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"My Brigade suffered severely & behaved well" - Longstreet's Attack of July 2nd and its Greater Memory

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Abstract

An analytical study of the July 2nd, 1863 Confederate assault at Gettysburg both during and after the fighting.

Keywords

Longstreet's Attack, July 2nd, Peach Orchard, Mississippi Monument

Disciplines

Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 347: Gettysburg in History and Memory.

Gettysburg College

**“My Brigade suffered severely & behaved well “
Longstreet’s Attack of July 2nd and its Greater Memory**

A Term Paper

Submitted

To Professor Peter Carmichael

Department of History

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code. – *Jesse Campana*

By

Jesse Campana

Gettysburg, PA

May 9th, 2017

The afternoon of July 2nd, 1863 brought about a world of death and destruction on a small parcel of land on the outskirts of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The Confederate assault conducted by the men of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's Corps in the waning hours of the day surged forward and broke the Union line along stretches of property commonly referenced today. Areas like that of the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, and the Rose Woods would forever be enshrined with the blood and suffering of those who fought with every bit of effort to preserve their lives and the true causes for which they were fighting for. This area of the Gettysburg Battlefield has come to be one of the many locations strife with conflicting memory and notions of interpretation for which many can come and understand but also fall short due to the way in which the battlefield stands today.

Reflecting upon that fateful afternoon, the assault that carried forth the Union extreme left flank was one of great triumph on a tactical level in its beginning stages. At around 4:30pm on the afternoon of July 2nd, the Confederate attack began, spearheaded by the men of Major General John B. Hood's Division on the right and Major General Lafayette McLaws' on the left. The terrain for which these men had to cross to smash into the Union line and defeat their enemy was that of mixed conditions: rocks, woodlots, orchards, farm fields and lanes, and marshy lowlands plagued this region of the battlefield.¹ Rising up from their relative cover in the woods of Seminary Ridge, the Confederates advanced towards the precariously advanced Union line lying with its apex at the Sherfy family Peach Orchard. The large sweeping motion of Longstreet's attack was aimed at turning the flank of the Union line but due to Major General Dan Sickles' advanced position, it invariably caused a confused situation for the advancing Confederates. Striking into Union forces in the Rose Woods and the area around Devils' Den,

¹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2008), 109.

Hood's men became the receiving victims of a withering fire. At first the Rose Woods became the final resting place for men from Texas and Arkansas, but later men from Georgia and South Carolina also found their dreary end in this mangled assortment of trees and vines. Pressing forward to meet the Union defenders intermingled in the Rose Woods were the men of Robertson, Anderson, Semmes, and Kershaw's brigades.² The series of fatal assaults to take this ground would strike down numerous men but the Confederates would prevail in taking the positions of Devil's Den and the Rose Woods only to press on towards the impending height of Little Round Top and the area known as the Valley of Death.

Coinciding with the faulted assault on Little Round Top, Devils' Den, and the Rose Woods, was the main thrust of McLaws Division upon the Sherfy Peach Orchard and the Rose Wheatfield. McLaws' forces advanced under the preceding cover of artillery fire into the hastily formed defenses about the Peach Orchard. Moments later when the Confederates crossed the Emmitsburg Pike, the Union line opened fire and raked their foe mercilessly. Mississippians under the command of Brigadier General William Barksdale were at the forefront of this attack, receiving many casualties but brought a crushing blow to their adversaries. The Union line gave way after the tide of Confederates had hit from both front and flank, forcing the Union defenders to retreat or fall at their post. Realizing this crushing action, Union reinforcements quickly were brought up to stem the tide of Confederates now approaching from the Rose Woods and the Peach Orchard into the Rose Wheatfield. The series of attacks made by both sides in the Wheatfield and its surrounding woods would come to harness thousands of casualties and the final fighting of the day.

² Steven E. Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2008), 131-132.

