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## The Nature of Battle: Contesting Ideals of Ecology and History at Gettysburg

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*A monument can incidentally be a work of art or a public facility; it can even give pleasure. But those are secondary characteristics. A monument can be nothing more than a rough stone.... Its sanctity is not a matter of beauty or of use or of age; it is venerated not as a work of art or as an antique, but as an echo from the remote past suddenly become present and actual.*

— J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity of Ruins*<sup>1</sup>

Soon after the close of the war I met Colonel Harrison at Gettysburg who was General Pickett's adjutant general, and was with him at the battle.... [W]e spent several hours under the shade cast by the copse of trees, when he explained to me what an important feature that copse of trees was at the time of the battle; and how it had been a landmark towards which Longstreet's assault of July 3d, 1863, had been directed.

Impressed with its importance, I remarked, "Why, Colonel, as the battle of Gettysburg was the crowning event of this campaign, this copse of trees must have been the high water mark of the rebellion." To which he assented, and from that time on I felt a reverence for those trees.

Later in the season while passing them one day I was shocked to find the owner engaged in cutting them down; a dozen or more already lying on the ground, I expostulated with him, but without effect until I suggested to him that if he cut them, then he was only getting for them their value as rails, whereas, if he allowed them to stand to mark the spot he would eventually get ten times as much for them and he spared them....<sup>2</sup>

If there is one thing that I do not need to explain to this group, it is the basic fact that one person can make a difference when it comes to preserving specific areas. One of our roles as participants in preservation is, at times, to alert others to oversight, either related to a lack of knowledge or awareness or, at other times, to suggest another intellectual vantage point with which to view a place. Each of us in this room likely has specific stories about individuals who have made a difference at a specific site; very likely, most of you have made a significant difference through your own efforts. In my research of the preservation efforts at the Gettysburg Battlefield, there are many such individuals; however, John B. Bachelder, the author of this quote, still stands out to me.

As a veteran, painter, printer, and historian, Bachelder provided meaning and definition

to early preservation at Gettysburg. With the aesthetic vocabulary of an artist, Bachelder shaped the ethics of early preservation at Gettysburg to create a combination shrine and park. His account continues:

Subsequently an avenue was laid out which embraced them; but as their historical importance became known, relic hunters commenced to cut their branches for canes; and, at a meeting of the board of directors in 1885 I made a motion that they be enclosed with an iron fence; but, the motion was lost. In 1886 I reported the same motion, which was again defeated; but in 1887 I embodied that motion in a written resolution, which passed unanimously and the Superintendent of Grounds was directed to erect it, which he did.

On the 25th of September 1888 I offered a resolution at a meeting of the Executive Committee, “that a bronze tablet be prepared indicating and setting forth the movements of troops at the copse of trees on Hancock Ave., July 3d, 1863” which passed unanimously, and I was appointed a committee by the chair to do the work: he remarking facetiously that, “there were no funds ... [and] only a small tablet bolted to the fence would be required.”<sup>3</sup>

A fence, it seems, could accomplish a great deal in 1891 (Figure 1). But Bachelder and other early preservationists functioned in a simpler time. Today, a fence accomplishes very little in terms of preservation. Nature, it turns out, cares little for the limits of fences.

Although Bachelder’s era of preservation possessed complexities, including land acquisition, management of the grounds, etc., there were scarce examples of what anthropologists and other refer to as “*public contest*.” A fairly straightforward period of land acquisition and enabling at least nominal tourist access gave way to more than a century of shifting definitions and, at times, contrary efforts. From an era before 1894 when most individuals seemed to be on the same side of the preservation cause at Gettysburg, after Bachelder’s death in 1894 we enter into an era of conflicting interests and discourse. And after 1900 of course, a new actor will become intimately involved in the preservation at Gettysburg: that is, the federal government, first in the form of the Department of War and later in that of the National Park Service. Throughout the 20th century, then, the primary role of the federal government consistently grew to be that of the arbiter between diverse interest groups, each with conflicting ideas of preservation.

Changes in these ideas of preservation and the concrete form that they took and continue to take on the landscape are the subject of my research. And I should report at the outset that my research grew out of my concern about some of the ideas put in place on the battlefield by the 1999 general management plan. As part of my larger effort to contextualize the



Figure 1. The copse surrounded by Bachelder’s fence, circa 1900. Courtesy of Gettysburg National Military Park Collection.

