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Echoes on the Gettysburg Battlefield

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Abstract
Back at the beginning of the summer, I was asked by the College to write a piece on the history of the battle and its many resonances for what turned out to be an obscure periodical and not the actual USA Today. That means next to no one got the chance to read the piece, which I was quite happy with. So I wanted to share that piece with all of you.

How does Gettysburg’s unique history echo backwards and forwards? [excerpt]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2013

Back at the beginning of the summer, I was asked by the College to write a piece on the history of the battle and its many resonances for what turned out to be an obscure periodical and not the actual USA Today. That means next to no one got the chance to read the piece, which I was quite happy with. So I wanted to share that piece with all of you.

How does Gettysburg's unique history echo backwards and forwards?

On the afternoon of July 1st, 1863, an artillery shell passed through the upper floor of Dr. Henry Huber's house in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It sailed in to the brick wall, punching a clean hole near a window and shattering glass as down in the streets below Federal soldiers retreated from a horde of onrushing Confederates. Plaster fell to the floor inside the home. The shell kept flying, piercing another of Dr. Huber's walls, driving back through another brick wall and sailing on its way. The Huber family saw war pass through their home in the guise of a steaming, speeding hunk of iron.

War changes landscapes. It is what war does first and foremost. Whether it is a beach in Normandy morphed from quiet seaside to hellish, pockmarked moonscape or a peaceful library reduced to jagged rubble in Sarajevo, war destroys. It destroyed a few bricks in a wall and some window glass for Dr. Henry Huber, local doctor and Pennsylvania College instructor, in 1863.

But war touches more than buildings. War touches people.

The Huber family had felt war before. Their son Frederick, a promising young man who hoped to be a doctor, was killed a year earlier fighting with the United States army at Fair Oaks on the outskirts of Richmond, Virginia. “It is only when we see those who left us... returning with mangled form,” Huber wrote of his son, “or stricken down in the prime of life, that we can realize the horrors of our war.”

Gettysburg, at its heart, is the story of America. It is the story of who we are as a people and how we’ve
moved through the rivers of time. Sometimes that tale is about sorrow, like that felt in Henry Huber’s parlor in 1862. Sometimes it is about joy, hope and opportunity. As with anywhere in our grand narrative, there are heroes, there are villains and there are those men and women who you can never quite categorize. Gettysburg seems like it is a place stuck in time, forever trapped in three days in July of 1863.

But it simply is not. Gettysburg is as much about who we are and where we are at today as it is about men suffering, fighting and dying in some godforsaken farm field one hundred and fifty years ago.

Just down the street from Henry Huber’s house, on the campus of Pennsylvania College (modern day Gettysburg College), president and professor Henry Louis Baugher felt war too. His son Nesbitt was wounded in spring of 1862 at Shiloh in Tennessee. The college president rushed to his son’s side, only to watch helplessly as his son took a turn for the worse, and now the, he later wrote, “the soldier is once more in the battle field, and it is his last.” Nesbitt Baugher died in May of 1862, and his father brought his body home to Gettysburg to be laid to rest.

Everywhere you turn in Gettysburg, you find these stories. They are the stories of people who lived through extraordinary times. Even without a massive battle that would see nearly 9,000 men killed and 30,000 men wounded, Gettysburg had seen suffering as the war entered its third year.

The landscape is maggoty with tales of heartache and sorrow, much as the bloody ground was maggoty in 1863 for entirely different reasons. And if you walk too far for too long across this battlefield or through this town, you will run into the ghosts of the past. This is not the hokum and humbug of the local cottage industry of ghost tours; this is finding the real people of the real past still echoing in this place. Your mind begins to paint them into the picture even without your asking.

Though it is long since demolished, the home of Jack Hopkins rises again in the imagination, a squat structure behind the imposing Pennsylvania Hall on the Gettysburg College’s campus. Hopkins was the college’s janitor. The joshing students loved their Jack, a character and fixture among the hundred or so young men who teemed across the campus when war broke out. They even called him, penned in neat letters in a yearbook, “our vice president.” A joke, of course, because the janitor could never be vice president of Pennsylvania College. A double joke because the students could never imagine an African-American man as vice president of their beloved alma mater, or anything for that matter. Hopkins’ skin became a target in the lingering months of spring 1863. As Lee’s army marched northward, they snapped up and sent south the free black population of southern Pennsylvania. Jack Hopkins and his family ran for their lives from the oncoming Confederate juggernaut and the prospect of spending a lifetime in slavery.

