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“A time to be born, and a time to die.”

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“A time to be born, and a time to die.”

Abstract

"While surgeons were well acquainted with the horrors of a field hospital in the aftermath of a grand battle like Gettysburg, the civilians of the North were woefully unprepared for the carnage at play in the halls of their local institutions and homes until it presented itself in full-colored glory in front of their very eyes. Senior Michael Colver finally picked his way down the long slope of Cemetery Hill, across the borough and onto the campus of his alma mater on Monday the 6th of July. "On our arrival," he recalled, "we found in and around the building, according to the estimate given us, seven hundred wounded rebels." The campus was transfigured from the placid and quaint to the grotesque and horrific. Colver ascended the staircase into the hellish depths of the building. "When I came to my room I saw it afforded ample accommodations for three." One bleeding Confederate reclined in his bed. Two more lay splayed on the floor. As Colver stumbled through the halls, stepping around and over body after body, he heard nothing but, "the moans, prayers and shrieks of the wounded and dying," of the, "poor, deluded sons of the South." Enmity melted from his mind. "Only a heart dispossessed of all feeling of humanity," Colver mused, "could refuse sympathy and help in such a time as that." [excerpt]

Keywords

aftermath, Manuscript, Pennsylvania College, Rudy, Suffering

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Social History | United States History

Comments

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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



“A time to be born, and a time to die.”

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2013

This week I'm off on travel for work to Philadelphia, to help run a facilitated dialogue interpretive training. But I don't want to starve everyone of content. So, I thought that a preview of my manuscript-in-progress about Pennsylvania College and the Civil War might be a great way to fill the gap.

Without further ado, an excerpt from Chapter Six - Hell on Earth:

While surgeons were well acquainted with the horrors of a field hospital in the aftermath of a grand battle like Gettysburg, the civilians of the North were woefully unprepared for the carnage at play in the halls of their local institutions and homes until it presented itself in full-colored glory in front of their very eyes. Senior Michael Colver finally picked his way down the long slope of Cemetery Hill, across the borough and onto the campus of his alma mater on Monday the 6th of July. “On our arrival,” he recalled, “we found in and around the building, according to the estimate given us, seven hundred wounded rebels.” The campus was transfigured from the placid and quaint to the grotesque and horrific. Colver ascended the staircase into the hellish depths of the building. “When I came to my room I saw it afforded ample accommodations for three.” One bleeding Confederate reclined in his bed. Two more lay splayed on the floor. As Colver stumbled through the halls, stepping around and over body after body, he heard nothing but, “the moans, prayers and shrieks of the wounded and dying,” of the, “poor, deluded sons of the South.” Enmity melted from his mind. “Only a heart dispossessed of all feeling of humanity,” Colver mused, “could refuse sympathy and help in such a time as that.”

Pouring into the town were hands determined to render just such magnanimous aid. Private citizens from across Pennsylvania, from Baltimore and Washington City surged into the southern Pennsylvania city to give aid and comfort in a sea of suffering. Representatives from the United States Christian Commission and the United States Sanitary Commission began to spur their organizations to undertake the massive mobilization to deal with nearly 50,000 wounded men and their less fortunate comrades. Leonard Gardner remembered the flood of



people as, “the surrounding country began to come into town.” Rolling down the spokes of the hub at Gettysburg’s center, “hundreds of wagons and carriages from every direction filled the place.” Each wagon, “brought provisions to give to the wounded and in this way showed their sympathy.” But more so, the wagons were loaded with, “gratitude for the happy results of the battle.” Aid had begun, but not quickly enough for the suffering wounded.

Andrew Cross, a representative of the Christian Commission, moved through the halls of the College Edifice on the morning of July the 6th. As he was passing, “a young, pleasant-faced lad asked us rather anxiously for food.” The boy reported that, “he had not had a meal from Tuesday before, six days.” But food was in short supply in Gettysburg, Cross reported to the wounded young man, on account of, “the burning of the railroad bridges,” outside of town. The starving soldier, “with earnestness,” Cross reported, exclaimed, “*Didn't Stuart burn them? So he makes his own men suffer as well as others.*” Cross again and again found men suffering from a want of rations. On the first floor of the building, in one of the rooms on the north side, Cross saw, “sixteen lying on floor, all badly wounded, several of whom died.” Each of the men, “looked anxiously for something to eat.” Tomorrow, the Christian Commission representatives counseled the men, help might come tomorrow. As Cross left the room, he realized that in his pocket were, “few dried apples, which we were chewing for our own dinner.” The snack was, “nothing comparatively,” and Cross, “felt ashamed to offer them, and did not expect them to go around one a piece.” Without thinking, he tossed the apples across the room to the bed-ridden men. “Without thought of their wounds, every man exerted himself to catch.” There were just enough. “Never,” Cross recalled, “did we see men enjoy a little thing more.”

When John B. Linn and Jim Duncan visited the campus of the college, they witnessed the horrors of the building before even setting foot inside. “Some rebel surgeons,” Linn wrote in his diary on July 8th, “were amputating a man’s leg on the portico.” Linn mused that, “the citizens of Gettysburg behaved nobly, the shock of such a three days battle over their heads was enough to unstring the nerves of them.” In spite of their efforts, there were simply not enough souls to tend to the detritus of battle. Indeed, Andrew Cross wrote, “to say in such a field that surgeons were busy, is needless.” With so much, “ragged, naked, torn and mangled mortality,” what more, “could they do but work.” The number of doctors to patients was woefully inadequate. “There was not more than one for ten that were needed,” Cross moaned, “every man that could tie a bandage, or give a drink of water, or pour it upon a wound, was at work.” Passing through the halls and between the suffering forms of the South, from every direction came the constant, delirious call to anyone who passed: “Doctor, oh, doctor, won't you attend to my case? Won't you fix my arm, or my leg, or my shoulder, or head?”

Leonard Gardner, who was visiting nearby Carlisle for Dickinson College’s commencement before the rebel invasion interrupted both the ceremony and his vacation, visited Gettysburg as a tourist but quickly tendered his service to the Christian Commission. He was sent to, “Pennsylvania college Hospital, where the confederate wounded were kept.” Gardner found himself surrounded by the prostrate Confederate men on all sides when he entered the building. “Their comrades had to leave them,” he wrote years later, “suffering from every form of injury.” Each of the soldiers, “wore a sad and dejected appearance.” The Pennsylvanian found that, in spite of the animosity between the two warring nations, that he, “had a profound sympathy for them.” Still, like so many of the hundreds of eager hands pouring into the town wishing to help alleviate the suffering, Gardner had no skills to offer. “The most that could be done at that time was to give them something to eat and wash and dress their wounds.”