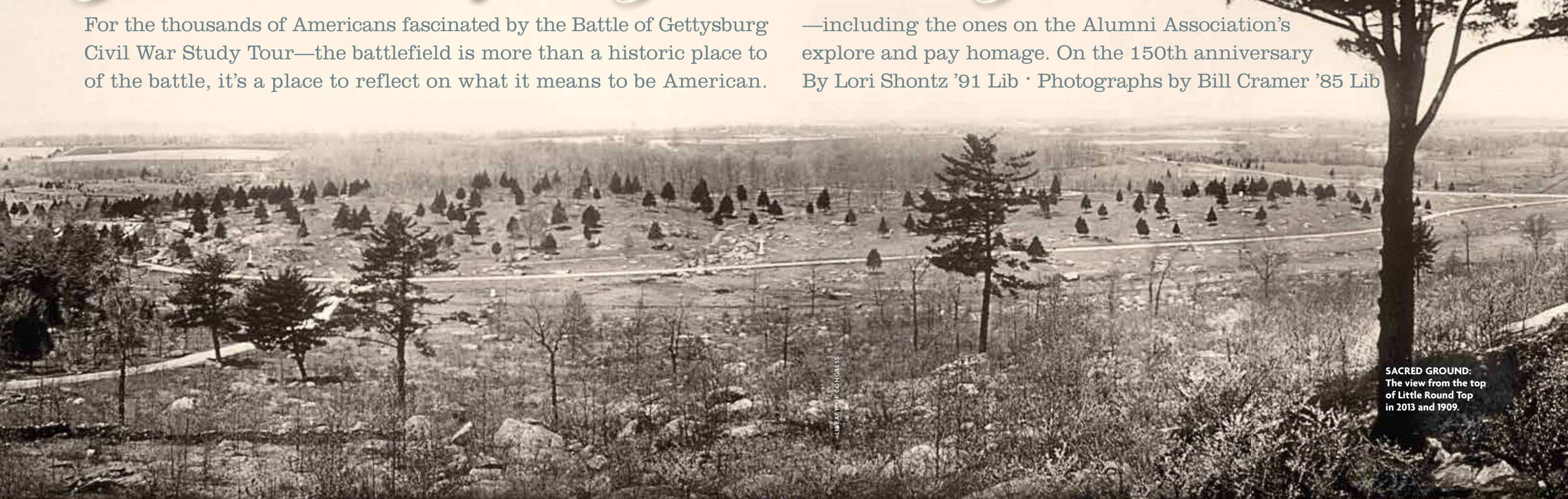




The Visitors

For the thousands of Americans fascinated by the Battle of Gettysburg Civil War Study Tour—the battlefield is more than a historic place to of the battle, it's a place to reflect on what it means to be American.

—including the ones on the Alumni Association's explore and pay homage. On the 150th anniversary
By Lori Shontz '91 Lib · Photographs by Bill Cramer '85 Lib



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SACRED GROUND:
The view from the top
of Little Round Top
in 2013 and 1909.

When Nancy Blecher Crago '88 H&HD wants to treat herself—when her husband's out of town, or she has an unexpected day off, or it's her birthday—she doesn't dither over what to do. There's one choice, really. She hops in the car and drives 75 miles from her home in Thompsettown, Pa., to Gettysburg National Military Park. She's visited the Civil War battlefield scores of times, read hundreds of books about it, rattles off details of troop movements and generals' backstories with ease. "I've spent more on this obsession," she says, laughing, "than on my college education."

Crago has no idea how many times she's hiked Little Round Top, where professor-turned-commander Joshua Chamberlain led the bayonet charge immortalized in the 1993 movie *Gettysburg*. How often she's wandered The Wheatfield, where more than 6,000 men were wounded, captured, or killed on the battle's second day. Or how long she's stood at The Angle, where Union forces repelled Pickett's famous—and futile—Charge, and marveled at the bravery of the men who fought there. "I sit there and look at the wall and think how much American blood was spilled here," Crago says. "It's so beautiful, and it's so peaceful now. It was anything but beautiful and peaceful that day." She generally wraps up her day at the National Cemetery, where she pays her respects. She's read so much about Gettysburg that she feels like she knows the men who fought there.

She's not alone.

More than 1.5 million people visit Gettysburg annually, more than scenic national parks such as Arches and Mount Rainier, and about even with the Everglades. For every book written on other Civil War battles, estimates Parker Hills, an author, retired brigadier general, and battlefield guide, 20 are written about Gettysburg. And in 2001, *USA Today's* travel section declared Gettysburg "the consensus top choice as the essential American place" and "the symbolic heart of America."

