every possible narrative at every possible location on the battlefield. It is reasonable, however, to task visitors to the battlefield with thinking about why certain details of the battle are included while others are ignored. By asking the “big questions” regarding the events that transpired at Gettysburg, visitors to the battlefield learn to never take any commemorative landscape at the field at face value. If guests can learn anything about the nature of a commemorative landscape, it should be that every monument, wayside, and marker is located where it is, and says what it says, for a reason. Asking the bigger questions about the battle while visiting a commemorative landscape can allow guests to better understand the political and cultural factors that influence the memorialization and content of a place like Gettysburg National Military Park.

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