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**Jim Weeks: Gettysburg**

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## Introduction



“YA GOT ME, AGHHHHH!” Lurching from the imaginary bullet fired by my finger, cousin Jack tumbled off the stone wall on Gettysburg’s Cemetery Ridge. On that summer noon in 1959, the heyday of family touring, other tourists near the High Water Mark ignored the killing. War as play occupied baby boomers at all of this national shrine’s place-names, which had been fixed in the gazetteer of Americana—the Wheatfield, Devil’s Den, Little Round Top, the Angle. Whether or not children and parents pondered Gettysburg’s lessons of national sacrifice that day, they visited on family time. After driving over the battlefield, families might have relaxed at a motel pool, shopped for souvenirs, or visited a proprietary tourist attraction. As had Gettysburg visitors before and since, most combined commemoration with play, reaffirming allegiance to country while on leave from everyday routine.

With a view that the American landscape had something to teach, Mom and Dad packed the black ’53 Ford every summer in the late fifties and the sixties and drove us to places claiming significance in American history: Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, Bunker Hill, Williamsburg, and Gettysburg. Of all the historic sites we visited prior to Gettysburg, and all those explored long after the ’53 Ford expired, Gettysburg produced not just the most vivid memories, but a transformation in me akin to religious conversion.

The family stayed at an eight-dollar-a-night tourist cabin that proved a bit cramped for six. When the proprietor told my father the next larger cabin cost thirteen dollars, Dad hesitated and, as if it were the only possible response, whistled one long blast. We drove the battlefield avenues from one monument to the next, gaping at the sculptural variety as if we were on a scavenger hunt. Occasional waysides explaining the battle broke the stones’ mesmerizing effect and reminded us of the event this park memorialized. At the Soldiers’ National Cemetery, we stumbled through the Gettysburg Address memorized in school. Our patriotic thoughts may have been inchoate, but we understood Gettysburg’s place in the struggle for liberty at home and overseas. Tourists could not escape references to this

notion. Peering down at President Dwight David Eisenhower's farm from a nearby observation tower was as much a part of Gettysburg touring as Ike-and-Mamie teacups, pincushions, and postcards. Only at Gettysburg did the Free World's leader merge in a comforting omnipresence with the Civil War leader who here reaffirmed America's destiny. Lincoln in bronze, Lincoln in ceramic, and Lincoln in wax reinforced our reverence for the mythical hero whose portrait hung alongside George Washington's and the flag we saluted in our school. Together at Gettysburg, Ike and Abe exuded assurance of the nation's glorious past and an even more glorious future.

Gettysburg's carnivalesque sights, crowds, and kitsch enchanted the puerile mind. The Civil War forage caps, toy guns, and Confederate flags we purchased in town assumed talismanic powers, inspiring us to scramble, charge, and retreat over ground that once hosted mass carnage. Our boyish imaginations were stimulated by a mammoth circular painting of the battle, the cyclorama—a relic of preautomobile, preelectrified entertainment the likes of which P. T. Barnum once displayed. Museums of an earlier day, stuffed with macabre, grotesque, and ghoulish curiosities, titillated us even in the age of television and atoms. Along with providing soft drinks, ice cream, and souvenirs, these ma-and-pa emporiums displayed battlefield-dug bones, teeth, bullets gathered in geometric shapes, and, in one case, what appeared to be a whitewashed chicken coop labeled mysteriously General Longstreet's Headquarters.

While my mother and sisters patronized the Hall of Presidents—an old-fashioned waxworks collection of American presidents and first ladies—we visited a museum that included a diorama and “slave hideaway” from which frightful mannequins stared. A short walk brought us to a museum opened in an old orphanage by Cliff Arquette, folksy NBC television personality Charley Weaver. Even though Arquette used his television aura to attract customers, the museum reflected the nineteenth-century fondness for potpourri. Among the bric-a-brac blending Civil War with television themes, the museum featured an optical device through which one could see the figure of an orphan chained in the building's basement. When I arrived home, the topsy-turvy exhilaration of carnival swung to fear, producing sleepless visions of staring dummies, children chained in dungeons, rattling bones, and, worst of all, the memory of a photo showing a bayonet rammed through a human skull. But terror from the trip quickly gave way to an emotional response that has lingered ever since, manifesting itself in a variety of ways.