The actions of both Union and Confederate forces alike on the afternoon of July 2nd, 1863 have come to be enshrined in some ways but also somewhat forgotten on the Gettysburg Battlefield today. As presented by monuments, waysides, and a pristine landscape preserved nearly to its liking on the day before the fighting occurred, the area for which Longstreet's assault was made does not reflect the deadly landscape it had once been. One of the more striking features on the battlefield today are the large and every present monuments. Dedicated to the men and states that they represented, these stone sentinels speak volumes on the war and its memory than simply just that of remembrance for the actions of July 2nd, 1863. While the National Park Service has stated that their mission as "unaligned and apolitical policies of the past, presenting history, not opinions," it is hard to ignore the political attributes displayed on monuments throughout the park.³ Every monument, whether it be one erected by that of Union veterans in the 1880s or that of one by a southern state in the 1980s, holds a political stance that is reflected upon the battlefield and the supposed political motives that these soldiers fought and died for. The monuments of the Union forces dotting the area around the Peach Orchard display a sense of steadfast honor and bravery in contrast to their counterparts across the avenues of approach on the adjacent Seminary Ridge. These Confederate monuments of course embody the same notions of courage and honor but they too hold political resentment and power that one cannot understand without proper interpretation.⁴

Seemingly devoid of all military destruction or intrusion except for cannons here and there, the landscape preserved by the National Park Service affixes the mindset of the visitor towards a much more peaceful and serene scene. As opposed to the destructive nature of war

³ Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2003), 125.

⁴ Ibid, 174-175.

witnessed by Gettysburg and its land, the park today is much more akin to that of a large park, more fit for a picnic than that of a warzone. While this phenomenon of peace and serenity was born out of the post war usage of the area as a recreational and vacation location, the NPS still attempts to convey the notions of the battle in its greater placement of artillery pieces and replicated breastworks around the park.⁵ Correlating with this peaceful and serene nature, the outward appearance of the battlefield conflicts with the nature of the interpretive waysides placed at critical areas of the park. As historian, Christian Spielvogel stated, “visual representation at a given wayside is also complicated by the combination of visual mediums used at a given stop while each of those mediums is influenced by its own artistic and institutional conventions.”⁶ These “visual mediums” of preserved and well-kept meadows and fields wreak havoc on the mindset of visitors who should be seeing the fields as vast wastelands of death and destruction when glancing over the small array of facts pertaining to assaults like that of Barksdale’s on the Peach Orchard. The limitation to the visitor’s understanding of the actions conducted on July 2nd, 1863 are forever embraced by the placement of these monuments and waysides in a pristine landscape like no other.

The great questions that arise from this established and well preserved landscape devolve unto the issues of morality and steadfast struggle that was waged on the very ground, some one hundred and fifty years ago. The foremost question relates to the tactical and strategic importance of the attack, that being, why would Longstreet launch his attack at such a late hour without proper reconnaissance? This of course devolves onto the memory and recollections of the men who made these key decisions, many of which who suffered and perished in the war or

⁵ Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and An American Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 111.

⁶ Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 106.

were ridiculed afterwards in the postwar struggle for justification.⁷ One of the most prevailing questions relates to just how savage was the nature of the fighting and at what cost to the men both mentally and physically did it affect them. For this question, one must reflect on the accounts of men who fought and suffered, as they were the ones who could convey and assist in the “linking of combat to the pastoral.”⁸

Relating to this sense of savagery, many also come to ponder why these men would even go forward or try to withstand such an attack. At what cost to their livelihood and general wellbeing does this one single action hold when thinking in terms of historical social contexts and ideologies.⁹ Coinciding with these personal accounts of the battle and its aftermath, the issue of memory and how the story of the actual actions took place come to the forefront of debate. Remembering the events of the action vary based upon time away from its occurrence, political implications, and greater outside tensions that could shape and alter the overall synopsis of even a small detail.¹⁰ Time and time again, the true historical story of the attacks on the Rose Woods or the Peach Orchard were constructed and disassembled by these conflicting masses of reports, memoirs, and governmental interpretation years after the actual fighting took place.

These implications of faulty memory relate to the standing stone sentinels that dot the approaches leading up to the Peach Orchard but also at the starting points for the Confederate attacks. The Mississippi State monument is a clear example of how interpretation of the past comes to reflect itself in future endeavors of memory and commemoration of actions that

⁷ James Longstreet, "Longstreet: Lee in Pennsylvania," in *Lee: The Soldier*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 381.

