



Vigil of Silence: The Civil War Memorials

The commemorative history of battlefields
deserves thoughtful interpretation

BY RICHARD WEST SELLARS

At Antietam Battlefield the monument honoring the State of Maryland's men who fought there stands in a quiet grove of maples near the Dunker Church. At Vicksburg the towering Wisconsin column pays tribute to the sacrifices that state's soldiers made on the surrounding battleground. And at Shiloh the dark and grieving figures on the Confederate Memorial testify to the tragedy of the battle and the Civil War.

These are only three among hundreds of memorials that stand about the woodlands, fields, and towns that are America's Civil War battlefields. Despite their great numbers, their beauty, and their artistic and symbolic variety, memorials receive only casual interpretation at most battlefield sites. The lack of meaningful interpretation holds true at sites containing hundreds of monuments scattered over extensive acreage, on fields with only a few memorials, and at crossroads or city parks punctuated by a lone Civil War figure. Without much interpretation, visitors must rely on their own knowledge of the memorials' significance and of the

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The Confederate Memorial at Shiloh Battlefield

Courtesy of Shiloh National Military Park

historical contexts in which they were created.

Important features of many Civil War battlefields, memorials represent an aspect of history almost ignored—the commemorative development of historic landscapes over time. Successive generations have memorialized the battlefields. Union soldiers occupying Vicksburg erected one of the early memorials, a small marble obelisk, in July 1864, one year after the Southern troops' surrender there. The State of Tennessee placed a monument on the Gettysburg Battlefield in 1982, 119 years after the battle. Representing a long commemorative aftermath that has added richness and variety to the battlefields' history and appearance, the memorials, themselves, are historical phenomena worthy of the public's attention and understanding.

Historical perspectives

Several important trends influenced the proliferation of Civil War memorials on the battlefields, on hundreds of courthouse squares, and in city parks. These trends include an increasing interest in memorials, the stylistic evolution of commemorative architecture and sculpture, and early developments in landscape architecture. Political and economic factors, as well, sanctioned the commemoration of the Civil War. To foster a greater appreciation and understanding of the memorials, site managers and local historical commissions should interpret them within the broad contexts of 19th-century memorialization, landscape design, and politics and economics.

To begin with, not only was the Civil

War the most traumatic conflict this nation had endured, but it occurred during the Victorian era, a time of extensive monumentation. During the mid- and late-19th century, memorials became a popular expression of public sentiment. For the first time, the nation took pride in erecting many large, impressive monuments, including the Yorktown Victory Monument (completed in 1884), the Washington Monument (begun in 1848 but not finished until 1885), the Statue of Liberty (dedicated in 1886), and Grant's Tomb (dedicated in 1897).

Concurrently, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago and the "City Beautiful" movement following the exposition inspired memorialization throughout the country. Especially important were developments in civic planning and design, including urban parks, frequently with monuments. Also widely reproduced photographs of the Civil War and, later, of the newly erected monuments further instilled in the public's mind the idea of memorialization. Thus, given the Victorian interest in monumentation, the Civil War battlefields of the 1860s became natural targets for an outpouring of sentiment expressed in granite, marble, and bronze.

Victorian cemeteries contain the most pervasive evidence of the era's fascination with monuments. These cemeteries, with their ornate and frequently ostentatious monuments expressing elaborate sentiments about death and affection for the dead, contrast dramatically with burying grounds of both earlier and later times—the relatively plain graveyards of the 18th century and the architecturally bland

cemeteries of recent years.