1999 plan within the history of the battlefield, today I'd like to discuss one portion of the evolution of preservation ideas at Gettysburg: the natural environment. In the interest of brevity, this paper focuses only on the years of Park Service involvement at Gettysburg prior to the 1990s. As Bachelder's quote indicates, though, the earlier era of preservation (1865–1890s) also relied on elements of the natural landscape—particularly for ordering the battle narrative and the visitor's experience. Expectations, though, altered the management of the natural environment significantly during the Park Service years at Gettysburg. The 1999 general management plan, which set out efforts to re-create the natural environment of 1863, marked an important moment in the National Park Service's interest in meeting visitors' expectations.

In summary, my findings are fairly straightforward: although the 1999 general management plan marked a significant international watershed in the use and manipulation of the ecological landscape for historic preservation, at the Gettysburg National Military Park it marks the culmination of a remarkably consistent approach to the natural resources of the site throughout the 20th century. Whether one agrees with this policy or not, the majority of the initiatives implemented in the 1999 plan for the battlefield are entirely consistent with the preservation aspirations that were laid out by federal park administrators at this site throughout the 20th century.

### **Defining a preservation mandate**

Soon after the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, Director Horace Albright set out to place military parks under the Park Service purview.<sup>4</sup> While he argued that such sites had unique historic value, some also possessed important scenic qualities.<sup>5</sup> Congressional discussion of the shift drew criticism that the Park Service would make the military sites little more than “pleasure grounds.” The Park Service, it was argued, was not to be trusted with such sacred sites. The War Department, however, was extremely concerned about the expense of keeping up these sites and they were willing to support a transfer. As bills tried and failed over the next decades, the Park Service clarified its stand. In 1929, for instance, a Park Service position paper specifically described Gettysburg's situation in this fashion:

Gettysburg, a great battle area, is marked with all sorts of questionable monuments. It is literally ‘monumented’ almost to the cemetery—or graveyard—condition. Our problem in any future development of physical features is serious. We might have to forego for many years making any changes due to the considerable influences that are back of the present situation.<sup>6</sup>

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's committee on government reorganization suggested that such sites be shifted to the Park Service. His executive order of June 10, 1933, made the transfer official. In 1933, the National Park Service took control of the battlefield as well as a number of other historic sites. On paper, this transfer marked a wholesale change in the philosophy of park management. However, there appears to be a disconnect with the application of these policies on the battlefield landscape. In their management plans

for the site, however, one finds that the Park Service had a very different ethic in mind for the battlefield from the beginning of its tenure.

In 1934, the Park Service proposed a six-year development plan for the park. Foremost was the effort to restore the conditions of 1863: “The Park should, as far as possible, represent the condition as found in 1863. It should in every possible way be restored to the condition of that time. Formal features and the demands of modern transportation necessitate a certain amount of work foreign to the desired 1863 atmosphere. Every attempt will be made to keep such development to the minimum. A general program of restoration is established as a guide to all work undertaken.”<sup>7</sup> This restorative approach was reiterated in a 1936 announcement of the park’s first master plan, when Superintendent James R. McConaghie stated:

Today the structure itself is primary.... The task before the field is to carefully plant so that the numerous monuments will appear to fit and be screened so as not to unduly affect the landscape.

The primary purpose is to preserve an area of great historical value in such a manner as to permit the visitor to visualize conditions of the day. A promoted educational program is definitely needed to replace the personal knowledge of yesterday. Necessary conveniences to provide for the health and comfort of the visitor and safety measures so that he may drive or walk with the least possible danger. To him, this is a memorial park presenting an area of 1863. The word, “Park” and the date, “1863” are two definite guiding factors placed in front of the developer and administrator today. A certain amount of modernity is, of course, necessary. Where this appears, it must not be too obvious. Restoration, preservation, accessibility and usability are the primary objectives of physical work conducted in this park, coupled with these should be educational objective effort so that the field may be understandable....

The management plan was updated, revised, and reorganized each year between 1939 and 1941. The educational value of the battlefield, it was clear, bore a direct connection to the landscape’s ability to remain consistent with the appearance of 1863.

