PENNSYLVANIA IN/AND THE CIVIL WAR: A SHORT DISCOVERY TOUR

Randall M. Miller
Saint Joseph's University

Any discussion of Pennsylvania in/and the Civil War begins, and for many ends, at Gettysburg. This is so because in the popular mind, and in so much literature on the war, Gettysburg stands at the center of the war’s character and meaning. If anyone outside the commonwealth associates Pennsylvania with the Civil War at all, invariably it is because the great battle was fought here. Indeed, from 1863 to today countless people have made pilgrimages to the battlefield (for which many thanks for all those tourist dollars in commonwealth coffers). And what little one might have learned about the Civil War in school placed Gettysburg as the turning point of America’s ordeal by fire. It matters, too, that Lincoln came to Gettysburg and hallowed the ground by his address, with its almost biblical cadences, which became for generations of school children outside of the South one of the sacred texts they had to put to memory and printed and reprinted in various forms became almost a totem in households and schoolrooms across America.
Then, too, the battle acquired preeminent importance among southerners, especially Virginians, as they tried to explain Lee’s defeat—and did so by finding in Pickett’s charge and in other acts of bravery against all odds the proof that southerners were made of the right stuff. Brave, honorable men ennobled the Confederate cause by how they had fought there. Confederate veterans in their postwar Lost Cause literature also sanctified the ground.

The attempt to “remember” the war and give it cosmic meaning in some important ways began with, and at, Gettysburg. The effort was contested almost as soon as the guns fell silent after the third day of battle, but there was no gainsaying the national consensus that getting to know Gettysburg was somehow essential to any understanding of the war and even America itself. The dedication of the national cemetery, which was the reason Mr. Lincoln was at Gettysburg on that November 1863 day to give his short speech, the re-encampments of Union veterans there after the war in memory of their great test of manhood and proof of the Union’s will and God’s favor, and then the coming of the Confederate veterans, who by century’s end joined with Union veterans in rituals of reconciliation—all served to consecrate the battle and the place in the national narrative. The monuments put up by regiments, and the shrines put up by and for Pennsylvania, tied men and families from across the nation to this place. And when southerners were allowed to add their own monuments in the twentieth century, they put in stone the glory they had already sculpted many times in words. Gettysburg thus became in symbol and in fact the point of reference and reconciliation. In that process of “remembering” fallen heroes and a supposedly glorious past, the causes and much of the character of the war were forgotten or shunted aside. And so it would be for generations. All roads about the war led to and from Gettysburg—a place in Pennsylvania—but what one found there was the story of a battle, rather than a civil war, a story of how men fought rather than why the war came or what came of the war.

Adding to the primacy of Gettysburg in the Civil War narrative and American consciousness and even interest in the war was that the great battle attracted great writers. Bruce Catton, for one, wrote of the Army of the Potomac and the battle in such Homeric ways that his books were bestsellers and excerpts from his battle account were required reading in literature and English composition courses. And the list goes on, even to today. Popular fiction like Michael Shaara’s *Killer Angels*, which was the basis for a major Hollywood movie, Ken Burns’s documentary on the Civil War, which has
much on Gettysburg, and the steady march of popular histories on every personality, regiment, action, and piece of ground in Gettysburg kept it center stage in popular thinking, and in heritage tourism planning. To cite one recent example: the new Pennsylvania Tourism Office guide to Civil War trails in the commonwealth, ostensibly an effort to enlarge the compass of the war story and interest in Pennsylvania, still has all roads leading to Gettysburg.

I could go on, but the point here is that Gettysburg—the battle, the place, and the mythic memories of it—have so dominated the literature and thinking on the Civil War that they have overwhelmed almost any other approach to understanding the war in and for Pennsylvania. It has become almost impossible to get past Gettysburg to see any other aspects of the war in the commonwealth. The massive Rothermel painting of the battle of Gettysburg in the State Museum says it all. Entering the hall, the visitor must confront the painting—the battle. All pales below it, and the objects in the cases in the exhibit area serve only to elaborate the main story hanging on the wall. Seemingly, everything in Pennsylvania thereby plays a supporting role in the grand drama that was acted out in the battle. Only that moment put Pennsylvania on the Civil War map.

