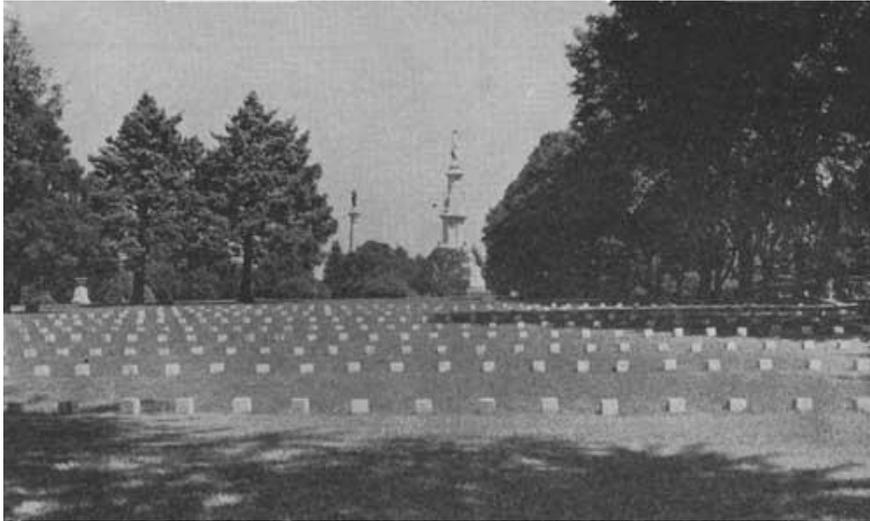


The Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg: Where The Preservation Movement Began

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(Gettysburg NMP)

When the last of the shrill bark of artillery subsided, the devastation that had befallen the fields and orchards surrounding Gettysburg was undeniable. It was, according to one infamous account, “a vast sea of misery.” Strategic consequences aside, the battle also created a very real and present humanitarian crisis – the dead of battle. Strwn across the countryside, the once verdant and pastoral farmsteads were the scene of unimaginable suffering and showered with the detritus of conflict. Caring for the wounded was unquestionably complicated, but was a fact of battle that was to be expected and by this point in the war was quickly becoming a much more organized and deliberate process. Recent advances under the leadership of Union General Jonathan Letterman had brought order to the issue and unquestionably saved many lives.

Disposition of the dead on the scale of the Battle of Gettysburg required more thought and planning than had heretofore been required. With nearly 10,000 killed in action, the complexity of the task quickly outstripped the resources of local cemeteries and municipal authorities and begged for the intervention of state or federal government.

The story that followed, that of David Wills and Governor Curtin and of David McConaughy is one well told and described by many historians and authors since. It is a story of physically removing the dead, designing the grounds, of speeches and ovations and the to be expected political intrigue that follows such affairs. The cemetery is also justly lauded for the dramatic and somber backdrop it provided for what is arguably the most famous speech in American history. Yet, what most if not all of these accounts fail

to note is the role the creation of this cemetery played in another profound movement in American history: *Historic Preservation*.

Americans are a people of the future. Ever since the first Anglo-Settler stood on the lapping shores of this continent we have been thinking about what's next – often with little care or concern for what came before. So, it should be no surprise that the early history of our nation is *not* replete with many efforts to preserve, protect or maintain notable historic sites or places. Somehow it just didn't seem important enough to worry about the past – there was a manifest destiny to concern the nation.

It wasn't until the mid-19th century, on the eve of the Civil War, that several historic homes, threatened with either demolition or neglect spurred the first substantial forays into historic preservation in the United States. *Mount Vernon*, the home of George and Martha Washington may represent the best example of this early, “house-focused” preservation. The home, threatened with serious neglect, yet recognized as truly important was in dire condition and was quickly deteriorating. Both the Federal government and the Commonwealth of Virginia declined requests to acquire it, citing the inappropriateness of government to engage in this work. To the rescue in 1858 came the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. Ultimately, their efforts saved Washington's home and the Association is remembered fondly as one of the first genuine American preservation organizations, a legacy which continues under their stewardship of the home and plantation today.



**The dilapidated Mount Vernon when purchased in 1858.
(courtesy mountvernon.org)**

In some respects, the tale of *Mount Vernon* represents the standard story from this earliest generation of preservation; concerned citizens, gathering, fundraising and organizing to save an important structure. With some limited exceptions (notably Independence Hall in Philadelphia), government intervention in preservation issues was absent during this era, particularly Federal intervention. As noted previously, at *Mount Vernon* it was outright denied. Additionally, though the concept of preserving Revolutionary War battlefields had been discussed, again no action had been taken. In an era when the limits of our

national expansion was boundless it struck many as pure folly that we should dedicate funds to preserving open spaces that would certainly remain open forever. A strict reading of the Constitution also created many questions about the legitimacy of Federal intervention in preservation efforts – and so the battlefields of 1776 (and 1812 for that matter) remained in private hands, some lost to development before the first guns of the Civil War ever opened fire.

Like so many issues, questions and pivotal concepts – historic preservation would be forever shaped by the Civil War. The war’s effect on preservation was profound and changed the way the nation looked and remembered its historic places. And, it could be argued that it all started at Gettysburg.

Theodore S. Dimon (working in partnership with an agent of the State of New York that was attempting to identify the needs of the dead of that state) was one of the first to envision a battlefield cemetery in an early meeting on the subject, in which he explained,

“I presented a proposition that a portion of the ground occupied by our line of battle on Cemetery Hill should be purchased for a permanent burial place for the soldiers of our army who lost their lives . . .”¹

Notable in Dimon’s early letter is the emphasis on this burial site being located on a piece of ground occupied during the battle. The connection between battleground and burial place is not by accident or out of pure convenience. The proposition that the dead should be buried where they fell in defense of Union and Liberty is, at its core a proposal based on the idea that historic sites hold some intrinsic, meaningful value. This is the authentic and “real” place to lay the dead to rest; where they fell with comrades.