The rural cemetery movement, an important aspect of Victorian cemetery development, appears to have been a forerunner of the monumented battlefield parks. Beginning in the 1830s, many American cities established landscaped burying grounds in somewhat rural areas on the city outskirts. The designers, some of America's first landscape architects, intended these cemeteries to replace the overcrowded churchyards as the chief burying places for the inhabitants of the growing cities. The Victorians extensively and ornately monumented the new rural cemeteries, such as Mount Auburn in Cambridge and Watertown, Massachusetts, and Cave Hill in Louisville, Kentucky. Also known as "garden cemeteries," the burying grounds were designed to serve as parks and became popular in this regard, remaining so today. The result was monumented countryside—rural cemetery-parks and hallowed ground in areas of pastoral beauty, with memorials inviting a contemplative response by the visitor. The rural cemeteries, except for their greater concentration of memorials, presented an overall appearance and ambiance similar to those the monumented battlefields would later assume. On the battlefields, however, the memorials to the sacrifices of war more than ever heightened the elegiac qualities of the surrounding pastoral landscapes. Memorialization in park-like settings, such as Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Shiloh, and Antietam, has a precedent in the rural cemetery movement; the presence of national cemeteries in these battlefield parks makes the precedent more evident.

Political and economic factors

A second set of influences on memorialization included favorable political and economic conditions after the Civil War. By the last decades of the 19th century, governments at every level—federal, state, and local—had become well established. Great corporate and individual wealth existed as well. A catastrophic war had concluded, and a political and economic framework enabled commemoration of the conflict.

By comparison, the American Revolution—the event in American history prior to the Civil War with the greatest potential for widespread memorialization—inspired the creation of relatively few monuments during the decades immediately after the war. The new nation lacked the necessary politi-

Bowtie Lanford, Vicksburg National Military Park



The Wisconsin Memorial at Vicksburg Battlefield

cal cohesion and economic strength for a large-scale memorialization effort. The Victorians, however, memorialized the Revolution during the centennial years in the 1870s and 1880s. But with a century having passed, the intensity of feeling about particular battles had diminished, and none of the Revolutionary War battlefields was extensively memorialized.

Veterans' groups and other patriotic organizations, adept at lobbying federal and state governments, encouraged the memorialization of Civil War battlefields. Except for Grover Cleveland, every president from Ulysses S. Grant through William McKinley was a member of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), as were many congressmen. The G.A.R. and the United Confederate Veterans, whose membership included Southern congressmen, found an ally in the railroads. Eager to promote tourism and fired by patriotic zeal, the railroad companies lobbied for battlefield preservation and memorialization. The War Department encouraged these private efforts not only for patriotic reasons, but also as a means of securing selected battlefields for the army to use for on-site study of the tactics employed during the historic battles. The efforts of these varied interests culminated in legislation in the 1890s, when Congress established Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Antietam, Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg as military parks.

The legislation establishing these parks called for memorialization, which had, by this time, already begun. The impulse to memorialize intensified during the decades following the war and carried strongly into the 20th century, spurred on by special anniversaries including the 50th, 75th, and the centennial.

Memory and elegy

Americans in their homes, schoolrooms, and workplaces have contemplated and recalled the details and consequences of the Civil War battles countless times—beginning on the battlefields before the troops moved out, then throughout the country for the remainder of the 19th century and into this century, even to the present day. The memorials and the preservation of battlefields reflect the enduring power of this remembrance. Recollection of the battles is institutionalized in the monumented parks, the remembrance reinforced through preservation, commemoration, and recurring ceremony.

The majority of the Civil War battlefields, however, have only a few memorials



The "Surrender Monument" at Vicksburg Battlefield

Bowie Lanford, Vicksburg National Military Park

or obscure bronze plaques or nothing at all. Yet preservation, even without monuments, is an act of memorialization. Preservation acknowledges that something so important has happened that it must be remembered and at least some terrain set aside.

Battlefield preservation alone does not present specific perspectives of a battle. Memorials, however, interpret a battle by highlighting certain aspects of the conflict to be remembered. Marking the location of important encounters and recalling acts by individuals, regiments, or entire armies, the memorials embody memory and legend: stories officially chronicled and perhaps those never recorded—recollections of the grandfathers, fathers, and sons told and retold until finally passing out of folk memory.