That connection was evident last August, as Hills and Terry Winchel '77 Edu led the 20th annual Civil War Study Tour, the Alumni Association's most popular trip. The tour, which has visited 13 battlefields over the years, sells out every time, including the 2012 trip to Gettys-

burg, the tour's fourth visit to the battlefield. (The 2011 Gettysburg trip had sold out in 30 minutes, one of the reasons the Alumni Association returned in 2012). Among the participants: Crago, who travels with a spreadsheet so she doesn't accidentally buy the same Civil War book twice; Greg Ness '79 Sci, who walks the battlefield four or five times a year; Mark Johnson, who owns more than 600 history books, most on

the Civil War; and Mitchell Schmidt '48 Eng, who has visited Gettysburg well over 100 times, including the 75th, 100th, and 125th anniversaries. "He's forgotten more about Gettysburg," says Ben Crago, Nancy's husband, "than the rest of us will ever absorb."

Schmidt will return again to Gettysburg in July for the 150th anniversary of the battle, and he'll be joined by thousands of others who will commemorate the date. For him, as for the other amateur historians and aficionados, Gettysburg is part of his identity. And his country's. Johnson, a University of North Carolina–Charlotte alum who's attended 18 of the 20 alumni study tours, finds it easy to explain what keeps calling them all there: "It's about what it really means to be an American."

In *These Honored Dead*, his book about the Battle of Gettysburg, historian Thomas Desjardin writes, "Meaning is an important part of Americans' relationship to Gettysburg. In my own experience with the place and its story, I have witnessed too many different kinds of meaning to count." He writes that he's heard of people going to Gettysburg to be married there, or to have a baby there. Among the others who come: Boy Scouts earning merit badges; former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, whose tour inspired him to reorganize his company—which in turn spurred a 64 percent increase in revenues; and families making what Desjardin calls "annual pilgrimages."

Those early family trips can be formative, as evidenced by the regulars on the Alumni Association tour. "I guess it's in the family genes," says Libby Herritt '77 MED



A PEACEFUL PLACE: Nancy Crago often drives 75 miles from her home to walk the battlefield.



BOTTOM RIGHT & BOTTOM OF PREVIOUS SPREAD: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

"When I walk it, I feel this real sense that I can honor these guys..."



“Just when you thought you knew everything, something else comes up.”

H&HD, whose parents considered summer vacations a chance to tour historic sites. (They went to the beach one year. “Nobody liked it,” Herritt says, and it was back to battlefields.) Says faculty leader Winschel, who recently retired as the chief historian at Vicksburg National Military Park: “My dad was a Civil War buff, as was his father before him.” Ness, who still has the sticker books of Civil War generals he toiled over in elementary school, also owns an old photo of his mom learning against the 99th Pennsylvania regiment monument. Johnson, who says a trip to a Civil War museum in his native North Carolina “tripped something in my brain” when he was 8, has been to Gettysburg a dozen times, including one tour on which he and Ness slipped away from their group and hiked Culp’s Hill, tracing the footsteps of an ancestor of Johnson’s, a Confederate soldier. “It’s a place of honor, a place of peace,” Johnson says. “I grieve there. But I can also relax. The world doesn’t matter, and you can just think about what it was like 150 years ago.”

A crowd like this has a lot of knowledge. The regulars go beyond the basics—that Gettysburg marked the “high water mark” of the Confederacy; that more than 40,000 Americans were wounded, captured, mortally wounded, or killed during the three-day battle; that, as Winschel repeatedly reminds people, there wasn’t a family in America that wasn’t affected by the Civil War. These

are people who can spend hours discussing what Union Gen. Dan Sickles was thinking when he ignored his commander’s orders and moved his Third Corps troops from the high ground to the Peach Orchard, forcing a change in battle plan. It doesn’t take much to stir up an intense—but good-natured—argument over why Confederate Gen. Richard Ewell didn’t press his advantage on Day One of the battle, or what J.E.B. Stuart, superstar of the Confederate cavalry, was doing riding around Pennsylvania rather than providing intelligence

DRAWN TO HISTORY: Laurey Schroeder is renovating a historic farmhouse so she can spend even more time walking the battlefield.

to the Army of Northern Virginia. Sometimes they sound like sports fans, making the case for their teams and extolling the virtues of their favorites. Other times, they sound like indie rock fans, lamenting that casual music listeners just don’t understand the genius in their famous, as-yet-undiscovered band. The

favorite unsung hero among those on the August tour was George “Pop” Greene, the oldest general on the field at age 62, who, despite ridicule from other generals, ordered his engineering corps to build breastworks (chest-high earthen walls) on Culp’s Hill, which enabled the Union to hold off the Confederates—who far outnumbered them—at a vital strategic high ground. The only reason Chamberlain and the 20th Maine—whose heroics held the Union’s opposite flank with their bayonet charge—are better known, they’ll say, shaking their

heads, is because they just got better PR. And, well, a bayonet charge looks better on the big screen than guys building walls.