A fresh perspective on that visit, evolving over the intervening decades, produced several key reflections that served as the origin of this book. One is that the permanent imprint Gettysburg left on my imagination, the reason for its enduring attraction, lay in the way the place simultaneously shattered time and offered entertainment. On the one hand, Gettysburg broke through the humdrum of my suburban life by cheating the present.

Its soldiers' cemetery, panoramic views, expansiveness, and abundance of oversized funereal monuments evoked a sense of grandeur that lured one into a distant time. On the other hand, the carnival aspects of Gettysburg—sensuous, strange, full of possibilities—offered a hyperreal sense of the here and now. Gettysburg combined extremes of the worldly with the otherworldly, simultaneously overwhelming, thrilling, entertaining, amusing, and frightening. More than commemorating the site where something had happened, Gettysburg seemed a place where something *was happening*. My experience, like those of other tourists, replicated a medieval pilgrimage: we stepped out of everyday life and encountered the wondrous through extraordinary sights, amusements, and magical goods.

Another observation evolving from my initial visit is that Gettysburg, one of America's most important shrines, is its continual state of transformation. Objects on the landscape, including the cemetery, monuments, fencing, cannon, interpretive signs, and tourist attractions, can be read as texts revealing the cultural standards of those who built and visited the shrine. Even the absence of structures removed in recent decades communicates much about the current era of heritage tourism. At the time of my first trip, over forty years ago, Gettysburg showed signs of a different era of touring. Tourist cabins, gas stations, family attractions, garish signage, as well as ma-and-pa museums and refreshment stands, dotted town and battlefield. These tourist services have vanished in an attempt to replicate the ambience of 1863, a trend likely to accelerate. Similarly, the 1950s Gettysburg differed from its 1900 manifestation, which catered to railroad tourists, and was in turn dramatically different from its immediate post-Civil War counterpart, which served genteel tourists. This slow, imperceptible transition from one landscape to another opens a window not only on visitors but on the succession of reigning aesthetics involving memory and market.

A third reflection surfaced with the transformation of Gettysburg after Vietnam and the rise of reenacting as an appropriate form of commemoration. When I visited as a kid, I remember standing near a crowd at the great bronze, open-book monument on Cemetery Ridge while a guide referred to the High Water Mark. I puzzled later over what Gettysburg had to do with the ocean, straining to imagine a tide flooding the sloping farmland ahead. But I did not dwell on this enigma nor on any of the other symbolic imponderables I encountered, for my imagination had been stirred by the diorama, cyclorama, souvenir toys, and props on the landscape such as fencing and cannon. Together they provided a graphic narrative of the battle, aiding my quest to see advancing Rebel battle lines whenever I looked out over the battlefield. Although I did not realize it at the time, commercial culture—from guided tours to stereographs and movies—always had provided a subtext to Gettysburg's larger historical meaning. Indeed, these graphic forms, expressed in recent years through reenactors and restored landscape, could thrive apart from the historical significance of the battle.

