

USING HISTORICAL SITES TO HELP TEACH THE UNITED STATES SURVEY

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Everyone who teaches the American history survey in the United States has at hand some historical site that can be integrated into the curriculum. It might be a house or a neighborhood, a road trace, a fort, an old canal or railroad bed, or the remains of an iron furnace. Whatever the nature of the site, it holds the potential to bring a piece of the past vividly to life for students too often conditioned to rely on electronic images to stimulate their imaginations. Historic sites permit students literally to touch our past, and in that moment to make a connection to earlier Americans and their lives that cannot be duplicated in any classroom.

My major field is Civil War-era studies, and I am fortunate that several splendid mid-nineteenth-century sites lay within fairly easy reach of the University Park campus of Penn State. Ten miles away is Curtin Village, a well-interpreted historical settlement that focuses on the nineteenth-century iron-making culture of central Pennsylvania. Slightly farther away are impressive remnants of a canal along the Juniata River that serve as an excellent backdrop for examination of nineteenth-century transportation. For my purposes in this article, however, the sites that are most important are the Civil War battlefields at Antietam and Gettysburg.

I suspect that a poll of most of my academic peers would reveal a consensus that Civil War battlefields hold only limited value for any students except military buffs who want to examine in excruciating detail the tactical movements of regiments and brigades or to evaluate the tactical decisions of generals and colonels. Indeed, in testimony before Congress in 1990 the deputy executive director of the American Historical Association--who claimed to speak not only for the AHA but also for the broad historical community in the United States--opposed congressional support for additional Civil War battlefield preservation on the grounds that it would perpetuate "narrow, antiquated views" of history that give undue emphasis to battles and generals. "Historians today have redefined the study of the Civil War," he stated, "shifting attention from military action to the diverse experiences of individual groups, the impact of emancipation," and the ways in which the war exacerbated old social divisions and created new ones.¹

Editor's Note: Professor Gallagher moved from Penn State to the University of Virginia during 1998. He has indicated that he will continue to visit two battle sites a semester with his students in his new location.

¹*Testimony of James B. Gardner, Deputy Executive Director American Historical Association, Before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 3513 and S. 1770, September 4, 1990* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1990), 2-3.

Apart from its quite breathtaking innocence of the myriad ways in which military events during the Civil War shaped all the dimensions of American life he listed as currently important to historians, this testimony radically underestimated the value of Civil War battlefields as tools that can help teachers move well beyond any specific tactical story. Over the ten years I have been taking students to Antietam and Gettysburg, I have found these sites to be singularly effective as aids in helping students place themselves in another time and in helping them understand the people who lived and worked in that time.

Let me start with Antietam, which is located in western Maryland and which, with more than 23,000 casualties in one day, marks the bloodiest single day in American history. My students and I follow the battle chronologically during the course of a six- or seven-hour walking tour. Traversing the field most obviously enables students to grasp what happened militarily at Antietam; more than that, it promotes their shifting mental gears so that they sense the presence of the people who lived during the Civil War. At various stops during the tour, we discuss such topics as the circumstances that sent men into the respective armies, the responses to the war in the different states represented by monuments on the field, the factors that led some slave states such as Maryland to remain in the Union while others seceded, and the postwar efforts to create a suitable public memory of the war that resulted in the erection of the monuments.

Because the battlefield constitutes a tangible link to one of the watershed events in our history, students easily move from specifics concerning what they see in the Sunken Road, or at the Dunker Church, or at Burnside's Bridge, to the larger questions of the era. Did the founding generation envision a true nation, or did they have in mind a collection of semi-autonomous states? Why was emancipation added to restoration of the Union as a second great goal for northern armies? How did events on the battlefield influence morale behind the lines? Were the soldiers in the two armies more alike than different? How did women such as Clara Barton, who made her first major appearance at Antietam, overcome a range of obstacles to play a significant role in a conflict too often seen as exclusively the province of men?

Antietam is especially useful as a site where I can explore the ways in which the battlefield and the home front intersected during the Civil War. For example, I talk about the battle's importance in giving Abraham Lincoln a victory that enabled him to announce his preliminary proclamation of emancipation. I go on to discuss the nature of the proclamation, its relationship to earlier congressional actions such as the Second Confiscation Act, and the shift in historical analysis from a preoccupation with political events in Washington concerning emancipation to a broader interpretation that takes into account the actions of African Americans--both slave and free--that furthered the cause of black freedom during the war.

