



Gettysburg Regress

How the government is ruining America's most famous battlefield.

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Last winter, I was walking with my wife along Seminary Ridge on the Gettysburg battlefield when an odd detail drew into sight: piles of felled trees, stacked alongside a road. The cuts smelled as fresh as the trees

Today's drive to refurbish Gettysburg, more ambitious in every respect, has not stunted on inspiration--or controversy. A \$135-million Museum and Visitor Center, which opened last spring, has lately grabbed headlines thanks to allegations of ethical impropriety. (Questions are swirling about why two firms--one run by the head of the Gettysburg Foundation, the Park Service's partner in building the new center; the other run by his son--were selected to do work at the battlefield.) Less attention, however, has been trained on the ongoing effort to rehabilitate parts of the battlefield to their July 1863 states. This effort marks the latest chapter in a contest between dueling conceptions of Gettysburg--the battlefield as unchanging relic and the battlefield as living memorial.

In April 1864, the Pennsylvania legislature chartered the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (GBMA). It had taken burial gangs until March of that year to complete the bulk of their work and inter most of the Union dead in Soldiers' National Cemetery. And not until 1873 were the Confederate dead removed from mass graves and reburied in Richmond and Raleigh, Charleston and Savannah. The GBMA made some efforts in the direction of restoration-- repositioning cannons, for example--and its founder argued for maintaining the July 1863 appearance of some key aspects of the battlefield. At the same time, he urged the construction of monuments, while his organization's charter called for it to commemorate the carnage with "works of art and taste." In 1866, the legislature empowered the GBMA to plant trees at the site. By 1895, when the Department of War assumed jurisdiction and created the Gettysburg National Military Park, the GBMA held title to 600 acres of land from which it had carved 17 miles of roads. In its first decade of administration, the War Department added more than 800 acres of land, planted nearly 17,000 additional trees, and improved roads. The commemorative work of boosters and government officials utterly transformed the battlefield.

Administrative control over the land migrated from the War Department to the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service in 1933; and developments surrounding the battlefield continued to reflect tension between the two conceptions of Gettysburg. On the one hand, New Deal officials issued a six-year general plan that identified a desire to return the land to its July 1863 appearance. Barns were restored, fences and walls rebuilt. Using workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Park Service pared away overgrowth for the sake of an authentic view at Little Round Top. Yet, in other respects, the site continued to migrate away from its 1863 appearance. In 1938, at the battle's seventy-fifth anniversary, President Roosevelt came to dedicate the Eternal Light Peace Memorial, whose torch--situated above a granite and limestone monument--was meant to symbolize domestic unity while Europe rearmed. Fewer than 2,000 Gettysburg veterans attended the ceremony, and their average age was over 90. Perhaps they exercised something of a check on the drive for authenticity: One can see how wishing for an authentic battle experience in the presence of these survivors--who did not have the experience of the battle so much as they were had by it--might have been considered tasteless.

Eventually, however, the veterans died off, and, as told in Jim Weekss -0.8500000 51 607.55cm rciIBT 9 01 (d) -1 (ered) -.8500000

The approximately 1,328 markers and monuments scattered about the grounds are a stellar collection of public sculpture, but, individually and as a whole, they reflect "a constructed view of a certain version of the past, rather than a factual description of some historical truth, " according to Thomas Desjardin's *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory*. Many of these iron, bronze, and stone structures were placed in the 1880s, and most excluded the Confederates. Apocrypha that still surrounds Little Round Top and other areas originated not in the infallible testimony of eyewitnesses but in remembrances blurred, biased, or invented. Desjardin argues convincingly that "there is no 'what really happened' at Gettysburg; only a mountain of varying, often contradictory accounts that are seldom in accord, all tainted in some way or other by memory, bias, politics, ego, or a host of other factors."

Nobody learned the practical limits of such research faster than the battle's first historian, John Bachelder,

golden processes in the midst of so much devilment."

Most of us, like my wife Anna on Seminary Ridge, intuit the connective tissues of trees and grief. That humans plant trees on grave sites is a spiritual fact of great and ancient significance. Homer signals a transition from war to peace by telling how Odysseus, returning home, found his father tending a young fruit tree. Ovid, in *The Metamorphoses*, tells of Cyparissus "begging the gods to ... let him grieve forever" after he accidentally kills a stag: "As his lifeblood drained away with never-ending tears, his limbs began to