Such a view is a huge distortion of the “real war,” of course, and recent scholarship, exhibits, public programming, and planning for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War have begun to redirect concerns away from Gettysburg or at least recast the Gettysburg story to see the war and its meaning in new ways.1 We already have such a remapping in William Blair and William Pencak’s *Making and Remaking Pennsylvania’s Civil War*—of which more later. And, to be sure, historians and biographers have for years explored many other Civil War subjects relating to Pennsylvania to fill library shelves, especially of Pennsylvanians off to war in Virginia and Maryland, or other places.2

Since the founding of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, much writing about the war has centered on the battle account—what today would be termed the “old military history,” with its emphasis on strategy and tactics, the character and conduct of generals (battle leaders), and the effects of battles on politics and public policy. There have been, and are, other approaches, but the battle account ruled Civil War literature, and it still counts for the lion’s share of the books on the war. Authors rendered generals as gods or devils, and they left the larger historical context of war mostly as a backdrop to battlefield dramas. In such works, battle leaders
made the critical decisions and won or lost based on their will and ability to overcome the "inertia of war."

The "old military history" also included interest in the experience and life of the common soldier—Billy Yank and Johnny Reb in popular parlance. Such interest was fed by the many memoirs and regimental histories written by the veterans during the late nineteenth century and by the continuing barrage of publications of Civil War soldiers' letters, diaries, and memoirs in the twentieth century to our own day, including many such sources printed in Pennsylvania state and local history journals. That interest remains, getting a boost from the Ken Burns documentary and the rise of the "new social history" that sought to discover and recover the voice of the common people.

Writing on Pennsylvania in/and the Civil War followed the basic patterns noted above. But that pattern began to change in the 1960s and has continued to move in new directions thereafter.3

The 1950s and early 1960s promised a time of national reflection on the Civil War as its centennial approached and came. New interest in the war invited new scholarship. The organizers of the national centennial effort in the late 1950s wanted it to be popular. They enlisted the National Park Service and the Civil War Round Tables in the cause, got a congressionally established U.S. Centennial Commission to plan and manage events, celebrations, and writing, and set out to bring the war into every American home, or bring every home to the war. Almost every state set up a centennial commission, corporations promoted the centennial and hoped to profit from it (e.g., Sinclair Oil, which encouraged heritage vacationing), tourist offices printed up flyers to get people to Civil War sites, and battlefield preservationists got to work reclaiming the fields of glory. The U.S. Centennial Commission tried to avoid controversial issues in order to gain national support, which in practice meant playing more to white southerners' definitions of the war's character and meaning and ignoring issues of causation and topics such as slavery, race, and political dissent. The Commission's common theme was one of consensus. In its telling, the struggle was a brothers' war nobly fought by both sides that tested and thereby saved the great republic. Supposedly, more united the blue and the gray than divided them, as the sectional reconciliation of the late nineteenth century seemingly attested. The centennial's consensus theme fit the Cold War emphasis on consensus history and American exceptionalism.4

It did not fit the facts of the war scholars were digging up. Nor did it square with the new political, social, and cultural realities remaking history
in the 1950s and 1960s. The old narrative worked only so much as troubling questions about race and slavery were left out. But by 1961, it was impossible to keep race out of any honest national narrative. The civil rights movement forced a reassessment of American history, and by making history in the streets, blacks were forcing America to rethink its past.

James McPherson and others insisted on inserting blacks into the Civil War narrative—not as a sop but because, to their minds, the reason for the war, the nature of the war, and the meaning coming from the war were all bound up with black slavery and blacks’ struggles for freedom. Blacks put themselves there too. They did so not only by recalling their own service in the war but also by reprinting works such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* that told the story of freedom’s struggles from black perspectives and described the “failure” of emancipation and Reconstruction in terms of racism and weak-willed northerners unwilling to stand up for freedom and the freedmen and strong-willed counter-revolutionary southerners willing to use any means to reassert white power.

At the same time, the emergence and drive of the new social history and women’s history in the 1960s and 1970s led historians to re-envision the war. The home front now became as important as the battlefield in tallying the contributions and costs of war. A host of community studies—mostly of southern places—ensued, in part borrowing from the models of community studies of colonial New England by social historians in their microscopic examination of seemingly every aspect of daily life and in their charting of social relationships. Reid Mitchell and others helped make sense of the “vacant chair” and re-connected people at home with those in uniform by their close and copious reading of diaries and family correspondence.

