"...let the spinning wheel turn": A Piece of Gettysburg Lost in Rebeldom

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Abstract
Everything eventually comes full circle. The past meets the present meets the future. And we find echoes of the past in the things we do today. It's not a new sensation.

In the early days of January, 1863, one Gettysburgian found an echo from his town in the most unusual (but not unexpected) of places. "It was a cool day yesterday," a soldier, writing under the pen-name Fergus reported to Compiler editor H. J. Stahle, "and as I passed along the street leading towards Winchester, I observed a large two-horse carriage that had arrived in town with a load of ladies for the purpose of shopping." [excerpt]

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TUESDAY, JANUARY 15, 2013

Everything eventually comes full circle. The past meets the present meets the future. And we find echoes of the past in the things we do today. It's not a new sensation.

In the early days of January, 1863, one Gettysburgian found an echo from his town in the most unusual (but not unexpected) of places. "It was a cool day yesterday," a soldier, writing under the pen-name Fergus reported to Compiler editor H. J. Stahle, "and as I passed along the street leading towards Winchester, I observed a large two-horse carriage that had arrived in town with a load of ladies for the purpose of shopping."

Fergus was stationed in Harpers Ferry, at the gap in the mountain range where Shenandoah and Potomac poured out toward Washington City and the sea. This was still enemy Virginia, albeit occupied and relatively calm on this January day.

Fergus and I share a compulsion. Whenever I go into a diner, I pick up the coffee cup and read the maker's mark underneath. I'm looking for, "Syracuse China," embossed underneath, reminding me of my hometown. It's like touching the home once again, through a piece of dime-store ceramic.

"From some idle curiosity," Fergus stooped down at the carriage. He, "found that it bore the name of 'Danner & Ziegler, makers.'" Suddenly, a place and time flooded back over him. "You may imagine," he wrote, "what recollections it called to my mind of those pleasant, good old times, when your little city of Gettysburg, famous for its good coaches, used to drive a thriving business with these people."

Gettysburg was carriages in the prewar years. The local economy was dominated by the manufacture of quality buckboards, wagons and hacks. William Frassanito, in his Early Photography at Gettysburg, marks that no fewer than 10 carriage shops dotted Gettysburg's streets as war descended on the nation. The chief market for the carriages? Northern Virginia's plush farmlands, where sprawling landscapes birthed sprawling agriculture and immense wealth.
"How many in your midst," Fergus continued, "remember that when their husbands started forth with their long line of carriages it was only for a short time and the to return with an honest equivalent." Gettysburg traded with the south, allied itself with the south, profited alongside the south. Gettysburg benefited from the prosperity of Virginia's tarnished and slave-blood soaked soil. Carriages were blood money.

"Through some mismanagement what a change has taken place," Fergus benignly mused to Stahle back in Gettysburg. But Fergus, writing to the Democratic-partisan Compiler, eschewed the money's source in favor of its vast benefit. To him, Gettysburg had lost because of the scourge of war. Where once her husbands drove wagons into the south and cleaned up with a tidy profit, now the trade was quite different.

"Instead of their carriages they have been compelled to take up arms and march forth to battle, and many will have seen their homes for the last time, many will return crippled in limb and health, only to drag out a miserable existence among friends," Fergus floridly wrote, "Such is war and its consequences."

War was evil, war was wrong and war directly harmed Gettysburg. In January of 1863, for a good number who trod the streets of this still-obscure borough, the war needed to end and radical schemes be set aside for prosperity, freedom of four million set aside for the greater success of the nation.

Dissent is universal. Maybe that's because, no matter where on the spinning wheel you stand, dissent is one of the chief tenants of America.