

CIVIL WAR MEMORY IN ELMIRA, NEW YORK AND GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

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Abstract

This past summer, I was the fortunate recipient of a Rivier College Faculty Development Grant, which I used to fund a research trip to both Elmira, New York and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This research is part of an on-going project that considers how the United States remembers the Civil War, how this remembrance has evolved over the past century and a half, and what this remembrance tells us about our country. The following commentary provides a brief overview of my trip as well as its aims and results.

1 Background

For the past few years, I have been doing work on collective memory, considering what and who are remembered in society and how they are remembered. The cemetery has been a focus of much of my work. I have argued for ways in which the cemetery, because of its unique nature as a memory site, can teach us about what has been collectively forgotten. In this work, I have visited Andersonville, Georgia, the site of a Civil War prison and national cemetery and learned of the varying ways this controversial site is remembered in the small town itself. I also learned how Civil War prisons, both Union and Confederate, have been given a marginalized role in histories of the Civil War.

During my trip to Andersonville, a camp notorious because of its close to 25% death rate for prisoners, residents told me how Elmira, New York's role in the Civil War has been even more marginalized in Civil War remembrances. The Union Civil War prison in this northeastern city had a death rate close to that of Andersonville's, yet this prison is overlooked in a vast majority of Civil War histories.

To consider the various ways in which the Civil War is remembered, and the ways cemeteries and memorials influence these memories, I decided to visit this city, as well as several other Civil War historic sites, to compare the variety of ways in which they are remembered and how cemeteries and other memorials figure into the remembrances. One such site with several important cemeteries and memorials is Gettysburg, a town that is renowned for its role in the Civil War and where memorialization has become an industry integral to the town's economic survival. I wanted to use this site as a comparison to other sites to consider the various differences in their memorialization and the reasons for these differences. Another site Fort Warren, located on George's Island in Boston Harbor, was also the location of a Civil War Union prison and a cemetery for the Confederate Dead.

2 Observations

This project is ongoing, as are my methods and results. Here, I report on preliminary observations.

With the usual memorials in the city center to soldiers of various wars, the city of Elmira seems to tell its guests that this city played no particularly important role in the War Between the States. A visitor to Elmira would see these typical memorials, but would immediately learn that Mark Twain is buried in the city's Woodlawn Cemetery. Signs throughout town guide the visitor to his burial site (see Photo 1).

Signs to the city's national cemetery are far more difficult to find, however, and it is not until the visitor is very close to the cemetery does he or she find any signs indicating the presence of a national cemetery.



Photo 1: Sign to the Mark Twain's Burial Location, Elmira, New York. (Courtesy Photograph).

Approaching Woodlawn, the visitor can see that the national cemetery had once been a part of Woodlawn Cemetery and that the main entrance to the nineteenth-century rural cemetery was next to the national burial site. Today, Woodlawn has been restructured so that the entrances of the new separate cemeteries are quite distant from each other. The graves of the Confederate soldiers are also somewhat difficult to find; the road into the National Cemetery does not border these graves and the visitor must cross graves of veterans of other American wars to find the Confederate location. Published literature on this national cemetery is quite different from that in Andersonville; one copied sheet was all the written material on this cemetery that was available, although the keeper of the cemetery told me that visitors to the Confederate graves were very common.

The visitor to Elmira would also have great difficulty finding his or her way to the location of the Civil War prison, as I did. Signs everywhere directed visitors to the location of Twain's writing study,

but nothing indicated the remnants of any Civil War prison. When I did locate the address of the prison site, I noticed signs nearby indicating that this riverside spot was a launching site for boats, but nothing told of the prison. Finally at the location, I found a memorial on the property of the city's water office. Additionally, there was another memorial nearby telling the visitor that the flagpole next to the memorial had stood at the entrance of the prison, though the flagpole had been moved from its original location.

Anxious to find more material evidence of the prison, I went looking through this now residential neighborhood for the original location of the flagpole and for markers that supposedly existed demarcating the northern and southern boundaries of the prison. The location of the flagpole was given on the memorial and I easily found the address. The current resident, thanked on the flagpole memorial, invited me into her private backyard to see the additional marker commemorating the entrance to the prison. The addresses of the northern and southern markers were also easy to find, and the resident of one address equally helpful. However, no marker was to be found. The resident of this address also led me into her backyard and showed me where she believed the marker to be, buried in undergrowth behind her pool.

Although these commemorations were exceedingly difficult to find, I did learn that there are currently plans for a museum, across the street from both the national cemetery and Woodlawn Cemetery, dedicated to John Jones, an ex-slave who buried the Confederate Soldiers in Elmira National Cemetery. This museum, being built in the relocated home of Johns, hopes to tell a story of Elmira's Civil War involvement.

In Gettysburg, I had little difficulty finding anything--with a visitor center in the town's center ready to assist in any way. The only difficulty a visitor might have finding memorials in this town would be to find a particular site among the many. My goal was to find Evergreen Cemetery, a rural cemetery established before the battle and the source of the name "Cemetery Hill" for one of the battle sites. At this easily found cemetery, I was able to talk with the keeper who gave me access to minutes of nineteenth-century meetings discussing the burial of the Gettysburg dead. He also told me about the politics surrounding a twenty-first century memorial to Elizabeth Thorn, the wife of the cemetery's keeper in 1863 and the person responsible for burying many of the battle's dead in Evergreen.

In addition to seeing the national cemetery, the location of Lincoln's famous speech, I was also fortunate to see original wooden grave markers from various Gettysburg burial sites on the battlefield and to learn about two little known African American graveyards that provided burial space for the Civil War veterans prohibited from both the segregated national and Evergreen cemeteries.

3 Future plans

I hope to consider other Civil War historical sites and to consider the various ways the war is remembered. Clearly, Gettysburg has a surplus of memories, some based on actual events—others not. On the other hand, Elmira seems to want to forget its role in the war. In some ways, the reasons for these differences are quite evident; in others they are not. My hope is to explore the histories of these memorials and to better understand how racial and regional politics have influenced what we remember and what we forget about this important war.

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