Amateur historians of Gettysburg tend to specialize. They don’t just immerse themselves in the overall strategy, or Day 1, or Pickett’s Charge. They become experts on specific regiments or individual generals. This can present opportunities: Hills, for instance, once led a tour of Gettysburg that started in Haymarket, Va., nearly 100 miles away, because there were enough people interested in following the route that Union Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock’s Second Corps took to the battle. It can also present pitfalls for guides: “When you do a Gettysburg tour, you’ve got to make sure you know exactly what you’re talking about,” Hills says. “We call them sharpshooters—guys who are armed with all this knowledge and can’t wait to try to take a shot at the instructors. People love to sharpshoot you at Gettysburg.”

Incredibly enough, there’s not always a correct answer. Even after 150 years and tens of thousands of letters, military records, contemporary newspaper accounts, and books, professional historians have many questions about what happened at Gettysburg—and why. The study-tour regulars debate those questions, too. Says **Don Ditko ’77 Eng**, a retired Navy commander who has toured the battlefield 30-plus times, many as a volunteer tour guide for seventh-graders or Boy Scouts from Fairfax, Va., “The

more you think you know about it, the less you find out you really know.”

You can feel the history here,” says Scott Hartwig, the battlefield’s supervisory historian, who decided in seventh grade that his life’s goal was to be a park ranger—preferably at Gettysburg—and who has worked there for 34 years.

That feeling isn’t happenstance.

The citizens of Gettysburg in 1863 realized immediately that the battle would have immense historical significance, and they acted accordingly. Prominent members of the community petitioned then-Gov. Andrew Curtin to set aside land for a cemetery; the eventual “Soldiers’ National Cemetery” was dedicated on Nov. 19, 1863, with a speech by noted orator Edward Everett that lasted two hours. (An additional speech, by President Abraham Lincoln, lasted only two minutes; because it was so short and difficult to hear, few took note of it. But it’s Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address that’s one of the reasons that the battle is still so well known today.) The citizens’ efforts paid off; throughout the town, there are markers and reminders of what happened there. Parts are so well preserved that six houses still have cannonballs or other ordinance embedded in the bricks.

The federal government, too, invested in Gettysburg.



LIVING HISTORY: Aside from the monuments, the terrain at Gettysburg is as it was in 1863.

The initial purpose of Gettysburg National Military Park, so designated in 1895, was to train officers in battle tactics, and particularly to teach them the importance of terrain. But as time passed, the original outlines of the battlefield became harder to discern; nature and private development obscured the field. “The landscape got to the point where it didn’t really resemble the battlefield anymore,” Hartwig says. “You’d be on Little Round Top and you’d have to tell people, ‘Use your imagination. Imagine all those trees you see down below you aren’t there.’”

In the early 1990s, John Latscher took over as park superintendent, and he oversaw the rehabilitation of the battlefield. It involved chopping down thousands of trees, which drew the ire of everyone from environmentalists to townspeople who simply liked walking their dogs there. Latscher held firm, and park rangers began rehabbing the landscape, paying special attention to what the military calls OCOKA: Observation, Cover and Concealment, Obstacles, Key Terrain, Avenues of Approach.

Now, when small children stand on a fence in the Peach Orchard for a better view, they’re on fences placed exactly where they were in 1863. When tour groups stand at the Point of Woods—from which Lee watched Pickett’s Charge—they see exactly what Lee saw. And if they decide to walk Pickett’s Charge, about a mile across the fields, directly into a line of Union forces, they realize

that the “high ground” doesn’t have to be a mountain or hill—the slightest dip can protect them from the enemy, and a gentle rise can put them in the line of fire.

“I really think that unless you walk the terrain, you don’t have the right to write about it,” says Hills, who, though retired, still leads military officers on battlefield tours. “I’ve learned many times on battlefields that reports are just not accurate. Memories are a bit faulty. And sometimes you have a way of putting on rose-colored glasses when you’re writing a report. Not many commanders are going to say, ‘Boy, I really messed up today.’ They’re going to gloss over some things. So you’ve got to get out on the ground and look and see.”