These observations that began with a childhood trip are addressed in the following pages: the apparent paradox between Gettysburg as both a site of commemoration and an object of commerce, and the evolution of both memory and tourism. Arguably, Gettysburg's significance rests as much in its stature as a cultural icon as in the battle's historical outcome. Civil War historian Fletcher Pratt once remarked that "Gettysburg" and the "Civil War" were virtually synonymous terms. Yet bigger armies had faced off during the Civil War; grander and costlier assaults were made elsewhere; equally significant turning points occurred. So why has Gettysburg's memory not only overshadowed other Civil War battles, but many other American historical events as well? And why has a battle described by participants as "awful beyond description" with upwards of fifty thousand casualties served as a significant source of leisure for Americans? A town that without the battle would be today as effaced as most other nineteenth-century market towns is instead a byword for Americana. A short list of celebrity visitors to this national crossroads includes Lucille Ball, Henry Ward Beecher, Menachem Begin, William Jennings Bryan, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Edison, David Lloyd George, U. S. Grant, Joseph Hooker, Nikita Khrushchev, John L. Lewis, George C. Marshall, Mary Pickford, Frederick Remington, Jacob Riis, Lillian Russell, Anwar Sadat, Philip Sheridan, William T. Sherman, Adlai Stevenson, Billy Sunday, Owen Wister, and most presidents since James Buchanan.

Judging from Gettysburg's infusion into American life, the battle's twenty-odd hours of combat action represent perhaps the most powerful moments in American history. Indeed, its power appears to grow instead of diminish as the battle recedes in time. Attempting to thoroughly list the diverse ways Gettysburg appears electronically, in print, and in plastic is almost hopeless. Television and movies have referred to Gettysburg in comedies, drama, documentaries, and in cable series. *Gettysburg*, a movie based on Michael Shaara's 1977 best-seller about the battle, *The Killer Angels*, played nationwide beginning in 1993 and became a television feature. One of the film's heroes, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, launched a subindustry that peddled Chamberlain books, beer, T-shirts, mugs, and credit cards. Chamberlain's hometown in Maine went so far as to construct a public park resembling Little Round Top, the site where Chamberlain achieved cinematic immortality.

But Gettysburg in celluloid is only one form of its pervasiveness. In 1984, a magazine devoted to the battle, *Gettysburg*, was launched, while Thomas Publications, a publisher located in Gettysburg, prints a variety of books and pamphlets devoted to the battle. Gun manufacturers market commemorative Gettysburg firearms. Toy merchants produce Gettysburg board games and a Gettysburg Barbie doll. Computer users may purchase Gettysburg screen savers and computer games, or access Gettysburg Listservs and Gettysburg Web sites. Until demolition of the National Battlefield

Tower in 2000, a television camera mounted atop the structure provided a continuous view of the battlefield.

Nearly two million tourists visit the battlefield annually, requiring services provided by hostellers, restaurants, impresarios, and fast-food operations. Gettysburg passes as a kind of Civil War Canterbury, where shrine and festival merge. Tours, seminars, and institutes abound, from tactical studies to explorations of the haunts of tortured soldierly spirits. Air-conditioned buses provide audiotape tours around the battlefield, while a small army of licensed guides offer the same service live and privately. Beyond the standard fare, a variety of historical organizations sponsor specialized tours that last several days and sometimes focus on only a few hours of fighting. Wax museums, relics of bygone commercial amusement, continue to attract tourists, as do other catchpenny operations. Of recent origin are costume shops offering uniforms and paraphernalia for reenactors who seek vicarious entry into the past. Most ubiquitous, perhaps, are the souvenir shops, which sell not only traditional ceramic dinner bells, cedar boxes, and teacups, but innovative mementos such as T-shirts featuring creative Gettysburg themes, Civil War ties, boxer shorts, and bric-a-brac related to the movie *Gettysburg*. Several of the largest tourist shops, including the National Park Service's bookshop, position television monitors above the shopping floor and play *Gettysburg* in endless loops in spite of the film's sentimental dramatization of history.