But it is not simply the ghosts of men like Hopkins or Baugher who haunt these fields. Other men and women linger here, impelled by the battle in their own era, but throwing stark light on its changing meanings for our eyes today.

From 1925, ghosts in white sheets march into our streets once again: the knights of the Ku Klux Klan, come to Gettysburg to rally and unite on the fields where just over 60 years before the best men of a generation of North Carolinians bashed their heads against a powerful United States army. If you squint hard enough, you can see their Model-T Fords chugging down the street into town, the words, “Klan to Gettysburg,” painted on the sides. You can also squint hard and imagine Harry Viener locking up his shop along York Street early on that Friday, heading home to celebrate Rosh Hashanah as the denizens of hate, against not only African Americans, but Jews and Catholics as well, streamed through his town’s streets.

That next day, September 19th, 1925, the streets were filled with white hoods, American flags and
cheering throngs. One contingent of Klansmen stretched a flag across the street; spectators dug into their pockets and hurled dollar coins into the folds of Klan-lofted the red, white and blue to show their support. Near the edges of the crowd, some students from Gettysburg College scoffed. “Anyone who can stand by the avenue of Klan parades and watch docilely the stars and stripes used as a promiscuous coffer to catch coins,” one student later groaned, belonged, “to a land where national respect and self-respect are a grotesque hallucination.”

In that field where the Klan met in 1925, just a few years later, another massive group of men and women gathered in that place again precisely because it was Gettysburg. The 75th anniversary of the battle brought thousands of veterans and their entourage to the small-but-noteworthy Pennsylvania burg. They were there to dedicate a new memorial, nestled at the crest of Oak Hill on the first day’s battlefield: the Eternal Light Peace Memorial. But across the ocean in Europe and Asia in 1938, peace was anything but eternal. It was obvious to anyone paying attention that war had already been in progress for more than a year, with an invasion of China on one front and Hitler’s voracious hunger for Lebensraum in the other. America would need to once again defend freedom; even the most bumbling of politicians could see the pressing need.

In Gettysburg, they dedicated a monument that looked like it was ripped from Berlin’s recent Olympics, a monument to peace eternal in a land that knew quite clearly that eternal peace was not assured. President Franklin D. Roosevelt stood at a podium to accept that granite and limestone shaft topped with a gas flame, a monument atop Oak Hill where just a decade before the Klan had burned crosses in a rally of pure Americanism.

The President spoke of his own day, when, “a conflict as fundamental as Lincoln’s,” would be fought, “not with glint of steel, but with appeals to reason and justice on a thousand fronts.” In Europe, Hitler was making it quite obvious that words were not his tools of choice. And across Gettysburg College’s football field, Civil War veterans watched the latest military technology roll in a grand parade of military might and bombastic pomp. “We are near to winning this battle,” FDR told the crowd on that hill. But it would mean another 70 million open, festering graves like those that had been dug at Gettysburg to ensure a shaky peace at best.

But the stone shaft has a more important and powerful element than the flame at its top or the carved pseudo-Egyptian figures on its face. The foundation of the monument, the grading of the land it sits on, stands as a hidden monument all its own.

To plop the Eternal Light Peace Memorial on top of that hill meant grading a new roadbed, leveling off the slope and readying the plot for its new streamlined tower. And in the economic disaster that was America in the 1930s, this meant that the Civilian Conservation Corps was the prime candidate for the job.
The spirits of these workmen are just as palpable walking the fields surrounding Gettysburg, particularly near their camp at McMillian Woods along the former Confederate battle lines. Gettysburg’s CCC camp was quite unique within the service. Where other camps typically had leadership that was lilly white, regardless of the color of skin of the laborers who worked there, Gettysburg was one of only two places in America which had a CCC camp with both black labor and black leadership. The hands that leveled the ground for this new monument were black, the same color as the hands of the men and women over whose fate the Civil War had been fought.