⁸ Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 106.

⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Random House INC, 2008), XV.

¹⁰ Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limitations of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 135-136.

happened so long ago. We tend to forget how such a grand and overpowering piece of stone and art can be used for other purposes, and how it can construe the nature of the landscape surrounding it, giving false contexts and notions that should not be present. Questioning the presence of this monument and its respective wayside marker as being necessary for the interpretation of the battle, only furthers the divide for a pastoral landscape and what it meant for these men to be fighting here over one hundred and fifty years ago.¹¹ The necessity to question not only the morality but the social implications of the monument only goes to broaden the understanding of the Gettysburg battlefield and the war itself both during and after the fighting ceased.

The great questions that arise from the actions and events that occurred on July 2nd, 1863 around the area most commonly described as the Peach Orchard and the Rose Woods, all have a similar thematic underlying that helps with the overall interpretation of these events. The issues of the *ars moriendi* or the “good death” plagued men from both sides of the conflict, forcing themselves to either preserve their own lives or wish for a greater and much more respectable outcome in the fighting.¹² This preparation for a commendable death in combat would be stripped away for many as the savage and bitter nature of the fighting would not allow for such a thing to occur. The sheer nature of the battle and the notions of courage and honor drove men to their breaking points, many going above and beyond the call of duty to justify their manhood and prominence above others. However, the hopes of upholding the honorific and courageous aptitudes set forth by society of the time could never preserve the lives or the righteousness of any cause when faced with the extreme carnage and savagery of the battle and its aftermath.

¹¹ Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and An American Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 64.

¹² Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Random House INC, 2008), 6.

Seeing how so many men were simply killed or missing in this outright slaughter for such small parcels of land, one can only imagine how these men were just simply left to the wayside in the hours or days after the fighting. This inability to obtain the “good death” mixed with tactical defeat even though extreme bravery and heroism was displayed led to ideological notions like that of the Lost Cause in the postwar era. These implications would later manifest themselves in the way in which we interpret the battlefield on a day to day basis, regardless of where you stand on the well-manicured and overtly peaceful battlefield.

The most pertinent object on this area of the Gettysburg Battlefield is that of the Mississippi State monument. Sitting amongst fellow Confederate brigade and state monuments and backed by a perfect outlook towards the Union lines that once sate amongst the swaying trees of the Sherfy Peach Orchard, the Mississippi Monument seems almost surreal in its placement. Dedicated on October 17th, 1973, the monument was funded and provided by the state of Mississippi and placed at the starting area of William Barksdale’s assault on July 2nd.¹³ The monument itself depicts two Confederate soldiers, presumably from Mississippi, one a fallen flag bearer grasping the Confederate battle flag with the other soldier swinging his rifle in a fatal drive for protection of the comrade and colors beneath him.¹⁴ The notions of heroism and bravery immediately come to mind when gazing upon the large bronze monument, giving one the sense that the cause for which these men fought and potentially died for was justified and worth dying for in the end. As stated by the presentation marker itself on the monument itself: “On this ground our brave sires fought for their righteous cause; In glory they sleep who give to it their lives. To valor, they gave new dimensions of courage. To duty its noblest fulfillment. To

¹³ Stone Sentinels, "State of Mississippi Monument," Gettysburg Stone Sentinels, <http://gettysburg.stonesentinels.com/confederate-monuments/confederate-state-monuments/mississippi/>.

¹⁴ Mississippi Monument, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

posterity, the sacred heritage of honor.”¹⁵ While these words seem appropriate for men who fought in an action in which some fifteen hundred Mississippians fell as casualties, the issue of context and word choice presents a different perspective on what it meant for these men to have “fought for their righteous cause.” This righteous cause of course would be that of the Confederate government and its implicated actions and laws, most profoundly that of the institution of slavery. While one does not receive this information from the tablet or the natural landscape surrounding the monument, the political ramifications of these men who fought here paired with this monument erected on their behalf in the post war era shows just how political the landscape is.¹⁶