Moreover, memorials suggest *how* a battle should be remembered. They rarely portray the horrors of battle, nor do they question the morality of war. Rather, they ennoble memories of a battle to recall the tragedy and sacrifice in a heroic and elegiac way, and they seek to justify and reaffirm the causes for which the war was fought.

Aside from the fumbling march of armies to victory or defeat, what do visitors sense while on battlefields with memorials scattered about the landscape? In fact, Civil War battlefields and memorials may still evoke deep feelings of empathy within those visitors who are able to grasp the appalling tragedy and grief engendered by these conflicts. Perhaps in the finest way, while standing on ground where men once fought and

died and surrounded by tributes to their sacrifices, visitors may have a greater sense of the communal bonds of generations. Then despite the intervening years, they might be moved by a personal sense of loss to say (borrowing from Walt Whitman's elegy for Abraham Lincoln), "Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep." HN



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The Granite Orchards of Gettysburg

BY RICHARD WEST SELLARS

Standing near the large Pennsylvania Memorial on Gettysburg Battlefield at dawn, I watch the early light give form and definition to the monument with its beaux-arts design and inscriptions and lists of the Pennsylvania veterans of the battle. Nearby, other memorials dot the landscape. None is larger, though, than the ornate structure built by the people of Pennsylvania, where the momentous Civil War conflict took place in 1863.

A brief glance, and the battlefield appears a bit outdated. With obelisks and equestrian statues, it, like other Civil War battlefields, is crowded with heroic sculpture. Today, the visitor to Gettysburg may view the memorials as curiosities; they do not have, for example, the powerful, direct emotional appeal of the Lincoln Memorial or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. But in the larger context of the battlefield's history, they have great meaning. To me, they give evidence of the long continuum of commemorative history at Gettysburg, and they indicate that people other than those who fought there also have dedicated, consecrated, and hallowed this site.

Gettysburg is one of the most "monumented" battlefields in the world. Scattered about this gentle landscape of woods and fields where the battle occurred are almost 400 memorials, many of them impressively large, and more than 900 smaller markers. An important museum of commemorative architecture, the battlefield exhibits styles of sculpture from more than a century of memorializing. In several areas the memorials dominate the landscape with their size and numbers, and in places they are oddly situated among the historic farmsteads that remain from the time of the battle. The most striking visual feature of the battlefield, the memorials appear like randomly planted orchards—architectural surprises of granite, many topped with bronze sculpture—that at once seem out of place yet, given their purpose, are altogether fitting and proper. Each a call to remembrance of some aspect of the battle, the memorials also testify to its lasting impact.

The history of the Battle of Gettysburg differs from the history of the Gettysburg Battlefield. The first is military history, the events of the battle itself; what followed at the site is largely commemorative history—this country's response to the battle through memorialization, veterans' reunions, encampments, and ongoing preservation.

For three days in July 1863, the Northern and Southern armies fought a grim, noisy battle in what was otherwise a peaceful rural area. Resulting in more than 50,000 casualties, with



Detail of the Louisiana Memorial at Gettysburg Battlefield

more than 6,000 dead, the battle was also a decisive reversal for the Confederacy. Here, the Northern troops blocked the last major Southern effort to penetrate deep into Union territory.

But then the armies moved on, leaving the dead to be buried in a landscape that suddenly had been imbued with a meaning much deeper than mere pastoral beauty. Gettysburg Battlefield became a sacred place, hallowed and revered. These were no longer ordinary farms and wooded hills; they differed even from neighboring farmlands and would not be allowed to return to obscurity.

Every generation since the battle, including our own, has placed memorials at Gettysburg—as late as the 1970s and '80s, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee commissioned monuments for the site. Even in the late 1860s, but especially in the last decades of the 19th century, patriotic groups led by veterans'

organizations erected memorials there. The early memorials were direct expressions of the feelings and emotions of the generation that fought the war. Traditional memorials erected by traditional people to commemorate the sacrifice and heroism of the battle, the memorials express national and personal sorrow.