The Civilian Conservation Corps did more than simply make room for new monuments. They made sure that the old ones survived for us to see today, perpetual landmarks on a landscape of carnage. No place is that landscape’s blood more palpable than in the National Cemetery perched atop Cemetery Hill, the key ground around which hinged the entire battle.

In the 1930s, frost and shifting earth had taken their toll, and the neat rows of adjacent headstones were a jagged and gap-toothed mess, unbecoming of a simple churchyard let alone the resting place of thousands who, “gave their lives that that nation might live.” The black workers of the Civilian Conservation Corps undertook the herculean task of hoisting each segment of headstone from its hole, regarding the ground beneath and leveling the stone once again above the sainted deads’ final repose. Black laborers who, in their work were honoring the men who in 1863 fought for the freedom of four million men and women with the same hue of skin.

It was not the first time that black labor had worked in between those neat rows of graves. The CCC laborers had the ghosts of their forbears right by their sides. As the blood was still drying on the field in the late months of summer 1863, plans were underway in town to create a cemetery to house all of the loyal sons who had died in the battle. Like all good Government contracts, the award went to the low bidder, who used local African-American men as his workmen. The black crew’s foreman Basil Biggs netted a small fortune from reburying the Federal dead through the fall and winter of 1863. For him and his fellow workers, each shovelful of dirt and rough pine box with its soldier’s identity nailed to the lid meant real, honest opportunity. These mens’ death literally offered Biggs the right to rise up the ladder of society; he went from poorer tenant farmer to honest-to-god property owner nearly overnight.

Just over the crest of the hill from where Biggs and his crew reburied the men who fell in the battle sits the town’s own burial ground, Evergreen Cemetery, from which Cemetery Hill garners its name. And in that graveyard lie the original cast of characters from the drama that was Gettysburg in the harrowing months after two armies descended on her streets.

In one neat grave is buried Michael Jacobs, mathematics and science professor at Pennsylvania College during the battle and meticulous 19th Century mind. Before Lee and Meade decided to duke it out around and through the streets of Gettysburg, Jacobs had exerted his painstaking nature to the recording of
atmospheric conditions. As shots rang out in the streets, his fidelity to his thermometer was undeterred. At 2pm on July 1st, as the Eleventh Corps fought less than a mile from his house, Jacobs recorded that it was 76 degrees Fahrenheit, with cumulostratus clouds covering the whole sky. By 9pm, after the frantic retreat through town, a soft 12-mile-an-hour breeze blew from the south.

But after the battle, Jacobs set to work on another painstaking effort at recording the what and where. He became the first historian of the battle of Gettysburg, with the first published history of the sanguinary conflict. Working through J.P. Lippincott in nearby Philadelphia, the college professor was selling his history of the conflict by October of 1863, only months after rebel troops paraded in front of his home on Middle Street as they moved toward a beleaguered Federal army.

As he stood at the National Cemetery’s dedication on November 19th of that same year, Michael Jacobs’ heart must have swelled with pride as the day’s speaker, Edward Everett of Massachusetts, endorsed him and his book in his address. “The highly valuable ‘Notes’ of Professor Jacobs of the University in this place, to which I am greatly indebted,” Edward advised the crowd as he began to launch into an account of the battle, “will abundantly supply the deficiency of my necessarily too condensed statement.”

In that same cemetery where Jacobs now finds his eternal rest, another of Gettysburg’s citizens lays entombed. Under a broken gravestone, shattered and sad looking, lays the body of Frederick Huber, the promising young man who Dr. Huber and his family saw off to war, never to return. Frederick had studied at the college under Professor Jacobs. Now they lie together in the same churchyard, citizens of another, undiscovered town from whose bourn no traveller returns.

But even death could not protect the studious Huber. As he lay in eternal slumber in his grave in 1863, above his moldering face the boots of war trampled the ground. His comrades had come to his hometown; their enemies were here too. And sometime during that battle, as shot and shell plowed through the air and tore into flesh, an errant shell collided with the brittle marble of the young soldier’s gravestone. It shattered under the sheer power of that flying iron bolt.

Even in death, war is inescapable. It shapes who we truly are, who we’ve truly become and where we are truly headed. And at Gettysburg, that truth lingers around any corner you turn.