During the 1940s, the natural environment also became a more active portion of the preservation process. Initially, this attention came in the form of clarifying the use of portions of the battlefield for controlled agriculture. Most often, this involved leasing fields to farmers who would grow crops that were consistent with 1860s usage. The agricultural “living history” usage also took the form of Peach Orchard restoration, which started in 1941 and included the controlled planting of approximately 270 trees in squares fifteen feet apart. By 1943, a more complicated understanding of ecological change emerged in efforts to manage the landscape. In 1943, the Park Service’s regional director, Oliver Taylor, wrote:

When so regarded, it is apparent that this complex historic object (the battlefield and everything on it) should be preserved or restored and presented to the public

as nearly as possible in the physical appearance that it had at the time of its wartime use. If it becomes greatly altered or changed by man or by erosion, its importance as historical source material and its value in enabling one to understand the battle become materially lessened.... If a battlefield area is already greatly changed by reforestation or agriculture practices, the long-range development program of the park should aim at the gradual restoration of the war-time scene by whatever steps appear most practicable, taking into consideration the fact that erosion is as destructive of historic scene as man himself. The long-range development program then becomes that of a balanced program to combat as much as possible the destructive forces of man and of nature.<sup>8</sup>

When the Mission 66 initiative followed for the Park Service, the Gettysburg National Military Park—as did each national park—prioritized visitor resources. At Gettysburg, this included resurfacing park roads and constructing several facilities: a new visitor center–cyclorama complex with space for park offices, new field exhibits, pull-outs from auto tour, and a new “High Water Mark” walking tour.<sup>9</sup> When initiatives shifted a few decades later, the battlefield’s natural resource management plan returned to the Park Service’s interest in returning the view of 1863. The 1981 plan put the goal this way: “to restore, maintain, and perpetuate as closely as possible the historic scene and character that existed on this battlefield in July of 1863. A reasonable understanding of the events which occurred here cannot be achieved by visitors unless the landscape is accurately portrayed.”

Natural systems are not static but are dynamic and constantly changing. To recapture or maintain the July 1863 scene requires continual monitoring and intensive management of these natural systems to prevent the natural succession which in this area would eventually led to a dense, climax, hardwood forest. Such a forest would not represent the historic scene we are charged with preserving and it would be impossible to clearly interpret the battle, the historic scene or the commemorative purpose for which the Park was established.

We use practices such as clear cutting of shrubs and trees; agricultural activities that include plowing, tilling and mowing, continuous livestock grazing on non-tillable lands; use of historic woodlot management; pesticides (biocides), and reforestation. Vegetative screening is used to conceal modern intrusions where necessary, and wildlife is controlled where unreasonable damage occurs to agricultural crops, cultural resources are threatened, or where it may endanger safety or health. Although we manage our natural resources primarily for their historic values, we cannot ignore or fail to mitigate, as much as possible, the effects of our management programs on the ecological welfare of these natural resources....<sup>10</sup>

Park historian William Unrau reports that when officials were confronted with how to maintain the historic landscape once it had been re-created, they “intended to maintain it that way indefinitely through low-cost agriculture permits.” Of course, this was not realistic from an ecological or economic perspective.



Figure 2. Forest reduction in progress in fall 2004. Courtesy of the author.

### **Conclusion: The 1999 plan**

After a series of hearings and scientific studies, in 1999 the Park Service put these internal aspirations front and center for the first time. Using landscape planning and the advice of scientists, the Park Service created a general management plan in 1999 that not only stated the utopian desire of restoring the 1863 landscape (as the agency had done throughout the 20th century), but now implemented a resource management plan to do so, including deer harvest, forest reduction (Figure 2), and removal of tourist-oriented structures on portions of the battlefield. The outcome has been a watershed in preservation history that continues to unfold today.

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### **Endnotes**

1. J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 91.
2. John B. Bachelder, *The Bachelder Papers* (Dayton, Oh.: Morningside, 1995), 1854–1855.
3. Ibid.
4. Gettysburg had been created by private preservation groups. In the 1890s, the lands were deeded to the Department of War, although some of the original preservationists continued to administer the properties.
5. This episode is discussed in Harlan Unrau's *Administrative History: Gettysburg Nation-*

*al Military Park and Gettysburg National Cemetery* (Washington, D.C. National Park Service, 1991), 140–142.

6. *Transfer of National Military Parks*, hearing transcript before Committee on Military Affairs, House of Representatives, 1929, 2–23.

7. Gettysburg National Military Park, “Superintendent’s Report for Year 1935–6,” 33–34.

8. Gettysburg National Military Park, “Statement for National Battlefield Parks,” memorandum of Oliver Taylor, September 3 and October 6, 1943.

9. Unrau, 253.

10. Gettysburg National Military Park, *Natural Resource Management Plan* (Gettysburg, Pa.: National Park Service, 1981).