

Photography, fake news and the restless ghosts of the Gettysburg battlefield.

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Photography, fake news and the restless ghosts of the Gettysburg battlefield.

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PRESENTED AT

Haunts #3 - The Haunted Battleground - *SHU Space and Place Research Group*, 25 Feb 2021. This online conference – comprising eight short presentations – is the first in an irregular series which across 2020-21 will explore new ways to investigate the relationship between places and their hauntings, through provocative and productive interdisciplinary conversations and juxtapositions.

- LINK - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lodK2gC5CvM>

ABSTRACT

The interplay of battlefield, landscape, memory and fictionalised narratives are central to the study of battlefield photography from the early years of the medium and are key to understanding one of the most iconic and contested images of the American Civil war, 'The Den of a Rebel Sharpshooter' a photograph from the Gettysburg battlefield captured two days after the fighting and published by Alexander Gardner. The accepted narrative, that this image was staged and constructed by the photographers who carried the dead soldier from another location, originates in a 1961 article in the *Civil War Times* and was popularised by William A. Frassanito in his 1975 book 'Gettysburg: A Journey in Time' since when it has been accepted as fact. This talk will explore the contested nature of this image which has haunted the memory of both photographer and soldier for more than 60 years.

PAPER

The interplay of landscape, memory and narrative are central to the study of battlefield photography from the early years of the medium and are key to understanding one of the most iconic images of the American Civil war, this photograph from Gettysburg published by Alexander Gardner.

SLIDE - *Map of the battle of Gettysburg - William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975*

Gettysburg is seen as the mid-point of the American Civil War, the 'high water mark' of the Confederate campaign and whilst the war continued for two more years it marked a turning point towards Union victory. The battle lasted for three days in early July 1863 with fighting taking place across a complex battlefield around the town. The battle was closely fought with both sides making costly mistakes resulting in the loss of many lives and until the last day either side might have been victorious.

SLIDE - *Library of Congress photographs of the Civil War, Petersburg, Va. The "Dictator," David Knox / Second Battle of Fredericksburg, May 3, 1863 (LOC).*

Whilst the American Civil War was not the first war to be photographed, taking place on the American mainland it was perhaps the first to be photographed extensively with over 10,000 negatives of the conflict exposed.

In viewing such photographs, it is important to realise that the technology of the time limited photographers to capturing the aftermath of battle rather than the fighting itself. The wet collodion process required the glass plates to be coated, exposed and processed while the light sensitive emulsion was still wet.

SLIDE - *Library of Congress photographs of the Civil War mobile darkrooms - Timothy O'Sullivan, Mathew Brady & assistants (LOC).*

Thus, photographers had to travel with a mobile darkroom and both coat and process their plates in the field. As a result, the equipment was too cumbersome to use during the fighting and photographers usually concentrated on taking portraits of the key personalities, recording views of important locations and photographing the aftermath of battles and the battlefield dead.

We should also remember that those who photographed the Civil War were not documentary photographers in the established sense of the word, neither were they what we might call press or newspaper photographers, such roles did not exist (and were in part established through the photography of this conflict), rather they were self-employed commercial photographers producing images for sale direct to the general public.

As portrait photographers they were no stranger to the posing their subjects to produce the most effective image and as landscape photographers they made aesthetic compositions adding figures to the foreground to provide a sense of scale and depth within the scene.

Much of the photography of Gettysburg was originally credited to Mathew Brady however the much of the imagery etched on most people's memory was produced by Alexander Gardner, his colleague Timothy O'Sullivan and their assistant James F Gibson. Both Gardner and O'Sullivan had previously worked for Brady however had left after disagreements and Gardner had set up his own studio in Washington.

SLIDE - *Unfinished burials of Confederate Dead with Union Burial Parties – Gardner, Stereo View (LOC)*

Gardner and his party were the first photographers to arrive at Gettysburg two days after the battle on or around the 5th July 1863 while burial parties were still at work burying the dead. Unlike the photographers who followed them they focused almost exclusively on capturing images of both Union and Confederate dead before they were removed or buried probably knowing that these would sell best.

SLIDE - *Victorian Stereo Scope and Stereo Views from Gettysburg (LOC)*

At the time of the civil war the latest photographic craze was for stereo views, paired images which when viewed with a stereoscope produce a lifelike three-dimensional effect. Soon after he returned from the battlefield Gardner published numerous stereo views of fallen soldiers on the Gettysburg battlefield, with short simple captions which were very popular and widely circulated.

SLIDE - *Union Dead with Burial Parties – Gardner, Stereo View (LOC)*

In some of Gardner's images the dead have been gathered together prior to burial and occasionally burial parties, shovels in hand, can be seen in the background.

There are few if any bodies present in his photographs that have not been moved or rearranged in some way, most by Confederate or Union burial parties. Many Union dead pictured have had their boots and shoes removed and their belongings rifled through, probably by the poorly equipped Confederates, whilst others have had their pockets turned or cut out, either to remove valuables or in an attempt to identify the dead prior to burial.