The honor and courage of these men of course is not degraded by the presence of the monument, instead it does just the opposite, it embraces the notions of these attributes and justifies the reasons for why they fought so bravely. The monument is further exemplified as courageous and outstanding above all others due to the placement of a wayside by the NPS right at its footsteps. Pertaining to the charge made by Barksdale’s Mississippians on the Union troops at the Peach Orchard, the wayside displaces the monument behind it and all of its “political commemorative functions,” therefore leaving the visitors to interpret it as a place marker and not a historical and culturally driven piece.¹⁷ This wayside marker also depicts the actions of Barksdale himself as being a hero in the minds of the visitor, one who could lead his men into impending death, regardless of his own wellbeing.¹⁸ Having the wayside along with the

¹⁵ Presentation Marker, Mississippi Monument, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

¹⁶ Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2003), 125-126.

¹⁷ Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 115.

¹⁸ Wayside Interpretive Marker, Barksdale’s Assault, Seminary Ridge, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

uninterpreted monument leaves visitors to their own interpretation of the area and therefore not truly understanding the savage and political ramifications of the battlefield.

Moving away from Seminary Ridge and the glorious Mississippi Monument, one comes upon the apex of the once timid Union line at the Sherfy Peach Orchard. This recreated orchard, encompassed by a tour road and the Emmitsburg Pike, is arrayed in the same format as it once stood on the afternoon of July 2nd, 1863. The orchard itself was the centerfold of McLaws' main attack, pitting men from Mississippi, South Carolina, and Georgia against those of Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania.¹⁹ Within an hour after the start of Longstreet's orders to go forward, the Peach Orchard was in Confederate hands and was then covered with the dead and dying of both sides, amounting to hundreds of casualties in a very small and packed area. Today, the Peach Orchard sits idle, totally refurbished and replanted, no longer scorn or baring witness to the horrific amount of shot, shell, and musketry fire that engulfed it that afternoon. The only recollection of the battle lies with the numerous Union monuments that surround the Peach Orchard as well as a single wayside interpretive marker. This marker recounts the precarious position occupied by the Union III Corps that afternoon and the subsequent attacks that helped drive off the Union defenders.²⁰ While the marker does outline the savagery witnessed by some of the attackers in Kershaw's South Carolinian brigade as being "shredded by rapid rounds of Union canister," it loses its driving power behind how badly the men suffered during these attacks.²¹ The actions undertaken by the men of the Union III Corps are seemingly left out of the wayside even though their monuments, adorned with the casualties counts that had been suffered in the battle, attest to their presence in the fighting at the

¹⁹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2008), 135-136.

²⁰ Wayside Interpretive Marker, Peach Orchard Salient, Peach Orchard, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

²¹ Wayside Interpretive Marker, Peach Orchard Salient, Peach Orchard, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

Peach Orchard. Accounts of the fighting, like the actions undertaken by the 2nd New Hampshire who take fifty-four percent casualties or the men of 9th Massachusetts Battery who seemingly attempted to hold off the onslaught of the Confederate attack, suffering thirty percent casualties, an otherwise obscene number for an artillery unit.^{22 23} Yet again the waysides that are present in the Peach Orchard are left to interpret a much more expansive action and leave out the personal stories of the men who fought there.

One of the most appalling lack of interpretation in this area of the Gettysburg Battlefield today pertains to the actions that occurred in and around the Rose Woods. The Rose Woods, appropriately named for the Rose Family's ownership of the woodlot, stretches just south of the area known commonly as the Peach Orchard and rests just north of Devil's Den. This wooded area, engulfed by rocks and boulders that appear throughout the terrain, was home to some of the most vicious and savage fighting on July 2nd, 1863. Devoid of NPS interpretation markers and no general indication of the heated action that flowed back and forth across the area besides the Union monuments that line Sickles Avenue, the Rose Woods story seems all but lost. These lost interpretation opportunities present some of the more faulted elements that the Gettysburg Battlefield has to offer due to the plethora of accounts and images that relate to the Rose Woods themselves. Accounts of the battle can be examined from the perspective of both Confederate and Union men alike, but we shall start with that of the attacking Confederates, particularly those of Semmes' Georgia Brigade. Brigadier General Paul Jones Semmes, a Georgian by birth led his men forward into the Rose Woods on July 2nd, inspired by notions of courage and instilled with a belief that he "may die on this Battle Field gloriously" if the day presented itself.²⁴

²² 2nd New Hampshire Monument, Peach Orchard, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

²³ 9th Massachusetts Artillery Monument, Peach Orchard, Gettysburg Battlefield, May 2017.