Antietam also provides a good place at which to discuss the diplomatic implications of military events--how England and France backed away from some type

of mediation in the American war following Robert E. Lee's retreat from Maryland in September 1862. I point out the irony that on September 17, the day Antietam was fought, British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell agreed with Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston that a victory by Lee's army in Maryland would open the door for Britain to attempt to arrange an end to the conflict.

Finally, I use the battlefield at Antietam to examine internal rifts in northern and southern society. For example, at the Dunker church, which stood at the epicenter of the battle, we discuss conscientious objectors in the North and the fact that western Maryland contained few slaveholders and thus did not welcome the Confederate invaders.²

Gettysburg affords an equal number of opportunities to consider broad questions relating to the Civil War. In the National Cemetery, where the students are surrounded by the graves of roughly 4,000 northern soldiers who died at Gettysburg, we talk about what the concept of Union meant to thousands of northerners in the mid-nineteenth-century. In my experience, one of the hardest things to get across to students is some idea of why hundreds of thousands of American risked their lives to hold the Union together. Historian Barbara Fields has labeled preservation of the Union "a goal too shallow to be worth the sacrifice of a single life,"³ an observation that might seem to make sense to modern students. But Fields's observation overlooks the fact that untold northern men and women did believe the Union worth fighting to preserve, and we cannot understand them or the Civil War unless we try to understand why. No one got to the essence of what the war was about more effectively than Lincoln in the 200-odd words of his address delivered at the dedication of the cemetery in Gettysburg on November 19, 1863. We read those words in the cemetery and discuss how the conflict evolved during its first two years.

The war had begun as a war for Union--a test to see if a republican government could withstand the threat of disunion. At Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke to the widely held belief that the United States was a beacon of democracy in a world where democracy had not yet taken firm root. If the Confederacy succeeded in winning its nationhood, believed Lincoln and other northerners reared on the rhetoric of Daniel Webster, the noble American experiment in democracy would have failed. When the students hear Lincoln's words in the setting of the cemetery, it brings home to them the awful price that thousands paid to keep the Union together. They see evidence of what Lincoln meant when he said the Union dead gathered on that hilltop had "given the last full measure of devotion."

²For another look at Antietam as a classroom, see John F. Votaw, "Old Battlefields and Their Lessons: The Case of Antietam," *Teaching History*, 21 (Spring 1996), 16-21.

³Barbara J. Fields, "Who Freed the Slaves," in Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 178.

Lincoln also touched on the North's second great war aim when he spoke at Gettysburg about the conflict's bringing "a new birth of freedom" to the United States. This affords an opportunity to talk to students about the addition of emancipation to Union as a focus of northern efforts and to emphasize how controversial this was across much of the North. I talk about the viciously racist character of the New York City draft riots, which took place in the immediate aftermath of Gettysburg, and the grudging acceptance of black soldiers by many of the northern men who had enlisted to save the Union but in 1863 expressed a disinclination to die for emancipation.

The thousands of monuments at Gettysburg provide a perfect opening to follow up on the theme of racial tension during the war. Many of the monuments were erected during the era of reconciliation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and commemorations of the battle often included scenes of former Union and Confederate soldiers in cheerful interaction. Absent were black veterans, a testament to the almost universal agreement between North and South to slight or ignore entirely emancipation in favor of celebrating the war as an epochal event that made the nation a great world power.

I will mention one last theme I develop at Gettysburg, and that is the impact of the war on civilians caught in its path. I discuss how any major battle overwhelmed the civilians in the area, who faced catastrophic loss of property, had to help care for thousands of wounded men, and had to clean up thousands of dead animals and untold material wreckage--all with little or no government help. I make the point that Gettysburg's civilians were among the very few northerners who experienced the war in a way scores of thousands of southern civilians did. Any consideration of the respective home fronts, I emphasize to the students, must begin with acknowledgment of this difference. For most northerners, the war was much like that of the March girls in *Little Women*. Their father is gone and they miss him, but otherwise their days proceed very much as before the war. Few southerners, white or black, could claim as much.

Virtually all of my students find it a moving experience to stand where Americans paid the ultimate price in a struggle over their differing beliefs. They look over countryside that evokes images of people trying to settle profound questions relating to slavery and freedom, to the nature of the Union, and to the relationship between segments of the population that had become increasingly estranged over the previous half century. In anonymous written evaluations by students, the trips to Antietam and Gettysburg always are among the most frequently mentioned strong points of my classes. Many students have singled these trips out as the most memorable part of their four years at Penn State. I believe such statements attest to the great value of not only battlefields, but also of historic sites in general, as tools to help those of us who teach about United States history.