SLIDE - *The area surrounding Devil's Den and Little Round Top - Google Maps*

The majority of Gardner's photographs at Gettysburg were taken in the vicinity of Little Round Top, Devils Den and The Rose Farm. Devils Den is an area of rocky outcrops lying in a marshy valley at the foot of two conical hills, round top and little round top.

Whilst Confederate troops were making an assault on Little Round top other Confederates attacked Union forces and artillery located at Devils Den and a fierce battle ensued with the area exchanging hands a number of times before the Confederates secured the position.

The lower slopes of Round Top close to the Plum Run river became known as the Slaughter Pen due to the large number of soldiers from both sides that died there.

SLIDE - *'Slaughter pen on left wing' – Stereo View negative by Gardner (LOC)*

The confederates continued to hold Devils Den for the remainder of the battle, using it as shelter for sharpshooters who picked off Union soldiers on Little Round Top above and unlike other parts of the battlefield, many Confederate bodies were still lying where they fell in the Slaughter Pen when Gardner and his party arrived.

SLIDE - *Devil's Den from Little Round Top – Google Maps*

The two rocks that form the sharpshooters den are located to the rear and slightly above Devils Den some way distance from Little Round Top nevertheless Union troops atop the hill would still be within range of confederate sharpshooters located here.

SLIDE - *'Rocks Could Not Save Him At The Battle Of Gettysburg' From Gardner's Gallery, Negative by T.H.O. Sullivan (LOC).*

The low stone wall built between the boulders may have predated the battle however it is probable that it was built either by Union sharpshooters on the afternoon of the 2nd July, or by Confederate sharpshooters later that same evening after they secured the position.

SLIDE - *Devil's Den – Google Street View*

Due to the stony and rocky nature of Devils Den, the Slaughter Pen and the Valley of Death it was difficult to bury the dead in this area. Many were placed in shallow graves or covered with their blankets before being buried with stones and there are many reports of decomposing bodies and skeletons becoming visible in the months and even years following the battle. Numerous dead and wounded soldiers fell between the large boulders of the den and burial parties struggled to remove the decomposing bodies using hooked poles. It's said that a number of wounded soldiers took shelter in the caves beneath the boulders during the battle only to drown when the waters rose in the heavy rain that followed.

SLIDE - *Devil's Den and Area, 11th November 1862 and The Electric Trolley at Devils Den from William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975*

In the years following the battle many tourists and relatives of those who fell visited the battlefield and in particular Devil's Den. An electric tramway was built to ferry visitors to the den at the end of which was Tipton's photographic studio where visitors could have their portraits taken or be photographed posing against the rocks of Devils Den. At this time there were many local tour guides who would chaperone visitors around the battlefield recounting tall tales of heroism and bravery.

SLIDE - *Gettysburg Licensed Battlefield Guide Tim Smith and American Battlefield Trust's Garry Adelman from Gettysburgh Battlefiledd Live on Youtube*

Ultimately this was formalised and today certified battlefield guides take visitors on one to two hour walks around different sections of the battle field. These walks are now videoed and available via YouTube to watch in the comfort of your own home.

SLIDE - *Inside the Sharpshooters Den – Google Street View*

The battlefield roads and paths can be accessed via google street view which allows you to visit the site of Gardner's famous photograph and peer up at Little Round Top from the sharpshooter's position.

SLIDE - *'Rocks Could Not Save Him at The Battle Of Gettysburg 1863' From Gardner's Gallery, Negative by T.H.O. Sullivan (LOC).*

When originally published as a stereo view and cabinet card this image of the sharpshooter was titled "Rocks could not save him"...

SLIDE - *'The Den of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg', Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War, 1866*

...however by the time it was reproduced in his photographic sketchbook of 1866 Gardner recounts the story of finding this lone sharpshooter still laying in his den on the battlefield, apparently injured by a piece of shrapnel to the head, who had laid down on his blanket to await his fate. Gardner also tells how the skeleton of the man was still present when he revisited the battlefield in the November of the same year, his rifle rusting by his side.

Photographic histories and academic texts now explain how this image was constructed and staged for the camera often as part of a discussion questioning photography's credibility as an authentic form of documentation.

SLIDE - *A True History of Fake News, Ian Hislop, Wingspan Productions for BBC 2019.*

Indeed in a recent BBC documentary entitled 'Fake News A True History' Ian Hislop explains how Alexander Gardner first photographed the body at a different location and before carrying it to the den to create a more aesthetically pleasing and successful photograph. This accusation has haunted this image and the memory of the soldier pictured within for more than 60 years. The truth, as it often the case, is far more nuanced and complicated than the BBC programme makers suggest.

SLIDE - *Frederic Ray, The Case of the Rearranged Corpse, Civil War Times, Vol III No. 6 October 1961*

The narrative of the moved body was first suggested in a 1961 article entitled 'The Case of the rearranged corpse' by Frederic Ray who noticed that the same body appeared in a number of other images taken at a different location.

