

### Gettysburg Contested:150 Years of Preserving America's Cherished Landscape

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#### Recommended Citation

Murray, Jennifer M. (2019) "Gettysburg Contested:150 Years of Preserving America's Cherished Landscape," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.4.16

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss4/16>

## Review

**Murray, Jennifer M.**

**Fall 2019**

**Black, Brian.** *Gettysburg Contested:150 Years of Preserving America's Cherished Landscape*. George F. Thompson Publishing, 2019. \$34.95 ISBN 9781938086489

Civil War historians have produced no fewer than 6,000 books on the Gettysburg Campaign, saturating the Gettysburg historiography and feeding our seemingly endless fascination with the three-day battle. Recent scholarship has focused on Gettysburg in memory, including an exploration of the process of preserving and interpreting America's most popular battlefield. In *Gettysburg Contested*, Brian Black, an environmental historian at Penn State University's campus in Altoona, focuses on the process of preserving the battlefield from 1863 to the battle's sesquicentennial in 2013. As Black states, the vision for the book came from "a personal need to understand the ongoing effort to re-create the Battlefield of Gettysburg landscape of 1863" (10).

Of the seven chapters in the book, three are devoted to summarizing the battle action, written by Richard Megraw, an American Studies professor at the University of Alabama. Although not a Civil War historian, Megraw is a Pennsylvania native, and like Black, began visiting the battlefield at a young age. The subsequent four chapters explore the broad preservation trends of the battlefield's 150-year history.

*Gettysburg Contested* begins with a narration of the battle's aftermath from 1863-1868 and the site's preservation, 1863-1895. Here, Black covers familiar territory. He recounts the process of burying the dead, caring of the wounded soldiers, and how Gettysburg's residents dealt with the war's imprint on their property and farmsteads. He also explores the formation of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, the battlefield's first preservation organization, the erection of the battlefield's first monuments, and the federal recognition of the site as a national military park in 1895. Black continues the story of the battlefield's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and tackles the

invariable tension between preservation and commercialization. Under the management of the National Park Service, since 1933, Black explores the agency's role in the stewardship of the battlefield. He claims, "the park was now also susceptible to political and ideological changes within the NPS" (207), but fails to further explore ways in which the Gettysburg battlefield was influenced by larger preservation or management philosophies within the National Park Service.

Black's narrative is complemented by multiple photo galleries intended to provide visual accompaniment to the narrative. With over ninety photos, historic and contemporary, some of which were taken by the author, the photo gallery constitutes about one-third of the monograph. These photographs reflect the visual richness of the Gettysburg battlefield.

One gallery case study titled "The Copse and National Reconciliation" offers six photographs of the battle's Copse of Trees, located along Cemetery Ridge. The author's intention to use photographs to convey visual analysis to the "ongoing contest for how Gettysburg was to be preserved" falls short of its desired objective (229). The first gallery photo, by famed battlefield photographer, William Tipton, shows an early view of the Copse of Trees and a monument to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvania, erected nearly two decades after the battle. Black incorrectly labels this as an 1863 photograph. Perhaps this could be viewed as a mistake on dating a photograph, but the photographic history of the Gettysburg battlefield is relentlessly documented. The third photo includes another dating error in the erection of the commemorative iron fence around the Copse of Trees. When writing about the battle of Gettysburg or the battlefield, there is very little room for error, particularly in dating common photos of the Copse of Trees. The fourth photograph in the Copse of Trees case study is one of the 1913 reunion encampment along the fields of Pickett's Charge. Here the author notes, "Reconciliation gained energy and attention after the Copse was commemorated" (234). Not only does this imply that reconciliation depended on the dedication of a grouping of trees at Gettysburg, but overlooks a complex era of reconciliation, well documented by David Blight in *Race and Reunion* and other Civil War scholars. Finally, the last photograph in the Copse of Trees case study is a photo of the dedication of the Eternal Light Peace Memorial in July 1938. The author

fails to tie this photograph, or the monument, a tangible manifestation to reconciliation, to the previous photographs or the Copse of Trees, leaving larger conclusions unclear.

The appendix includes seven primary documents, as well as a list of officers who fought at the battle, and a glossary of military terminology. Although intended to “round out the preservation story,” the documents selected for inclusion into the appendix offer a curious, if not random, selection (12). For instance, how does Vice President Lyndon Johnson’s 1963 Memorial Day address, in which Johnson spoke about race on the eve of the battle’s centennial, relate to preservation at Gettysburg?

*Gettysburg Contested* provides a succinct narration of the landscape of the Gettysburg battlefield. To be sure, it is difficult to add anything new to the Gettysburg historiography and students of the battle and the battlefield will find a familiar narrative, and many familiar themes recounted elsewhere. In the conclusion, Black evaluates the park’s contemporary preservation initiatives, and indeed, returns to his quest to understand the landscape rehabilitation efforts. Here, Black is at his best and his perspective as an environmental historian most keen. Of the dilemma between preservation and the park service’s efforts to rehabilitate the historic landscape, Black calls for more “transparency about land-use policies and regulations” from the park management (304). Undeniably, the National Park Service management at Gettysburg sets precedents for landscape rehabilitation at other Civil War sites. Black’s book is a reminder of the critical role this agency plays in preserving and managing Gettysburg, the nation’s most visited Civil War battlefield.

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