Civilians find the experience equally powerful. “I love the classroom,” says **Laurey Doak Schroeder ’77 Sci**, who has never missed an Alumni Association study tour, “but it comes to life when you walk the ground.”

The battle comes to life, too, when the focus is on individual stories. Gettysburg is so well documented that anyone can find someone to identify with. There’s Jennie Wade, killed by a Confederate bullet as she kneaded bread in her home, and George Meade, who took command of the Union army just days before the battle but did a masterful job of managing his generals. There’s Gen. William Barksdale of Mississippi, mortally wounded while crossing the Peach Orchard, who managed to

speak one last sentence: “Tell my sons my last day of duty was well done.” And Union Lt. Alonzo Cushing, severely wounded in the gut on Day 3, who refused to leave his post because his cannon was ready to fire. Holding in his bowels, he is said to have shouted, “I’ll give it one last shot,” and died when a bullet whizzed through his open mouth. Even 150 years later, new letters, diaries, and other records are still being found—and made widely available to historians, professional and amateur, through the Internet. “Just when you thought you knew everything,” Winschel says, “something else comes up.”

That’s why Schroeder keeps coming back. Part of the reason, anyway.

Part of it is—of course—her parents’ fault. They honeymooned in Gettysburg, and took the family there often. When she moved back to southeastern Pennsylvania, one of her first trips with her husband, **Gary ’78, ’80 MS Agr**, was to Gettysburg. Eventually, the town’s convenient location made it the rendezvous point for the extended family, and the more time Schroeder spent there, the more the battlefield held her spellbound. She has walked it more times than she can count, but says it never gets old. “When I walk it,” she says, “I feel this real sense that I can honor these guys, that their sacrifice still means something 150 years later.”

Gary was attending a workshop on campus in 1993 when he saw an advertisement for a Civil War Study Tour—the Alumni Association’s first. He encouraged Laurey to sign up for that trip—to Gettysburg, of course—and she hasn’t missed one since. “I worry that I bore other people about the Civil War because I’m so into it,” she says. “But once a year, I can be as geeky Civil War-y as I want to be, because everybody else gets it.”

Schroeder makes two or three visits a month to Gettysburg, enough that she and Gary four years ago purchased a historic farmhouse—so close to the battlefield that reenactors stay on the grounds each summer—to renovate. It will be ready to host a family reunion for the 150th anniversary, allowing the cousins to catch up, and everyone to discuss (or debate) the battle. Her kids understand Little Round Top; they know what happened at Devil’s Den. “That’s important to me,” Schroeder says. “Just like the love of Penn State football and other things get passed on, we need to pass this on, too.”

She likes to end her days at Gettysburg on Little Round Top, watching the sun set. Something about the mountains, the clouds, the atmosphere, she says, makes that time of day particularly beautiful. “Lots of color,” she says. “Everything is peaceful and still and calm. You know it wasn’t like that, but that’s what the soldiers left behind. That’s what their struggle did, and then the people who came after them to preserve it—this is what they’ve made for all of us.” ■

Off the Beaten Path

Face it—if you show up at Gettysburg National Military Park for the 150th anniversary celebration, July 1-3, you’ll have to battle some crowds. The particularly popular sites will be jammed. Says Scott Hartwig, the park’s supervisory historian: “Little Round Top will be a mess. You can’t get around it.”

You can, however, get to some equally interesting—though less well known—corners of the battlefield. The regulars on the Alumni Association’s Civil War Study Tour offer the following suggestions:

Sunrise at the Virginia monument off West Confederate Avenue:

Laurey Schroeder likes to grab a cup of coffee and head to the giant statue of Robert E. Lee astride Traveller before the sun rises. “The sun comes up, you hear the birds, there might be a mist rising. It’s very powerful to me.”

Monument to Sallie, mascot of the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment, on Doubleday Avenue:

Sallie, a pug-nosed terrier, traveled with the 11th Pennsylvania throughout the Civil War, but when the regiment pulled back after heavy losses on the first day of Gettysburg, she stayed on the battlefield—with the wounded. After the battle, other regiments reunited her with her home regiment, and she’s memorialized with a statue at the back of the monument. Says Don Ditko, “Almost always, someone has put a dog biscuit there.”

State of Maryland monument on Culp’s Hill:

Maryland soldiers fought for both the Union and the Confederacy, and the state’s division is commemorated in this statue of two soldiers—twins, swears Nancy Crago, or at least brothers. One is Confederate; one Union. “They’re helping each other off the field,” she says, “and I can’t tell you who’s helping whom.” —LS

