
Gettysburg Address And Civil War

The Civil War is usually not a popular topic of discussion. It's surrounded by differing opinions, controversy, and a general apathetic attitude. But for the thousands of people that visit, work at, and work to preserve Civil War battlefields every day, it's an extremely important part of history. One such battle of that war is the Battle of Gettysburg. While it may be well-known, its importance is greater than most people would think. The Battle of Gettysburg is one of the most significant battles of the Civil War, both today and in the late 1800s, for several reasons.

The Battle of Gettysburg began in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on July 1st, 1863. The first shot was fired three miles west of Gettysburg on Knoxlyn Road. It's unknown who actually fired this shot, but the most credible claim is that of Marcellus Jones of the 8th Illinois Cavalry Regiment, who says he fired at a mounted officer of the Confederate Infantry. The fighting continued through the town and spread out to the surrounding land. This battle ended on July 3rd, 1863 with a Union victory after a failed Confederate charge. Although July 3rd is commonly considered to be the end of the battle, small skirmishes took place on July 4th and Confederate forces didn't retreat until that night. Many places of conflict became popular because of the battle: Little and Big Round Top, Devil's Den, the Slaughter Pen, the Wheatfield, the Peach Orchard, and Cemetery and Seminary Ridge, among others. Buildings that were exposed to fighting are now marked with plaques that read "Civil War Building July 1863." The end of this battle brought about 51,000 casualties, as shown on a graph in an article titled "Civil War Casualties" (American Battlefield Trust 2). It changed the town forever as the battlefield was converted into a military park and became heavily commercialized.

One aspect of the battle that makes it significant is the fact that it ended up being the turning point of the Civil War. The Civil War had been going strong for over two years by the summer of 1863. At that point, the Confederacy was beginning to gain the upper hand. Americans feared that another Union loss could lead to the end of the United States. But the Union victory at Gettysburg was enough to change their tune. Their morale was finally restored after their recent loss at Chancellorsville. And with that win came a substantial loss for the enemy. An article titled "Twilight of the Confederacy" describes how crushed the Confederates were after Gettysburg. One soldier wrote, "The campaign is a failure and the worst failure the South has ever made." Another wrote that "the Army is broken hearted" and now "don't care which way the war closes for we have suffered very much" (Guelzo 26). Along with the effect on each army's morale, the battle's outcome ensured that General Robert E. Lee would not regain the military initiative. The Gettysburg Campaign was a result of Lee's invasion of the north. His loss prevented him from moving further north. All around, it ensured that the Confederates would not win the war and would not permanently secede. These things helped secure the democracy that Abraham Lincoln was determined to save and gave the Union the advantage for the battles following Gettysburg. This is summed up in the same article, "Twilight of the Confederacy," when Allen Guelzo says, "Gettysburg did not end the war in one stroke, but it was decisive enough to restore the sinking morale of the Union, decisive enough to keep at bay the forces that Lincoln hoped could be persuaded to revoke emancipation, and decisive enough to make people understand that the Confederacy would never be able to mount a serious invasion again" (26).

Another aspect that made the battle significant is its location. As previously stated, Gettysburg, located in Pennsylvania, was part of Lee's invasion of the north. The purpose of this invasion was to help relieve the state of Virginia, which was ravaged by battles all over, and to defeat the Union on their own ground, furthermore destroying their morale. Despite the desire to start a fight on Union soil, the events at Gettysburg were not intentional. In Jeff Shaara's "Civil War Battlefields: Discovering America's Hallowed Ground," he clarifies the fact that neither General George Meade nor General Lee was ready for an engagement at Gettysburg (88). The fact that Lee specifically was not ready for an engagement may have spelled out trouble for him early on. What's most important about the battle's location is that even though a battle there was unintentional on both sides, it became unavoidable. In the same book as above, Shaara explains Lee relied on a map that showed a network of roads leading to Gettysburg that he could use to gather his troops (89). That means that not only could Lee's troops make their way to Gettysburg, but so could Meade's troops because, again, Gettysburg is surrounded by roads that all lead to the town. A quote from General Lee in Colonel G.J. Fiebeger's "The Campaign and Battle of Gettysburg" confirms that Lee knew what would eventually happen at Gettysburg because of its location and terrain: "It had not been intended to fight a general battle at such a distance from our base unless attacked by the enemy, but finding ourselves unexpectedly confronted by the Federal Army, it became a matter of difficulty to withdraw through the mountains with our large trains... A battle thus became, in a measure, unavoidable" (75).

