

### A Field Guide to Gettysburg: Experiencing the Battlefield Through Its History, Places, and People

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#### Recommended Citation

Teague, Charles (2013) "A Field Guide to Gettysburg: Experiencing the Battlefield Through Its History, Places, and People," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.19

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/19>

## Review

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Fall 2013

**Reardon, Carol and Vossler, Tom.** *A Field Guide to Gettysburg: Experiencing the Battlefield through Its History, Places, and People.* University of North Carolina Press, \$22.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3525-8

### A New Guide for the Sesquicentennial

Simply put, this is the most helpful book in understanding the field of battle at Gettysburg. In an era of digital resources, some today view printed field guides as passé, but they would greatly benefit from the thoughtful and thorough explanations of Reardon and Vossler. Both authors living locally have an intimate acquaintance with Gettysburg. Vossler brings the perspective of a career military officer and Licensed Battlefield Guide, while Reardon has renown as an academic focused upon military history, particularly for *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory*.

A well-conceived organization, first-rate illustrations, comprehensible maps, and a balance between tactics and human interest vignettes make the complex battle meaningful. Clarity in driving instructions and proper orientation at each of the 34 stops makes touring the battlefield simple, yet an armchair reader will also delight in the accounting. Those dreaming about one day about becoming a battlefield guide will discover this to be their best single resource.

Gettysburg can be a minefield for interpreters, with controversies continuing to rage 150 years later. Reardon and Vossler frankly acknowledge that in some cases "we can never know with certainty [what] happened even on a field as well-studied as Gettysburg." (400) Thus, such disputes as the first shot, the death of Reynolds, action at the Railroad Cut, Johnston's reconnaissance, Sickles' deployment, Wright's advance, the timing of Colgrove's attack, and Farnsworth's charge are approached in a frank but measured style.

The 47 maps are well designed, though the absence of indicated times is a shortcoming. The stops are arranged to be roughly chronological for the course

of the battle, but the flow of the tour being site-specific means the maps are not necessarily sequential. And although Hunterstown and Brinkerhoff's Ridge may not warrant separate stops, action there should have been mentioned to appreciate how the battle played out.

Each auto stop is framed by six thoughtful questions: What happened here? Who fought here? Who commanded here? Who fell here? Who lived here? What did they say about it later? A colorful biographical sketch is provided for key commanders, allowing readers to feel like they have actually met these characters. Who knew that Brig. General Alexander Webb continually had "a way of suddenly laughing in a convulsive manner"? Yet also introduced are insightful perspectives on common soldiers; it was their battle too. The authors likewise explain about the civilians and their homesteads, filling in what has too often been lacking in histories of this battlefield.

Any book on the much-debated Battle of Gettysburg is certain to arouse qualms and quibbles, and this one is no exception. Accounting and interpretation are sometimes blurred. Did Lee really think the enemy on July 2 rested along the Emmitsburg Road? (167) Did Webb actually report that his regiments opened on Wright? (268) And a participant's claim sometimes ought not be taken at face value, for did the XII Corps (odd to use modern army designation for the 12th Corps) actually camp on the slope of Little Round Top? (195) If Meade truly "divined Lee's attack plan for July 3," as Gibbon implied (316), why had the commanding general also expressed concern about expected attacks from the town and upon the Round Tops, and had not bolstered Gibbon's position? Moreover, ought the copse of trees be heralded as "historic" or more accurately said to have become "iconic"? (349) Myths and canards still abound in Gettysburg story telling.

There are dozens more points for debate, but these arise in every book about the battle and make discussions about it so lively. The bottom line for this field guide is that it is a superb and surprising addition to the library of Gettysburg books, valuable for the novice, the ardent Civil War buff, and the scholar alike.

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