SLIDE - *Variants of 'Dead Confederate Sharp-shooter' – Stereo Views (LOC)*

He wrote:

"I believe that I may have caught the great Civil War photographer cheating. It's nothing serious. It just appears that he moved the body of a confederate sharpshooter about a bit to get a better picture...."

"Was the blanket used to carry the body into the area around the rocks or was it the other way around?"

Frederic Ray, The Case of the Rearranged Corpse, Civil War Times, Vol III No. 6 October 1961

SLIDE - *Cover of William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975*

Whilst of interest to Civil War enthusiasts this revelation was not widely shared until the publication in 1975 of William A. Frassanito's ground breaking book 'Gettysburg: A Journey in Time'.

SLIDE - *Comparison of photograph of Dead Confederate Troops by Gardner with modern battlefield location from William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975*

Frassanito's detailed photographic mapping and re-photography of the battlefield, located the sites of the majority of photographs taken at Gettysburg through the meticulous comparison of identifiable landforms and features on the contemporary battlefield with those recorded in the original images.

SLIDE - *Comparison of photograph of Dead Confederate Sharp-shooter with modern battlefield location William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975*

In this way he was able to locate both camera position and viewpoint and in doing so revealed that the titles and locations of many photographs were incorrect and also that the majority of Gardner's images were taken at only five different locations.

Frassanito was also able to accurately locate the site of the three images of the dead sharpshooter on open ground as being some 40 yards from the den and both repeated and further embellished the story of the rearranged corpse with greater certainty whilst introducing this fictionalised narrative to a far wider audience

SLIDE - *Sharpshooters Den, Sickles Avenue, Gettysburg National Military Park – Google Maps*

He suggests that:

"Here... was the essence of the Den's more famous role in the battle, that of a sharpshooter position for the Confederates... but one vital ingredient necessary for a perfect view was missing. There were no bodies."

"In what must have been a flash of creative excitement, the cameramen chose to improvise. Returning to the position they had just photographed Gardner's men placed the slain youth's body onto a blanket and in all likelihood carried him themselves some forty yards up the slope."

William A. Frassanito, Gettysburg: A Journey in Time, Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1975

Frassanito's narrative is a construction based on a series of assumptions concerning the order in which the images were recorded and the identity of those who moved the body. There is no evidence whatsoever as to the order in which the photographs were taken, nor how long elapsed between the capturing of the photographs at the two locations nor as to who actually moved the body.

As Ray acknowledges it's quite possible that the body was first photographed at the sharpshooters den before being moved to the second location, it's also possible that the body may have been found somewhere else entirely and moved to both locations. The body may have been moved by a burial party before being re-photographed by Gardner and O'Sullivan some time later, possibly without knowing it was the same body. In truth nobody knows the actual sequence of events, nor the motivations and intentions of those involved.

SLIDE - *Cover of: Gus Macdonald, Camera: Victorian Eyewitness, Batsford Ltd, London 1979.*

Nevertheless the narrative provided by Frassanito gained traction with both photographic historians and the wider public and has been repeated time after time as an example of photographic construction and fakery.

Here are a few examples from across the years

- *Gus Macdonald in his book and television show Camera: a Victorian eye witness call the photo a 'fake'*

SLIDE - *Cover of: Dino A. Brugioni, Photo Fakery, Brassey's, Virginia, 1999.*

- The founder of the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Centre repeats Frassanito's suggestion as fact.

SLIDE - *Cover of: Brian Winston, Lies, Dam Lies and Documentaries, BFI, London, 2000.*

- While Brian Winston embellishes the story still further falsely suggesting Gardner carried the body around with him and re-clothed it as needed.

SLIDE - *Cover of: Devil's Den, Gary E. Adelman and Timothy H. Smith, Thomas Publications, Gettysburg, 1997.*

Frassanito's interest in photography at Gettysburg has been continued by a number of battlefield guides and historians, and in particular by Tim Smith and Gary Adelman who jointly published a study of the history of both the conflict and the photography at Devils Den in which they again repeat the same narrative.

SLIDE - *Blog of Gettysburg National Military Park.*

In the internet age the image of the Dead Sharpshooter and the narrative associated with it continues to provoke claims and counter claims regarding the identity of the dead soldier, the position and pose of the body, the presence of sharpshooters in Devils Den, the rifle, equipment and other 'props' present and many others details of the image.

SLIDE - *Interpretation Board, Sharpshooters Den, Gettysburg National Military Monument from Google Street View*

The current interpretation panel on the battlefield again repeats Frassanito's story but add a more reflective note:

"The photo was staged but the tragedy was real. A young man from the South lay dead far from family and home"

SLIDE - *Sharpshooters Den, Sickles Avenue, Gettysburg National Military Park – Google Street View*

This fictionalised narrative then has become accepted fact, repeatedly used as an example of historic fake news, implicating both photographers and photography in the falsification of the past however this narrative is itself fake news and perhaps the ghosts of Gettysburg should be allowed to rest in a more honest sleep.