Curiously, with but a few important exceptions, the interest in studies of communities during wartime did not take hold for northern places until recently. We are only beginning to understand what war meant in the small towns and rural counties that made up much of the North, Pennsylvania included.5 Regarding the Keystone state, thanks to scholars such as William Blair and Carol Reardon at Penn State University, community studies of wartime Pennsylvania or of Pennsylvania communities in a comparative context are finally getting their due, as any survey of recent master’s theses and doctoral dissertations will show and as submissions to *Pennsylvania History* and other journals will suggest.6 The Blair and Pencak collection, noted above, significantly broadened the geography and the conception of the ways the Civil War came to the commonwealth and the ways different peoples in
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Pennsylvania responded to and even shaped the war. So, too, the University of Virginia's stunning "The Valley of the Shadow" project, with its grand sweep of primary sources gathered from two counties in the war era (Augusta County, Va., and Franklin County, Pa.) scanned, translated, and accessible on-line, has made it possible to go deep inside and to track the lives of the many different "ordinary" people, on their terms, during the Civil War era of the 1850s through the 1870s. The computer age brings those worlds to us in images, words, maps, and more. And historian Ed Ayers's own work, drawn from the project, points to the possibilities of re-creating the war by at once locating it in particular places while also moving it from any one place to multiple ones, and to seeing every place in a comparative light and context.7

Even the battle history has entered a new age. Informed by the work of John Keegan on the "face of battle," the interest now is in discovering what soldiering, being in battle, and coming from fighting meant for those who fought. Gerald Linderman, among others, used the perspectives and experiences of the World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War era soldier to ask not only how soldiers in the Civil War fought but also, and even more so, how war affected their values and identities, how the shock of wartime carnage but also of painful and lingering death, disease, and moral decay caused men in arms, away from home and family, to question the Victorian values that promised God's protection and a noble death. Many such men had put aside the values learned during peacetime when massive killing demanded a new code of honor and a new definition of courage. Such accounts do not much fit the heroic stance of the great battlefield images of popular print or the Rothermel painting in the State Museum.

We do not yet have delineations in such studies that sort out Pennsylvania soldiers from New York, Massachusetts, Michigan, Illinois, or other men—assuming one's state of origin and recruitment significantly informed their perception of self and society and governed their conduct in war. We do know that men recruited from the same town or small community were conscious that they represented that people, and, initially at least, dictated their behavior by the knowledge that their community at home was watching them, and also praying for them not only to return alive but also unchanged by war. Several studies of particular regiments, such as Richard Moe's minor classic of the First Minnesota Volunteers, suggest the possibility for a new kind of regimental history that is really a community study extended into the war. Such work is now underway for several Pennsylvania regiments. The question 1/5
thus now might be what did it mean to be a soldier from Pennsylvania, or, better yet, from Bellefonte, or Warren, or Wilkes Barre, ...wherever.

And what of these and other communities in the commonwealth? Is there one—can there be one—history of and for Pennsylvania in the war that fits all? Recent work on wartime Pennsylvania has shown that it was a divided state in many ways, with resistance to recruitment and outright opposition to conscription, including anti-draft rioting, in various places. Such resistance to the Republican-led state and national government's war policies and practices was rooted in ethnic, religious, economic, regional, and political factors. All this complicates the older narrative of Pennsylvania as the great state that gave the second-highest number of soldiers to save the Union and thereby ensured Union victory on its field. It also raises questions about how much and for whom the war served to create a new nationalism, if at all. One wonders if the emphasis on the state's contributions to the war and its vital role in building a nation obscures the extent to which local and ethnic identities persisted and resisted the "nationalizing" tendencies of the war.

Recent work on Pennsylvania offers new ways to reconceptualize the war. Walter Licht, for one, insists that era only makes sense as one of "civil wars" (plural) in Pennsylvania rather than as the Civil War alone. He reminds us that it was, for example, a time of much labor conflict. So, too, Philip Paludan points to the ways Republicans and captains of industry used the war to suppress labor discontent and discourage union organizing.8

Recent work also notes that the Civil War era in Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, was also a time when blacks made new assertions for freedom by offering to serve in the army, only to be rebuffed in the first years of the war (and one wonders what difference it made to Pennsylvania that so many blacks had to leave Pennsylvania to serve because the state was tardy in enrolling them and ironically then that so many blacks later ended up training in Pennsylvania at Camp William Penn). Once in uniform, blacks demanded rights in Pennsylvania commensurate with the "new birth of freedom" proclaimed in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, as, for example, in attacking racial segregation on public conveyances in Philadelphia and demanding the ballot statewide. Such assertions for freedom continued after the war. Reconstruction was not just a southern story, though the Pennsylvania part in it has remained largely unwritten.

