“The Roots of Tourism at Gettysburg: 1863-1913”
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Abstract

In his 1863 “Gettysburg Address,” President Abraham Lincoln stated, “The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” President Lincoln envisioned the Gettysburg battlefield becoming a sacred place where American citizens could reflect on the importance of the American Civil War, and never forget the blood sacrifice that 51,000 men made there. Instead, Gettysburg has evolved from sanctified ground, into a place for amusement, entertainment, and commercial opportunities. People visit Gettysburg as tourists seeking an amusing and entertaining experience, not necessarily to learn the comprehensive history of the Civil War or reflect on the sacrifices the nation made to end the bondage of African Americans. It is the tension between history, education, and entertainment that my project seeks to explore.

My research has focused on the transformation of the Gettysburg battlefield into a tourist destination. In order to have a better understanding of what the battlefield has become, I traveled to Gettysburg. At the Gettysburg National Military Park, I conducted research at the research center and also explored the well known battlefield. From my research I can conclude that Gettysburg transformed into a tourist site during the late 19th century.

Timeline of Gettysburg Battlefield:

1863-1913

- July 1-3, 1863: Battle of Gettysburg
- November 19, 1863: Gettysburg National Cemetery dedicated by President Abraham Lincoln
- April 1864-February 1895: Early preservation efforts by the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association; Veterans create a heroic rhetoric on the battlefield
- February 1895: Creation of Gettysburg National Military Park; Federal Government in charge of preservation
- July 1-3, 1913: 50th Anniversary, Grand Reunion

Research Questions

- When did the Gettysburg battlefield become a place where people visit?
- When did the tension between preservationists and those who supported commercial endeavors develop at Gettysburg?

Methods

For my project, I analyzed both primary and secondary documents. At the Gettysburg National Military Park research center, I looked at unpublished documents that related to the creation of the park, early visitor accounts, and amusements found on the site in the late nineteenth century. People began to visit the battlefield after the battle concluded. These people came to pay their respect to the men who died there, but as reconciliation between northerners and southerners began, the battlefield became more than just a place to remember those who perished there. Veterans held reunions, and brought their families. The battle itself interested people, and many came to explore and learn about Gettysburg. The town profited from these visitors and many businesses capitalized on the increase in visitation. For example, the Gettysburg Battlefield Trolley and the Gettysburg Cyclorama were amusements that private companies founded in the late nineteenth century.

Future Research Questions

- What purpose can the site serve now? Can contemporary issues of race and war be addressed?
- How can visitors be better educated when they visit?

Conclusions

President Lincoln imagined Gettysburg becoming a sanctified ground, where no one could create a new meaning of the battle. However, Civil War veterans did alter the remembrance of Gettysburg and of the war. They understood that their memories would become what would be remembered, and could choose what would not be remembered on the site. The appealing memories constructed by veterans transformed the Gettysburg battlefield from a place of blood ridden ground, into a site of valor and amusement. In the post war years, Gettysburg did not become a place to reflect on the important implications of the American Civil War. These constructed memories made the site more than just a place for memorialization, but also a place for consumption by the general population.

A ticket for the Gettysburg Cyclorama. There were four cycloramas that traveled to U.S. cities in the late 19th century. One can still view an original at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center.

Literature


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