But Gettysburg is not only consumed. It is also a consuming place, engulfing aficionados in a number of ways. Like holy men, some zealots drawn into Gettysburg's vortex renounce life elsewhere and attempt to survive off of the tourist industry. The more realistic may satisfy themselves with Gettysburg-related activities and frequent visits. Thousands of Gettysburg enthusiasts nationwide belong to organizations dedicated to studying the battle, perpetuating its memory, preserving battlefield land, and restoring the site to its 1863 appearance. These organizations offer not only fellowship for the like-minded through E-mail and periodic meetings, but public education seminars about the battle, preservation and restoration advocacy, and group works projects on the battlefield. Reenactors find Gettysburg the most desirable battle to re-create, staging annual dramatized and sanitized versions of the original carnage. Over ten thousand participated in 1998. Historical writing about the Gettysburg campaign has absorbed the attention of many talented individuals, both academic and nonacademic, who delve into increasingly minute aspects of the battle. Thus Gettysburg boasts the largest corpus of literature of all Civil War campaigns, while other potentially enlightening topics about the Civil War remain unexamined. One might also argue that highly organized Gettysburg preservation, rehabilitation, and construction efforts divert resources and attention from other significant but less-publicized historical sites.

One of the many ironies of Gettysburg is that while it is one of America's

most popular sites of memory, the memory of the site itself has been largely ignored. Few articles and no books in the twentieth century have been dedicated to Gettysburg's development as an American shrine. The articles and book chapters have merits, but tend to read the past backward. They applaud nineteenth-century efforts to create the park as "preservationist" and drive an artificial wedge between "commercial exploiters" and self-effacing "memorializers." Like a morality play, this rearview reading of history has plucked certain groups and individuals from the stream of Gettysburg's development and sorted them out as "good" or "bad" according to contemporary standards. In addition, the literature ignores tourism altogether other than to condemn it as the shrine's bugbear. But shrines require pilgrims, and pilgrims in modern societies are consumers of images and services. Gettysburg has been part of a cultural marketplace ever since the shooting stopped, and its memory has spread with the growth of consumer culture. In other words, the cultural context in which Gettysburg earned its niche as a national icon and sustains that status has been neglected. Seen from a larger cultural perspective, Gettysburg takes on new significance—not just as a site of a pivotal Civil War battle, but as a shrine shaped by an evolving consumer culture. Its story sheds light on the nature of modern pilgrimage, including trends in leisure activities, commemoration, public behavior, mass culture, and merchandizing of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the memory gap in the shrine's multisided history has worked ill for charting its future. In the absence of historical knowledge, myths became either a shield or a bludgeon in fights over custodianship of contemporary Gettysburg. This book resurrects a forgotten past that can inform ongoing controversy. Much of the contribution made here results from a departure in the use of source material. The backbone of evidence has been built not from documents generated by official custodians, but from serials that reveal Gettysburg as a process of interaction between producers and consumers.

Important questions about Gettysburg are addressed in this book. How, for example, was such a horrific field of slaughter transformed into a major site of commercial leisure? Why is such a renowned tourist trap so fiercely defended against commercialization? Why is Gettysburg more like Gatlinburg or Niagara Falls than other Civil War battlefields? Why does Gettysburg have more monuments than any other battlefield on the planet? Why has Gettysburg become such a great cultural icon—indeed, an American cliché invoked in popular mediums such as television comedies, crossword puzzles, and quiz shows? These and other questions find answers through the book's central idea that Gettysburg is much more culturally significant than simply a Civil War battlefield, and only recently has it been narrowly defined as such.

In addition to coming to terms with fundamental questions, the following chapters also challenge key assumptions about Gettysburg. First, Get-

tysburg did not emerge as a shrine simply by popular will. Entrepreneurs, promoters, and boosters have labored to attract pilgrims since the battle ended. Second, Gettysburg never was at odds with the marketplace, which instead played a major role in constructing and reconstructing the shrine. A third assumption confronted here is that African Americans have ignored Gettysburg because they were not considered part of the battle's significance nor included in commemorative celebrations. As will be seen, African Americans used Gettysburg extensively for communal celebration near the turn of the twentieth century. Fourth, the present perspective that certain enterprises associated with the battlefield transcended the marketplace (avenues and monuments) while others desacralized (observation towers, the electric trolley) is reconsidered. Finally, the teleological view of Gettysburg's development—that the present era of visual purification represents the culmination of progress in preservation—will be challenged. I argue, rather, that the present era is simply the latest in a series of transformations driven by cultural, economic, and social change, and that, furthermore, simulacra aid co-optation of the sacred by heritage tourism.