All that said, Pennsylvania was also a precarious place for blacks. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia tried to bring the war home to northerners by invading Pennsylvania and ended up at Gettysburg, but on
the march his army sought to recapture supposed fugitive slaves who had fled across the Mason-Dixon Line seeking freedom in Pennsylvania only to discover that the war threatened that “freedom.” The story of Lee's army gathering up blacks to be re-enslaved is not the pretty picture of the supposedly saintly Lee that white southerners during and after the war crafted. It does offer a new way to consider Gettysburg in assessing the meaning of the war for all those engaged in or caught up in it.

Then, too, as to civil wars, women in Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, also contended for new definitions of freedom and citizenship that would include them and respect their civic contributions and patriotism. Pennsylvania women served almost disproportionately compared to women in other northern states in setting up and running hospitals, Sanitary Fairs, and relief organizations for widows, orphans, and wounded soldiers, and save for Massachussetts, Pennsylvania likely sent more women teachers south to the “freedmen’s schools” than any other state. Such women contested the constraints on their sex as being unworthy of the vote by organizing petition and lobbying efforts to get the franchise. Their public rallying, public service, public advocacy for education, and writing made them political beings in ways that challenged party politics as usual.

At the same time, other Pennsylvania women carried on less publicly, running the farms and businesses while their men were away, making do as best they could with more work, and worrying how their world would function if the men did not return at all. Surprisingly little has been written about the more prosaic aspects of women’s, and children’s, life on the Pennsylvania home front. And one wonders if the bias toward writing about the heroic public women fighting for political rights has left the “common” women unfit subjects for sustained scholarly inquiry.

Significantly, perhaps more than any other northern state, Pennsylvania saw the war up close and personal. It was not only the many men who went off to war and came back in body, or in correspondence, to tell about it, but also the military training camps, staging areas, railroad depots, Sanitary Fairs, hospitals, manufacturing and supplying, financing, and even Confederate raids and a famous invasion and battle that put Pennsylvania in the vortex of the war. It also was a state remade by the war, as in its politics with the Republican party emerging from the war as the dominant party statewide for almost three quarters of a century. No other northern state had such a tectonic political shift as did Pennsylvania because of the war.
Pennsylvania contributed much to the war in manufacturing, agricultural production, transportation, managerial expertise, raising money, providing relief, and so much more. It also gave many of its men. We know much about the means of killing but little about the meaning of death. Any history of the Civil War in and Pennsylvania must consider the social, cultural, and economic impact of the loss of so many men, killed or wounded so badly they could no longer “be men” as manhood was understood in the nineteenth century. As Drew Gilpin Faust has shown in her book *The Republic of Suffering* (2008), making sense of death became almost a preoccupation of a people consumed by the war and trying to re-order their lives in its aftermath. How so in Pennsylvania, one wonders?

I could go on.

But let us return to Gettysburg by way of conclusion. To go there today is to witness the new civil wars raging over who owns the memory and meaning of the Civil War. Several years ago, the National Park Service, pressed by historians, insisted that the interpretation at Gettysburg—as at all National Park Service-run battlefields but especially at Gettysburg—move from the emphasis on the battle—e.g., tactics, the nobility and heroism of soldiers—to consider why men fought at all. Holders of the flame of the old military history such as battlefield preservationists, battle reenactors, Civil War Round Tables, and tourist bureaus and battlefield memorabilia sellers, among others, dug in to preserve the sacred ground as the story of a battle alone. But the “new history” kept charging onto the field. Any look at the proposed new visitor center, the new interpretation (some of it already offered at Gettysburg), the U.S. Congress’s mandate to the National Park Service to create a “freedom trail” linking Underground Railroad and related freedom sites, and the embrace of the “new social history,” “the new military history,” and all the other “new histories”—any such look suggests that Gettysburg—in Pennsylvania—is now the touchstone, or at least flashpoint, for new understandings of the war. The battle, and its commemoration, will be returned to the war by considering how slavery and race and self-interest almost sundered the republic and forced Americans to make sense of a new-birthed freedom and to realize the promise “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

That new Gettysburg shows in the work of Margaret Creighton, whose book on Gettysburg brings blacks, women, immigrants, and townspeople into the main story. She reconnects the battle to a place and to many
different people who drew varied conclusions from it. And all of them understood that the battle did not end the war nor, alone, did it sum it up. Far from it. They knew, too, that the war itself might remain unfinished until the promise of freedom, now enlarged, became a reality for all of them. Happily, Creighton is not alone in recasting the Gettysburg story to probe larger questions about the meaning, memory, and even marketing of the war.10

