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A Useable Past: First World War Training Camps on Civil War Battlefields

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Abstract

When visitors flock to America's National Parks, the battlefields from the American Civil War are perennially popular. Every summer, thousands come to walk over the serene fields and forests where men suffered unimaginable carnage. These sites have become sacred in the American psyche, places to remember and honor the dead, educate the public, or engage in quiet personal reflection. The rolling plains, dense forests and impressive mountains of Civil War battlefields inspire awe and reverence for what author Robert Penn Warren tagged America's only "felt history." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, WWI, World War I, Training Camp

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Useable Past: First World War Training Camps on Civil War Battlefields

March 2, 2014

by Sarah Johnson '15

When visitors flock to America's National Parks, the battlefields from the American Civil War are perennially popular. Every summer, thousands come to walk over the serene fields and forests where men suffered unimaginable carnage. These sites have become sacred in the American psyche, places to remember and honor the dead, educate the public, or engage in quiet personal reflection. The rolling plains, dense forests and impressive mountains of Civil War battlefields inspire awe and reverence for what author Robert Penn Warren tagged America's only "felt history."

Such attitudes towards our Civil War battlefields did not always exist. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of the battlefields were owned by the United States War Department. The War Department's attitude toward the land was entirely pragmatic. Much of the land over which Civil War armies fought was tactically important terrain, hence the reason why generals chose to fight there. Studying historic battles has always been an important part of military instruction, and the War Department took a hands-on approach to training America's future fighters, literally creating a useable past by recreating, drilling, and practicing tactics on Civil War battlefields. During World War One, battlefields became training grounds. Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and Petersburg, huge sites in the Civil War world, also played a role in the First World War. Gettysburg became home to Regular Infantry in the summer of 1917 and was named Camp Colt to train the newly formed Tank Corps in 1918. Camp Greenleaf, located in the heart of the Chickamauga battlefield, housed the Army Medical Corps. Camp Lee, near Petersburg, trained infantry.



Medical Officer's Training Corps at Camp Greenleaf in 1917. (click image for full view)
Library of Congress.

At these battlefield training camps, the past collided with the future. Buildings and barracks covered landscapes such as the rolling plain of Pickett's Charge. At Gettysburg, men at the infantry camp stationed there in 1917 discovered bodies of Civil War soldiers as they dug water lines. Pieces of uniforms, minié balls, and other wreckage of the charge surfaced in their camps, sometimes right under their tents. In 1918, tankers practiced driving their Renault tank over the uneven ground. Included below is a photograph of a tank maneuvering over the barn bridge of the Bliss farm, the last evidence of a barn that was burned by Union soldiers during the battle to keep Confederate riflemen from occupying it. Little Round Top, the site of the famous Union defense of its left flank, was used as a backstop for machine gun practice. At Chickamauga, the Medical Corps taught stretcher drill running through the difficult forested terrain. Outside Petersburg, doughboys constructed their own trench lines and practiced trench warfare.



World War One tank maneuvering over a barn bridge at the former site of the Bliss farm. To the right of the tank can be seen markers for the 12th New Jersey (L) and 1st Connecticut (R).

Although the barracks and buildings that littered Civil War battlefields have mostly disappeared, not all evidence of these training camps is eroded. At Gettysburg, three out of the original five observation towers still stand on Culp's Hill, Confederate Avenue, and Oak Hill. These towers were built by the War Department in 1895 to teach topography and give soldiers an understanding of using terrain strategically. At Petersburg, those trench lines built by the doughboys still exist and are often mistaken for Civil War trenches.



Dorey Halsted, Captain of 4th Infantry stationed at Camp Gettysburg in 1917.
Library of Congress.

What makes our battlefields sacred spaces to be preserved? Although the question may seem obvious and perhaps even insulting to our intelligence, I'd like to challenge you, dear reader, to consider it seriously. The Civil War was still within living memory during the First World War and there was still tremendous admiration for sites like Gettysburg. What has made our Civil War battlefields sites of historic preservation rather than pragmatic usefulness?

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/03/02/a-useable-past-first-world-war-training-camps-on-civil-war-battlefields/>