Too often battlefield preservationists observe an uncomplicated dichotomy between the shrine and profanation by the marketplace. Gettysburg enthusiasts—some of whom, paradoxically, earn a livelihood from Gettysburg's popularity—view commercial threats to Gettysburg as the Beast of the Apocalypse. In 1998, enthusiasts were "aghast," according to *USA Today*, over a partnership between the National Park Service and a private enterprise to construct a new visitors' center. "They see visions of Disney World marring the battlefield landscape," the article concluded. The *Boston Globe* early in 1999 quoted a Washington consultant as stating "the crown jewel of American battlefield parks is going to get honky-tonked up" over the project. History, however, reveals a more complex process: Gettysburg has long been an emporium and, more recently, a themed mall of cultural goods. Indeed, Gettysburg is hardly Disney World's antithesis, and in fact is much more akin to Orlando's shrine of global Americanization than enthusiasts would care to admit.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the preservationist response is understandable. After all, contemporary life is so permeated by commercial interests that people yearn for sacred space that they believe lies beyond commercialism's profaning influence. Gettysburg provides an opportunity to pin faith in the sacred to a tangible place, whose borders the faithful assume they are defending against the barbarians of commercialization. Yet we only have to reflect on how Gettysburg has been experienced to begin to see the situation differently. The making of Gettysburg transpired as the nation underwent dramatic change in an industrializing America. Within little over three decades after the battle, the United States became the world's greatest industrial power and soon turned the corner from producer to a consumer nation. A new commercial culture penetrated the heart of American life, combining mer-

chandising with intangibles such as holidays, religion, and national purpose. The unfolding of this commercial culture paradoxically created sacred space to escape it. Like Christmas or civic celebrations, it was precisely Gettysburg's perceived transcendence of the marketplace that both enhanced and masked its position as a commodity. In other words, the making of Gettysburg into an icon did not simply happen because a great Civil War battle had been fought there. Rather, a commercial web often entwined with ritualistic activity packaged it for a consuming public and continually repackaged it for new generations. Its chief producers in the marketplace have been not only entrepreneurs, but those organizations dedicated to perpetuating the battle's memory, including federal, state, and local government, Civil War veterans, reenactors, and preservation groups. To achieve its central position in American culture, Gettysburg had to be brought within the cultural hub of American life, the marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

Reflection on Gettysburg's power in contemporary culture suggests this mix of the sacred and secular. If *sacred* refers to the transcendent beyond time, and *secular* means its opposite, the quotidian including commerce, then these two apparent opposites knit into a helix. As my own family's initial experience at Gettysburg suggests, a glance at the way people experience Gettysburg shows how the secular and sacred blend: the reenactor who dresses in an eight-hundred-dollar costume; the enthusiastic viewer of the movie *Gettysburg* who places flowers on the 20th Maine regiment monument; the double-decker bus tour over "sacred ground" that plays canned narration and the Gettysburg Address; a stroll through the cemetery followed by a "ghost tour"; guides and shop owners who decry profanation by the market yet depend on it for a living; and battlefield preservation promoted by the same organization that sells Gettysburg T-shirts, caps, and mugs and conducts lotteries to "save Gettysburg." This book intends to show that blending these opposites, the sacred and the secular, animates Gettysburg's popularity.