While the Southern states needed a greater perspective of time before memorializing the site of a Northern victory, for the people of the North, Gettysburg immediately became a primary symbol of the tragedy and heroism of war. The battlefield attracted curious visitors even as the soldiers moved out and before the dead and wounded had been fully tended to. The Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, chartered by the State of Pennsylvania in 1864 (the year after the battle), led early efforts to acquire and preserve the site.

After the war, Union veterans and ordinary



The Gettysburg Battlefield Park

Cathy Georg Harrison, Gettysburg National Military Park

Gettysburg National Military Park

citizens came repeatedly to the site to get a sense of the place, gain perspective, and associate themselves with Gettysburg. The Pennsylvania posts of the Grand Army of the Republic held encampments almost annually on the battlefield. In 1888 Union and Confederate veterans held a reunion at Gettysburg to commemorate the battle's 25th anniversary. By this time, the first big wave of memorialization was taking place, in part a response to the anniversary.

More than 54,000 Civil War veterans—both Union and Confederate and including many who did not fight at Gettysburg—attended the 50th anniversary encampment in 1913. This commemorative observance created intense national interest, attracted leading politicians of the time (President Woodrow Wilson was the principal speaker), and served as a bond between Northern and Southern states. Reflecting the gradual subsidence of sectional hatred, Gettysburg was becoming a *national* shrine.

In 1938 the nation observed the 75th anniversary of the battle with a reunion of more than 1,800 Civil War veterans, most by then in their 90s, some over 100. On the day President Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled the Peace Light Memorial, the crowd was estimated at more than 250,000. This was the last major observance that veterans of the battle attended. A large commemorative gathering in 1963 included the reenactment of parts of the battle to mark the centennial.

Of all the commemorative activity at Gettysburg, some events have had a lasting effect and deserve special note. By far the foremost event to occur after the battle came in November 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address—probably the premier public address in American history—at the dedication of the battlefield cemetery. (In the cemetery there is even a memorial to the address.) The cemetery itself is of historical importance. In 1872 Congress designated it a “national cemetery,” one of the first cemeteries to be so named. And in 1895, Congress authorized the Gettysburg National Military Park, which, along with similar legislation for other battlefields, established a precedent for extensive, eventually nationwide federal involvement in preservation.

Gettysburg Battlefield has been a powerful magnet, repeatedly attracting commemorative activity, itself historic. Now the battlefield appears like a giant stage set, the play over and the actors gone, but with embellishments of granite and bronze recalling the heroism and tragedy of those three summer days.

Today, visitation to the battlefield has risen to about 1.5 million people annually, while gradually the emotional intensity associated with Gettysburg has diminished, although not

vanished. There are more tourists but fewer pilgrims. The site is closely managed to preserve its many historic features, but it has become more of a park than a battlefield, its history institutionalized by Congress and through federal administration, and its hallowed ground largely defined by legal boundaries. This generation's primary tribute to the battle fought well over a century ago is its continuing commitment to preserve the battlefield and its memorials.