²⁴ Paul Jones Semmes to Emily J. Semmes, June 11, 1863, The Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, NY.

Coincidentally, Semmes would be one of the many men to fall as a testimony of the hard fighting in the Rose Woods. Writing from his deathbed only a few days after the battle, Semmes conveyed that “My Brigade suffered severely & behaved well,” which embraced the greater culture of bravery and honor that one sought after when writing home.²⁵ This single account from an officer in the attack allows the visitor at least a brief glimpse as to the mindset of these men when conducting themselves in combat.

The ferocity of the fighting in the Rose Woods, one for which elements of three Union Corps and a vast majority of Longstreet’s Corps had been used up in, left a defining imprint on both people and the battlefield itself. Due to the advent of photography and its rise in documentary abilities in the American Civil War, photographs of battlefields and the men who fought in the war are a common item one can find today. A series of images taken on July 5th, 1863 by the photographer Timothy O’Sullivan and his team, illustrated the true savagery of the fighting and the greater loss of life that went into the action. Several images of Confederate dead, waiting to be buried by Union gravediggers, show the greater signs of the struggle with many missing limbs, torn clothing, and contorted bodies from being exposed to the elements for over two days.²⁶ What one does not receive from these images are the notions of the “good death” and how these men, although killed fighting for some cause, were helplessly left to the mercy of the Union victors, whether to be buried and identified or simply thrown in amongst others, given at least some measly burial.²⁷ Simply having the men laid out with barely any context, no names, or

²⁵ Paul Jones Semmes to Emily J. Semmes, July 9, 1863, The Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, NY.

²⁶ Timothy H. O’Sullivan, photographer. [*Gettysburg, Pa. Confederate dead gathered for burial at the southwestern edge of the Rose woods, July 5, 1863*]. Gettysburg Pennsylvania United States, 1863. [July 5] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003000200/PP/>.

²⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Random House INC, 2008), 73-74.

even a sense of where they may be leaves one to reflect on the families and friends of these men who will never see them again. This true horror and utter feeling of hopelessness, regardless of cause or duty to ones' country should be felt by visitors when they come to reflect upon the nature of the conflict and what these men gave their lives for. However, as reflected by historians like Christian Spielvogel, Gary W. Gallagher, and Caroline Janney, the images, monuments, and their corresponding stories and cultural importance are seemingly lost in the pristine countryside around Gettysburg.

The story surrounding this area of the Gettysburg Battlefield, both during and after the battle has come to be shaped in our minds by a greater collective memory that is forever marked with interpretation that seems fitting to those who are interested. The Civil War and its larger implications on our nation's history can be found in the events and outcomes of Gettysburg. The actions on July 2nd, marked the beginning of the end for the Army of Northern Virginia and with that sparked a greater strife in the aftermath of the war as the Lost Cause mentality stirred from the incidents surrounding Longstreet's actions. The interpretation of these events and the usage of the Gettysburg battlefield to help convey the notions of the Lost Cause are seen throughout on the numerous Confederate monuments and the lack of true political awareness that the battlefield holds. As one reflects on these greater issues of the Lost Cause, one cannot help but think of the loss suffered by all who endured in the war, regardless of side or occupation during its tenure. This necessary interest to reflect on the social and political ramifications of the fighting at places like Gettysburg and others held a greater hold on those not even waging their own lives on the battlefield. The beauty of the battlefield in its present state reflects a more pristine and reconciled fate of the nation even though the turbulent aftermath and its endurance through Reconstruction was far from that in contrast. Seeing how the affected men of this action on July 2nd, 1863 came

to influence the battlefield at Gettysburg both during and after the battle, visitors too can take something away from this site and question our current world we live in, as they now have the capacity to either embrace or develop the collected memory of Gettysburg.

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