Unlike in previous conflicts where the dead were often repatriated to their hometowns and villages, the scale of this loss at Gettysburg was such that they would many would ultimately stay in place and the location would not be on some hillock or field far removed from the carnage, rather, it would be where the action was fiercest. In preserving a spot of ground to bury the dead, they would also be preserving the field itself and in doing so begin a new era in historic preservation.

David Wills, one of the leading proponents of a Gettysburg cemetery, explained in his own letter just a few weeks after the guns fell silent that,

“There is one spot very desirable for this purpose. It is the elevated piece of ground on the Baltimore Turnpike . . . It is the place where our army had about 40 pieces of artillery in action . . . It was the key to the whole line of our defences, the apex of the triangular line of battle. It is the spot, above all others, for the honorable burial of the dead . . .”²

The length to which Wills devotes in explaining the relative importance of this ground on the basis of its significance in the battle itself is notable. It is not the view or the serene nature of the place; rather, what happened on this ground in early July 1863 is what

makes it the honorable place to bury. The conclusion that can be drawn from his interpretation is that in sites touched by history there is something that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Or, as Lincoln would later note, this ground had already been “consecrated.”

Of course, any discussion of these early efforts would be incomplete without noting David McConaughy who was quite deliberate and candid in his intentions to help establish a soldier’s cemetery on the battlefield and a “noble National Monument,” somewhere on the pieces of battlefield terrain he had purchased soon after the fighting ended. McConaughy’s earliest land acquisitions included “the Granite Spur of Round-top,” which remains to this day one of the most visited and important preserved sections of the Gettysburg battlefield.³ Together, with the establishment of the battlefield cemetery, these acquisitions represent a watershed moment in preservation – shifting focus from the built environment to entire historic landscapes.



David McConaughy, whose support for the Union cause included passing information on Confederate troop movements to Union authorities in the summer of 1863 and later that year, laying the groundwork for what would become Gettysburg National Military Park. (GNMP)

Subsequent battlefield cemetery establishments mirrored Gettysburg’s, and when the Federal government eventually assumed control of these cemeteries, the burial sites often formed the nucleus around which the larger “military park” would develop. In addition to Gettysburg, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg and Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania all were initially battlefield cemeteries that evolved into preserved military parks. Cemeteries acted as the leading edge of a new movement aimed at whole landscape preservation, an entirely new concept for preservationists in the United States. Ultimately, it was the authority of the national government to create and maintain military cemeteries that also evolved into the authority to preserve much larger tracts of battlefield since, it was argued, that oftentimes soldiers were hastily buried where they fell and therefore the entire site was essentially a cemetery.⁴ The jump from cemetery establishment to large-scale land preservation was direct, immediate and important.

The idea that these killing grounds had been imbued with the living crimson of American soldiers, soldiers who were still likely buried there was often the rallying cry that forced the government to act. The concept that the entire battlefield was a de-facto cemetery was

undeniable and important, and again underscores the relative importance that the concept of a cemetery, or a “hallowed ground,” had in shaping early preservation efforts.



Entrance to the “hallowed ground” of Gettysburg National Military Park on East Cemetery Hill, ca. 1900. (GNMP)

The story of the earliest efforts to preserve land at Gettysburg and its connection to the establishment of the Soldiers’ Cemetery is also important in that it shaped how an American-style preservation movement would develop over the coming decades. Far from a top-down approach, American preservation, from its earliest days, begins as a local movement, as in the case of the cemetery, and only after significant lobbying, outcry and concern does the machinery of government begin to turn and address the compelling issue at hand. Ultimately, the landmark preservation case, *United States v. Gettysburg Electric Ry. Co.* that found that the use of eminent domain for historic preservation was acceptable, started with local public clamor. It took a supreme court to rule, but here again preservation started locally and ended with a national outcome. And, here again, it was precipitated by a Gettysburg issue. This formula for preservation is evident in nearly every issue that has presented itself at Gettysburg since July of 1863. From the cemetery to the railroad controversy to the proposed casinos of the 21st century – it was the locals standing up that brought the necessary national attention. It is also a formula that repeats itself over and over again in every village and hamlet where everyday citizens have gathered to save a favorite piece of architecture, noble mansion or stunning streetscape. This peculiar and democratic approach to preservation has yielded stunning results and a National Park system that is the envy of the world.

Prior to the onset of the American Civil War, historic preservation in the United States was contained to a few neatly preserved historic homes. Within a few short decades, the crucible of war had changed everything. That change began with Gettysburg.

Endnotes:

¹ Theodore S. Dimon. Letter to John F. Seymour, August 1, 1863; copy in GNMP Files, as quoted in, Harrison, Kathleen R. Georg, "This Grand National Enterprise: The Origins of Gettysburg's Soldiers' National Cemetery," 1982, p.7.

² Wills, David. Letter to Andrew Curtin, July 24, 1863; copy in GNMP Files, as quoted in, Harrison, Kathleen R. Georg, "This Grand National Enterprise: The Origins of Gettysburg's Soldiers' National Cemetery," 1982, p.9.

³ McConaughy, David. Letter to Andrew Curtin, July 25, 1863; copy in GNMP Files, as quoted in, Harrison, Kathleen R. Georg, "This Grand National Enterprise: The Origins of Gettysburg's Soldiers' National Cemetery," 1982, p.15.

⁴ Boge, Georgie, "Paving over the Past," 1993, p. 17.