
Every American national park site confronts the challenge of balancing preservation and visitor access. Civil War sites within the National Park System add layers of complication in managing passionate personal interpretations, encroaching commercial development on “hallowed ground,” and an increasing desire to shape battlefields into multiuse grounds. In tackling an administrative history of the National Park Service’s management of Gettysburg National Military Park (NMP), Jennifer Murray tracks these trends alongside the tangible and intangible results on the battlefield and its visitors. The resulting record proves invaluable for public historians hoping to better understand how the American people and the National Park Service engage with some of the nation’s most sacred ground.

An assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, Murray also adds a depth of personal experience from spending several summers as a seasonal interpretive ranger at Gettysburg NMP. Murray demonstrates her thorough knowledge of the field through detailed analysis of changes to the landscape—from fences to interpretive signage and artillery pieces—but the true strength of her work lies in unpacking the big-picture challenges of managing a battlefield landscape. Weaving together the broad trends that shape the battlefield reveals a contested past on many issues: should the battlefield serve as a memorial, park, or commercial tool? Does the park belong more to local or national interests? Who owns the Gettysburg Battlefield—park rangers, local businesses, Lost Cause advocates, or the American people? Using the context of substantial studies of the development and commercialization of Gettysburg and the American memorial landscape, Murray explores the progress of this landmark through national and local lenses.

Murray begins by tracing the roots of preservation and commercialization at Gettysburg, but she quickly gets to the heart of her work: the management of the battlefield since its transfer to the National Park Service in 1933. Early efforts by the National Park Service included contributions to park infrastructure by the Civilian Conservation Corps, limited formal interpretation, no museum collection, and a shift away from War Department management of the military park solely as a memorial to honor the dead. As Murray quotes from historical technician R. L. Jones, “Gradually the area is ceasing to be a Military Park and becoming a mere spot of scenic beauty” (31–32). The installation of picnic grounds and other park-like features generated criticism from veterans and others for treating the sacred ground as one of a chain of parks rather than a memorial battlefield. Yet, the earliest efforts at landscape rehabilitation also occurred in these early years.

During World War II, Gettysburg NMP contributed fences, ordnance, cannon, and even ground for a prisoner of war camp to the war effort. Adding to practical
contributions, the language of the Gettysburg Address delivered a powerful message of freedom and democracy, resounding through the years and tailored to each new crisis. The postwar years saw Gettysburg transformed into a battlefield for Cold War patriotism and competing commercial interests. Despite the opportunities offered by the Civil War centennial coinciding with the civil rights movement, interpretation at the battlefield (with a few exceptions) remained staunchly traditional, suffering from what Murray refers to as “heritage syndrome” (2, 113–14).

While the collapse of communism and the ensuing “culture wars” boded change for even the most traditional battlefield parks, these efforts did not find firm footing at Gettysburg until Superintendent John Latschar arrived in 1994. Latschar paired long-term planning with a bold concept and execution of landscape rehabilitation based on now-standardized practices. The late 1990s laid the groundwork for a broader interpretation, more inclusive of stories concerning race and causation of the war. A private-public partnership resulted in a new combined visitor center, museum, and cyclorama presentation themed “A New Birth of Freedom,” marking a clear shift away from the Pickett’s Charge and cyclorama-centered interpretations of the past by emphasizing the role of emancipation and the larger context of the war.

Public historians who manage and interpret Civil War sites will find Murray’s history and analysis engaging and remarkably useful in understanding the trends of preservation and management that have shaped these sites and public perception. As an administrative history-style work, Murray’s meticulous attention to detail is at times dry but will prove invaluable to the organization as a resource document. Her narrative is occasionally repetitive and sometimes lacks effective transitions between thoughts, but these elements are the result of a clear resolve to fully explore all of the issues that often assault a park simultaneously. Perhaps the greatest strength of Murray’s work is the documentation of the effects of a variety of management techniques considered and applied to the Gettysburg Battlefield.

By providing an in-depth look at the effects of commercialization, multiple uses of sacred ground, rollover in superintendents, and the American public’s views of its battlefield, Murray writes a cautionary tale with documented practical outcomes. Rather than asking a leading question of what happens if kite flying, sleigh riding, and Easter egg hunts are permitted on the battlefield, Murray shows the tangible outcomes for visitors and the landscape (115). The impact of decades of National Park Service management on the Gettysburg Battlefield argues for a strong dedication to the mission of preserving these battlefields, ensuring that management governs with a long-term view, and the necessity of viewing battlefields as national, not local, treasures.

Beth Parnicza, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park