

On a Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 19332012

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Review

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Murray, Jennifer *On A Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933–2012*. University of Tennessee Press, \$49.00 ISBN 1621900533

The Origins and Changing Meaning of Battlefield Preservation Efforts

On what is likely the most consecrated 6,000 acres of the United States landscape, is the Gettysburg National Military Park. Timothy B. Smith in *The Golden Age of Battlefield Preservation: The Decade of the 1890's and the Establishment of America's First Five Military Parks* [2008] addressed the creation of Gettysburg, Chickamauga and Chattanooga, Shiloh, Antietam, and Vicksburg parks during a particular decade. By the 1890s, the regional bitterness engendered by Reconstruction had subsided. The decade was ripe for veterans from both sides, in a spirit of brotherhood, to reconcile and remember the war. The battlefield sites were for the most part unmarred by urban or industrial development. Smith examines the process of battlefield preservation and focuses on the preservation and interpretation of each of these sites.

Generally, historians have paid limited attention to Gettysburg battlefield's history though thousands upon thousands of efforts have been made to describe and explain the battle and campaign. In both *This Is Holy Ground: A History of the Gettysburg Battlefield* by Barbara L. Platt [2001] and *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and American Shrine* by Jim Weeks [2003], the authors addressed the extent by which preservation and interpretation were challenged by periodic bouts of tourism and commercialization. Additionally during these decades, the glacial eroding of the founding premise of the national military parks occurred. Since the centennial commemoration, the climate of opinion regarding the validity of the Lost Cause interpretation and the rise of understanding the battle in the context of American race relations has prompted the National Park Service to accept changes to its preservation and interpretation of the sites.

On A Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933-2013, Jennifer Murray offers a unique, and some may say an insider understanding of the changes that have occurred at the park. She worked for nine seasons at Gettysburg as an interpretive ranger while completing college and graduate school. She understands that the battlefield, its preservation and its interpretation has been in a continual state of transformation over 150 years.

Neither the battlefield landscape nor its interpretation has remained static. Events, such as the passing of Civil War veterans, the invention of the automobile, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the rising of the civil rights and environmental movements have had significant impacts. The battlefield's initial preservation and memorialization [1863-1895], as well as its development by both the War Department [1895-1933] and the Department of the Interior [1933 to present], has played significant roles in making Gettysburg what it is today. The current \$105 million visitor center with the restored cyclorama painting is nestled in a landscape which is being sculpted to be more and more like it was in July 1863.

Murray has organized the story chronologically. The first chapter, 'We Are Met On A Great Battlefield' begins with the internment of the dead immediately after the battle on 12 acres adjacent to the 5 year old Evergreen Cemetery. The founding of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, along with the private purchases by veterans of land on which their unit fought, set in motion the preservation of the site for the purpose of remembering the valor of the soldiers. Frequent mapping of the battlefield by military staff and historians and the enabling legislation that encouraged landholders to turn their private property over to the government in 1895.

The second chapter 'We Cannot Hallow This Ground' introduces the impact of tourism by automobile, the creation in 1916 by Congress of the National Park Service, New Deal politics, and the 1938 seventy-fifth anniversary commemoration. Each of these moved the park toward the ". . . promotion of the battlefield's scenic features, landscape beautification efforts and a tendency to view Gettysburg not exclusively as a memorial battlefield , but as a park . . . (40)."

The next nine chapters describe the issues surrounding the development of the park between 1941 and the current day. During the Second World War the

National Parks were requested to give up extra cannon, iron wayside plaques and iron fences to the war effort. Post war tourism, patriotism and commercialization changed the public perceptions of what Gettysburg was and what it should become. In the mid-1950s significant impacts came through the 1956 Federal Highway Act which funded the construction of 41,000 miles of highways and the Mission 66 initiative that evolved as a manifestation of the National Park's "long-standing tradition to promote recreational tourism (80)." The Mission 66 initiative begat a visitors' center that would later become the focus of interpretive issues and conflict of philosophies. Would the park be a battlefield, a memorial garden, or a tourist destination? "The site and design for the visitor center demonstrated the Park Services' efforts to modernize the battlefield and provide visitor access" and "place convenience over preservation (85)."

As the centennial of the battle approached, the Cold War was well underway and molded domestic issues. Additionally, the nascent modern civil rights movement contrasted dramatically with the Lost Cause movement while the battle was commemorated during the 1960s. Murray sets forth the case that the battle, which had been described as the High Water Mark of the war, may have also provided a centennial that could be considered the high water mark of the Lost Cause explanation of the war.

She understands that the centennial observances of the Civil War "aptly demonstrate the dominance of the 'heritage syndrome' and a tendency to remember and glorify the soldiers, commanders and battles without engaging in a meaningful discussion of the war's causes or consequences (113)." The centennial commemoration generated friction within the interpretations of the 1863 military campaign, the battlefield and the civilian lives in Gettysburg and Adams County.

Discord occurred over the building during 1958-1962 of a visitors center designed by Richard Neutra and located in an area that was the destination of the Grand Assault of July 3. Negative public comments were uttered frequently in the mid-1970s as the National Tower, 307 foot high elevated observation deck was being constructed upon land deemed by many to be sacred and very close to George Meade's headquarters. The land swap between Gettysburg College and the National Park Service added heat to the simmering issues related to landscape preservation, visitor access and community desires. Between 1989 and 1991 history as a means of telling a story became extremely politicized. The demise of the Soviet Union, the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution,

the attempt of the Disney Corporation to create and history themed commercial park produced newspaper headlines. The film *Glory* and Ken Burn's *The Civil War* generated an uncommon amount of public discussion regarding American history.

In 1998 the National Park Service released a draft of a general management plan for the park. At this time the Memorial-Commemorative Landscape philosophy of the 1950s-1980s came into conflict with a Battle-1863 Landscape philosophy of the 1990s. The General Management Plan provided a framework for decisions regarding the battlefield landscape [1863], the memorial landscape [1880s-early1900s] and visitor access [post Second World War].

Throughout the book, Murray sets forth generalizations concerning who is visiting the battlefield and their expectations when they get there. Her access to Gettysburg National Military Park's [GNMP] archives is one of the chief strengths of the book. Notable is the author's attention to significant details from the wealth of data within the GNMP archives. At times institutional histories may be very difficult and less than exciting to read, but *On A Great Battlefield* never is. Murray offers a lucid and concise history of 150 years of preservation, interpretation, and commemoration at Gettysburg. Her writing style is precise, not wordy, and excludes stories and anecdotes that are non-pertinent to the clearly offered themes of each chapter. Murray's work is a significant addition to both the history of the Gettysburg battlefield and the field of public history.

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