The war did not end in 1863 at Gettysburg or, as to its meaning, in 1865. And it ought not end there, for finding Pennsylvania in/and the Civil War must include home front and battlefield, men and women, white and black, Protestant and Catholic and everyone else, immigrant and native-born, Irish-American miner and English-American mine owner, German-American soldier and German-American pacifist, farmer and artisan, Democrat and Republican, and so many more.11 The story(ies) will not be found in any one place, and “the real war,” to use Walt Whitman’s famous injunction, likely will never get fully into the books. That war for and in Pennsylvania is not even confined to Pennsylvania. But discovering what the war meant, and means, in and for Pennsylvania, and indeed America, still might start in Gettysburg And it might well return there if Gettysburg the battle, the place, and the memory force us to ask why the Civil War mattered so much that people fought it and why it ought matter still in considering what that great fight wrought.

NOTES

1. For an instructive introduction into the current thinking on rewriting the Civil War through exhibits, public programming, new scholarship, and curricular materials, see Beth Hager, “The Civil War Sesquicentennial: Seeking Common Ground, Conversations at the 2007 Annual Meeting [of American Association for State and Local History],” History News 63 (Winter 2008), 16–19. In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and its planning partners such as the Pennsylvania Humanities Council have led in planning for the sesquicentennial, and also the Lincoln bicentennial upcoming in 2009, by bringing together directors, curators, and educators from the county and local historical societies for planning conferences and encouraging such organizations to examine their own collections and resources in presenting the Civil War with “real stories” from the home front. The Centre County Historical Society showed the possibilities of such a venture with its new exhibit on the Civil War in Centre County, which opened in fall 2007. The 2007 annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association (PHA) also featured a session describing current planning initiatives across the state. For a brief description of the Civil War planning effort in the state, see Barbara Franco, “Partnerships for the Future,” Pennsylvania History 74.
4. In metropolitan Philadelphia, a Civil War consortium has organized workshops and symposia to plan for the sesquicentennial and to bring the latest scholarship on the Civil War into the hands of numerous area museums, historical societies, heritage organizations, schools, and other interested parties. For the larger picture on historiographical trends and directions in Civil War scholarship, see Lacy K. Ford, ed., A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), though it surprisingly devotes no single chapter to the northern home front; and James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, eds., Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), especially the chapters on battlefield tactics, the Civil War soldier, northern politics, women, and the social and economic history of the North during the war.


3. For an insightful and wide-ranging look at the history of writing military history, with several references to important developments regarding the Civil War and even Gettysburg, see Robert M. Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” American Historical Review 112 (October 2007), 1070–90.


5. For overviews of the northern home front, see especially Philip Shaw Paludan, “A People’s Contest”: The Union and Civil War 1861–1865 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), which remains unsurpassed in the depth and range of its inquiry; and J. Matthew Gallman, The North Fights the Civil War: The Home Front (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994). There are now at least two book series devoted to publishing works on the northern home front, one each with Fordham University Press and Kent State University Press.

6. It is no exaggeration to state that the George and Ann Richards Civil War Era Center at Penn State University, which now publishes Civil War History, and the history faculty there are in the vanguard in encouraging intensive case studies of the war, looking at unstudied groups involved in the war, and re-locating the war from its overly southern bias toward a more inclusive consideration of the northern home front, among many other initiatives the Center and faculty encourage. Indicative of the ways a close study of a Pennsylvania community can bring together the new history approaches and force a reconsideration of what the war meant in Pennsylvania is Carol Reardon, “We Are All in This War: The 148th Pennsylvania and Home Front Dissension in Centre County during the Civil War,” in Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front: Wartime Experience, Postwar Adjustments (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 3–29.
7. See Edward L. Ayer, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), for the comparative perspective and assessments. The “Valley of the Shadow” materials are available on line and are very easily accessed, clearly presented (including transcriptions of many scanned primary sources such as diaries and letters), and fully indexed.


11. Rather than including a list of works beginning to explore such topics, let two recent works suggest the possibilities of looking closely at a particular group in Pennsylvania to discover how the war came home to them and how their particular identity(ies) informed their responses to the war’s demands on their lives, faith, and property: Christian B. Keller, *Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); and James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt, *Mennonites, Amish, and the American Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).