Another important aspect of the battle is its immensity. One part of that is the combat size. In an article titled, "10 Facts: Brandy Station," the American Battlefield Trust states that the Battle of Brandy Station was the largest cavalry battle of the Civil War and had a great impact on the future battle at Gettysburg (1). While it wasn't directly part of it, this merely makes a point about the overall enormity of the Gettysburg Campaign. Another important point is that this battle is claimed to be the largest known battle fought in North America. But with a large battle comes a large loss of life and amount of casualties. Tens of thousands of men were killed, wounded, or captured over three days. To show just how bloody this battle was, an article titled, "10 Facts: Gettysburg," says that the first day of fighting alone is ranked as the 12th bloodiest battle of the Civil War. The second day comes in as the 10th bloodiest battle (American Battlefield Trust 1-2). The American Battlefield Trust talks about these casualties and why the amount of lives lost is so great in an article titled, "Civil War Casualties." It states, "More American soldiers became casualties at Gettysburg than in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 combined. New military technology combined with old-fashioned tactical doctrine to produce a scale of battle casualties unprecedented in American history" (2).

The acts of heroism that took place at Gettysburg are a big part of why people continually return to the battlefield. Both group and individual heroism were displayed by the events at Gettysburg. One example is the bayonet charge at Little Round Top. On the second day of fighting, Union Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, who knew how important it was to keep high ground, told his men to hold Little Round Top "at all costs." When the Confederates attacked the hill, Chamberlain's men ran out of ammunition and he called for a bayonet charge. This bravery led the Union to defeat them and may have been a large part of their overall victory. Another act of group heroism was Pickett's Charge, the final push made by the Confederacy. Led by Major General George Pickett and Brigadier General James Johnston Pettigrew, a line of Confederates marched across three-fourths of a mile of an open field to a line of Union soldiers and their cannons. Walking across a field towards the enemy and to their imminent demise takes true bravery, even if they were on the wrong side of history. An example of individual heroism comes from the story of John Burns, found in an article titled, "John Burns." He was a resident of

Gettysburg and a veteran of the War of 1812. When fighting broke out on July 1st, Burns, who was in his seventies, picked up his musket and joined the fight. He was wounded, but survived the battle, and lived until 1872 (Hawks 3). Individual heroism was again shown by the 64 men who received the Medal of Honor for their efforts at Gettysburg.

Lastly, the Gettysburg Address that was written because of the battle makes it extremely significant. This speech, written by Abraham Lincoln at the David Wills House in Gettysburg, changed what the Civil War meant to Americans. This is explained in the article, "Gettysburg Address," where it states, "With the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln transformed the meaning of the war from a conflict to preserve the Union to a sacrificial dedication to the survival of a political order built on liberty and equality" (Allen 3). As discussed in Austin Allen's article, The Gettysburg Address was delivered on November 19th, 1863 to commemorate the Gettysburg National Cemetery. With up to 750,000 dead as a result of the Civil War, they were typically buried on the battlefields where they died. But this cemetery brought about a new way to treat the dead when fallen soldiers at Gettysburg were reburied there (1).

The Battle of Gettysburg remains significant for multiple reasons. The Union victory virtually saved the United States from collapsing. The roads leading to Gettysburg made a battle unintentional but unavoidable. The battle was large from its combat size to its casualties. Both group and individual acts of heroism made the battle memorable. And the Gettysburg Address, one of the most recognizable speeches in history, was brought into existence because of it. The Battle of Gettysburg has stayed relevant and important to Americans from all over the country for over 150 years and will continue for generations to come.