Even more convoluted is the way both the sacred and the secular have shifted over time. While the packaging of Gettysburg has evolved with changing technologies and social change, so has the sense of the sacred. Viewed from today's perspective, for example, what makes Gettysburg different from a tourist attraction like Niagara Falls is that it marks a special slice of historical time worth recalling in the present. Yet during its early stages of development as a tourist site, Gettysburg shared with Niagara Falls the timeless, "sublime" qualities that defined American shrines in the nineteenth century. Obversely, the Gettysburg cyclorama displayed by the National Park Service today as a sacred inheritance originated as entrepreneurial-driven, urban mass entertainment in the late-nineteenth century. Monuments, trees, and carriage avenues intended to evoke contemplation about sacrifice and national purpose for nineteenth-century genteel culture intrude on sacred sensibilities in the twenty-first century's desire for authen-

ticity. Similarly, the Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP) visitors' center, designed as a memorial to human freedom during the Cold War, today violates the equation of the sacred with visual purity. Former abstractions about the sacred have transmogrified into the re-creation, Disney-like, of the battlefield as it appeared in 1863. To the cultural elites who built the memorial park, the pure, unsullied view of the past we demand today would have been an ineffective and inappropriate vehicle of remembrance. The meaning of the event, then, has changed along with aesthetics. What would have been relegated to the market fair a century ago is today inside the pilgrim cathedral.

Examining this shift opens a window on leisure activities of Americans. The sense of the sacred at Gettysburg initially had been fixed by the aesthetics of genteel tourism. Understandably, postbattle developers shaped Gettysburg for the mid-nineteenth-century group possessing the means and time to travel. By late in the century, however, working-class people began taking vacations—even “day trips”—as incomes increased, work hours decreased, and transportation improved. Facilities then were added at Gettysburg to meet the more spontaneous behavior of working-class visitors. By the mid-twentieth century, with the arrival of a homogenous public traveling by auto, the place of play for the genteel became the sacred ground. Play moved outside the park on garish strips of commercial attractions, motels, diners, and souvenir shops. In the most recent era of heritage tourism, play has moved into the sacred space with reenactor encampments and the drive to restore the battlefield to an appearance of 1863. Tourists who once conquered space now conquer time, too, and yesterday's play is today's commemoration. Reenactors wage sanitized versions of Gettysburg's combat at nearby stage sets, where onlookers pay admission to watch history “being made.”

To demonstrate the shifting sands of sacred and secular, memory and market, this book is divided into four parts of two chapters each. The arrangement is chronological, with each part defined by the way my research unveiled discrete developmental phases. The dates bracketing each part of the book provide orientation but are in some cases approximate and not exact fissure points. (For example, while I used 1920 to mark the end of the railroad era and the beginning of the automobile era, automobile tourists had been arriving at Gettysburg since after the turn of the century but had displaced horses by 1920.) Phases might be primarily driven by social change or technologies or both. “Phase One: 1863–1884,” which catered to the genteel market, gave way to “Phase Two: 1884–1920,” with the confluence of increased commercial leisure and revived interest in the Civil War. “Phase Three: 1920–1970” developed with the triumph of the automobile and mass culture, but the final “Phase Four: 1970–2000” took shape as mass markets segmented along with deflation of national pride in the post-Vietnam era. As these four phases rest on cultural production and consumption,

the first chapter of each part is devoted to manufacture and marketing of the shrine during that period, while its companion chapter explores why consumers purchased the product and how they experienced it. Because images and their increasingly sophisticated delivery have so powerfully defined, furnished value, and shaped expectations for the shrine, each phase integrates a discussion of Gettysburg-related representations circulating at the time. Hopefully the structure achieves its intent of moving away from elitist perspectives of Gettysburg, instead exploring the way Gettysburg has been manufactured and experienced.

This book attempts not to judge the variety of ways Gettysburg has been sold and consumed. But I do intend to suggest that the shrine has a much subtler and more intricate relationship with the marketplace than an adversarial one. In the process I reassess the presumption that Gettysburg's sacral-ity is immutable and unchanging. If this book simply informs current enthusiasts that they too cannot escape the marketplace any more than their predecessors, it will have served its purpose. As with all shrines, Gettysburg and the history of its development, revealed in the following pages, tell us more about the American people than about the battle Gettysburg memorializes.