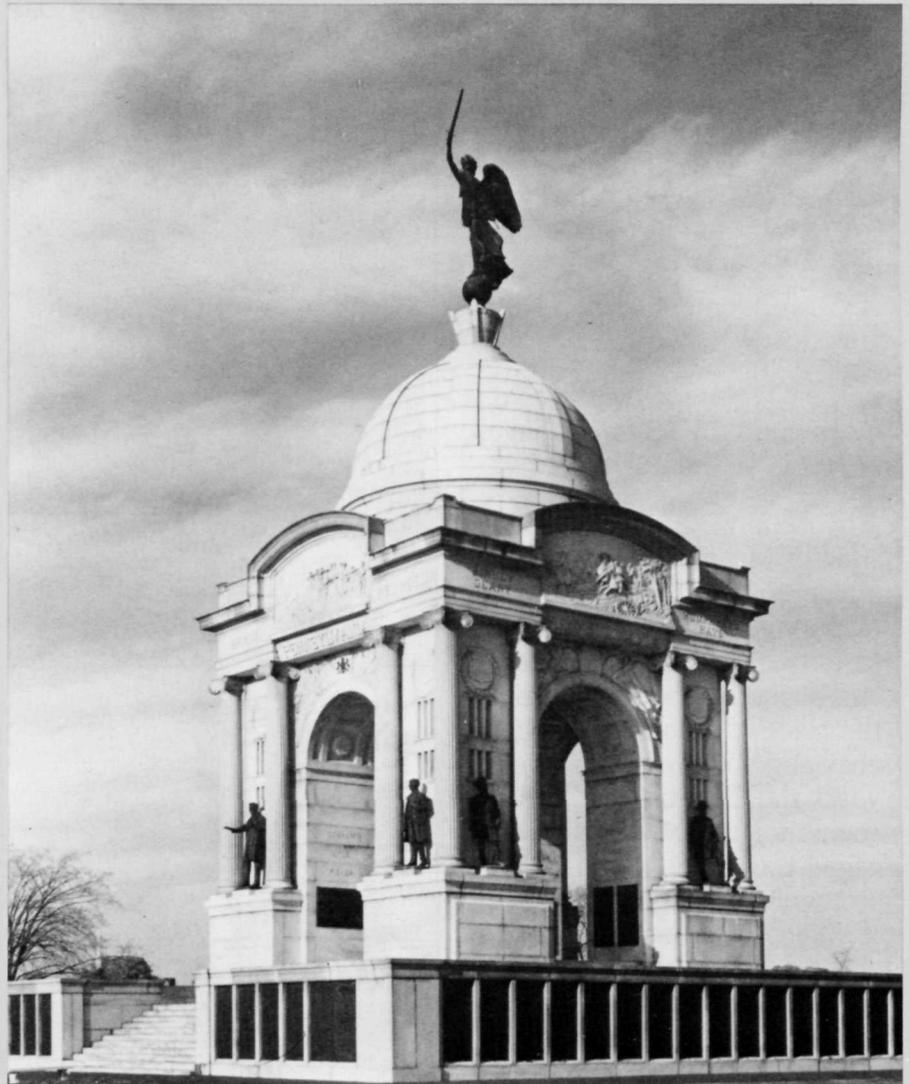
All in all, I disagree with President Lincoln: Even in a larger sense, we *have* dedicated, we *have* consecrated, we *have* hallowed this ground. Lincoln himself did so with his great address. Gettysburg is the best remembered battle of the Civil War in part because of this commemorative act by Lincoln in which he articulated the larger sense of the battle and the war. How dedicated, consecrated, and hallowed are other Civil War battlefields, such as Champion Hill or Glorieta Pass? Not at all. Yet the same generation of brave men struggled there for the same causes. Gettysburg is

so not only because of the battle's major significance, but also because of the American people's response: to sanctify it.

Sanctification is an act of special remembrance. The Civil War generation and its descendants have time and again paid tribute at Gettysburg. The memorials perpetuate this special remembrance. They are the chief physical evidence of the battlefield's hallowedness.

Today, amid the green, pastoral beauty, I find it difficult to comprehend the battle that took place here. Yet the peaceful countryside of the park suggests the giant, steady rhythms of nature—an ironic juxtaposition to the brief, furious battle. Far more than a scattering of individual memorials, Gettysburg is a single, immense pastoral memorial, a landscape of monuments and farmsteads, its granite orchards recalling the battle and the war. The evolution of Gettysburg's memorialized landscape reflects a continuing rite of passage by a nation long reconciled yet determined to remember.

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The Pennsylvania Memorial at Gettysburg Battlefield

Gettysburg National Military Park

History News

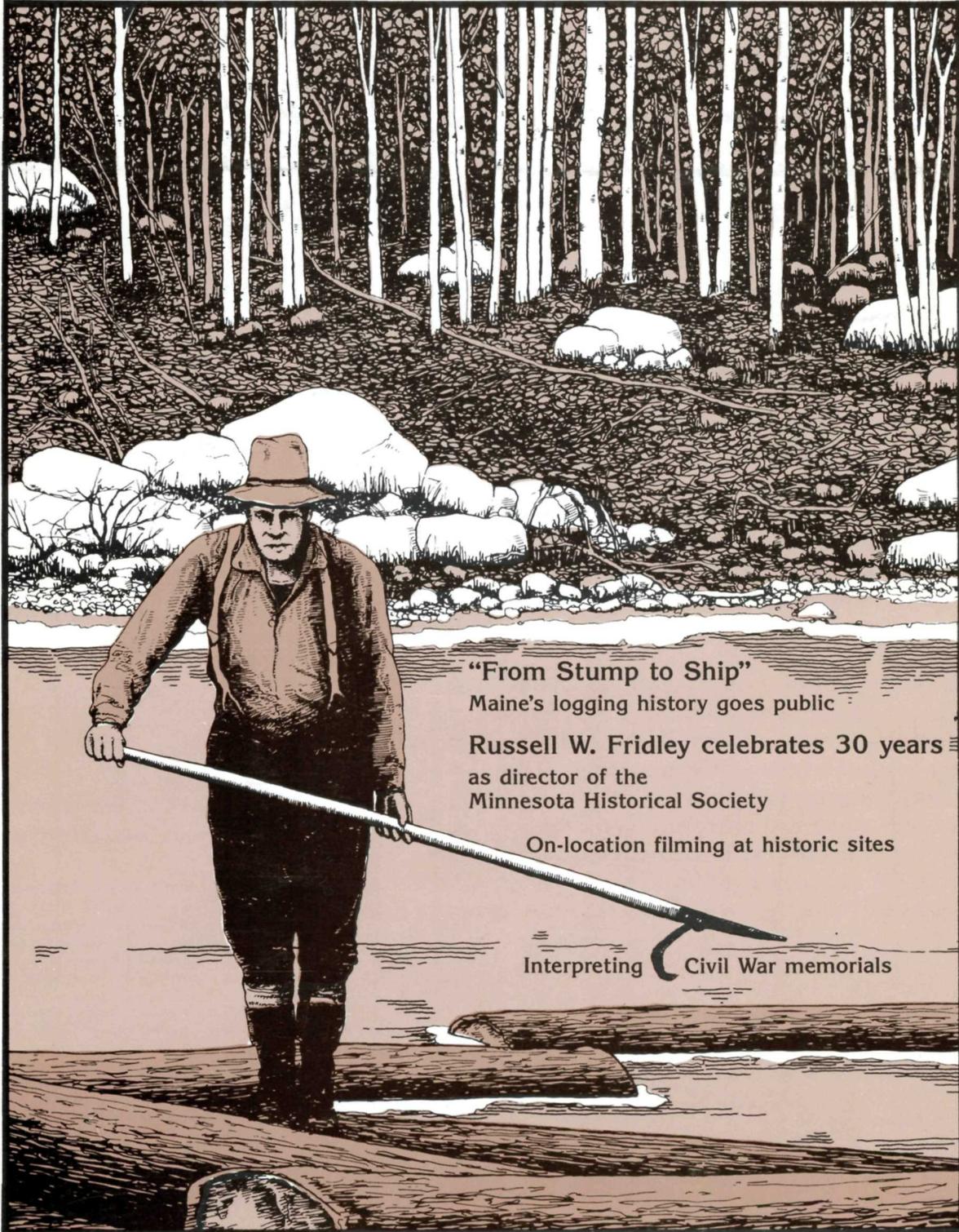
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