

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

The Museum and Visitor Center at Gettysburg National Military Park, 1195 Baltimore Pike (Rt. 97), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325.

Museum newly opened in 2008. Yearly Hours:

April 1 to May 31: 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

June 1 to August 31: 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

September 1 to October 31: 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

November 1 to March 31: 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Prices: adults \$7.50, seniors and active military \$6.50, children (6–18) \$5.50, children under 6 admitted free.

Internet: General information, exhibit information, fees and facilities, bookstore and refreshment information, access to other Gettysburg sites, educational resources, and calendar list of events, <http://www.nps.gov/gett/planyourvisit/visitorcenters.htm>

I visited the new Museum and Visitor Center at Gettysburg National Military Park twice, once last summer when admission

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was still free and visitors could choose to pay for the introductory movie, "A New Birth of Freedom," and then again last November when the admission fee was a flat \$7.50, a price that included the film, the Cyclorama, and entry to the museum. The brief controversy surrounding the announcement that, despite substantial federal and state financial investment, museum admission would not be free seems to have died down, and on my second trip the museum was crowded with visitors and school groups, despite dismal economic news and tight school travel budgets.

The new museum is housed in a substantial building which blends so seamlessly into the rural landscape that visitors might at first mistake it for a large red barn. In fact, I passed it the first time around. There is ample parking for cars and tour buses and a picnic area for travelers wanting to take a break after a long drive. For those not picnicking outside, the Refreshment Saloon boasts a large fire place and indoor and outdoor seating. The menu offers a good selection of freshly prepared food items, including a delicious and hearty Pennsylvania Pot Pie served with fresh corn bread—a portion size designed to eat after a day of hard marching.

As the title suggests, the film narrated by Morgan Freeman shapes the exhibit. Focusing on the link between the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation, "A New Birth of Freedom" presents Gettysburg as the place where the war came to be about slavery and where the sixteenth president rechristened the nation as having been built on a foundation of freedom. The museum bares the distinct mark of Gabor Borritt, the celebrated author of many books on Lincoln and director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College. Borritt established the emancipatory meanings of the Address in his book, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech that Nobody Knows*. The film carefully lays out the history of slavery that linked North and South, traces the emergence of sectionalism and the outbreak of war, and then moves quickly to 1863, linking emancipation to the events that transpired those three fateful days in July and the Address that changed the meaning of the war. The film ends appropriately with Lincoln's words, "and now we are met on a great battlefield of this war."

From the film, visitors are directed into a second theater to view the cyclorama. The restoration and relocation of the cyclorama painting was an extraordinary technological feat that took several years to complete. The new theater allows viewers to experience the three-day battle by viewing a series of panels depicting the battle's major engagements. Visitors ride an

escalator up to a viewing platform intended to allow visitors to move about and view the battle from various vantage points. Few visitors seemed to understand this, however, and instead stationed themselves before one scene or another, thereby missing two-thirds of the action. Perhaps removing the benches would help in this regard; and though the stubby wooden bridge in the middle of the platform was a nice effect, its function was not entirely clear and it obstructed those viewers who tried to follow the flow of action. A voice recording is timed to coincide with illuminations and sound effects that direct visitors' attention to the correct scene in the painting. To further draw the viewer in, the floor of the theater has been made to look like the terrain of the rugged nineteenth-century rural town, complete with wagon ruts and scrubby trees that provided soldiers scarce shelter during three-days of heavy fighting. Boots, hats, and rifles are strewn around the terrain—perhaps a little too neatly to suggest the haste with which soldiers discarded them in the heat of battle, but this is a minor infraction.

The exhibit follows the introductory film's narrative, taking the story from slavery to the end of war, weaving the three-day battle of Gettysburg into the larger political, social, and military narrative of the war. An entire room focuses on the Address and the various responses to it, many of them negative. The exhibit concludes with a nuanced look at Reconstruction and the amnesia that set in rapidly thereafter. A film of the fiftieth reunion at Gettysburg brings it all home with footage of silver-haired white Union and Confederate veterans shaking hands over the rock wall at the High Water Mark and a narrative that reminds visitors that African-Americans, many of them veterans, were allowed in only to clean the toilets. The speech Woodrow Wilson delivered at Gettysburg contrasts perfectly with Lincoln's fifty years earlier. Whereas Lincoln entreated Americans to remember the sacrifices of the soldier dead and the cause for which "they gave the last full measure of devotion," Wilson preferred not to dwell on "our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten." Wilson's advice appealed to Americans at the turn of the century and prevailed for some fifty years thereafter, but it is Lincoln's version of events that are having the final word.

The exhibit offers fewer interactive opportunities than we have come to expect in museums aimed to entertain younger visitors—or at least to give their parents a fighting chance at making it through. Interactive computers allow older children to test their knowledge of bugle calls—Can you

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identify Reveille? Taps? Call to Colors?—and to pack a soldier's knapsack with the right equipment. Hands-on activities include lifting a heavy knapsack by a rifle barrel and flipping through a family album highlighting how sectionalism divided families. Here museum planners were not as inventive as those who designed the American Civil War Center at the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond, where a children's section allows young visitors to dress up as a slave or a soldier and to imagine themselves in the past. Children can pack a care package to a relative at the front and must think about what they'd include—Coffee? Meat? A favorite doll? At Tredegar, young viewers are drawn in by comparisons between slavery and child labor in the industrial North and are allowed to vote on a number of issues. (After having visited both museums, my twelve-year-old son remembered the child labor comparison most of all—but that perhaps reflects his opinion of my parenting more than anything else.) Visitors at the Richmond museum are encouraged to make explicit comparisons between the two home fronts, with well-developed panels on New York City's draft riots and Richmond's bread riots; and in other ways, this museum treats home-front issues more comprehensively than Gettysburg.

On the other hand, there are many things that only Gettysburg can offer. In the section on the dedication of the national cemetery, for instance, the Gettysburg Address is etched onto a glass wall, offering visitors a panoramic view of the battlefield between and through the words of the president who sought to give meaning to the loss of life that occurred there. This perspective should serve to remind viewers that their visit will be incomplete without a tour of the battlefield. Indeed, it was a concern of museum planners that visitors might find the exhibit to be such a total experience that they will forego a battlefield tour. Visitors who might consider committing such a blasphemy would do well to remember that when they exit the parking lot at the new Visitor Center they are just a stone's throw from the High Water Mark, where 7,000 Union soldiers held off 12,000 Confederates led by Major General George Pickett, late in the afternoon on the third day of the epic battle. Not wanting to start the story at the end, park officials hope visitors will wind their way around the battlefield to take in the entire experience. As further inducement, visitors can buy a discounted package that includes the museum and a battlefield tour.

After some debate, the old visitor center was demolished in March.<sup>1</sup> The building was outdated and inadequate to serve the steady stream of pilgrims who make their way to Gettysburg each summer, and it had long been

seen as a violation of sacred ground, located as it was on Cemetery Ridge where Union soldiers held off a Confederate advance on the second day of the battle. The family of the architect who designed the 1961 cyclorama building, however, moved to have that structure protected, providing a potential roadblock to those who would like to return the entire area to its original condition.<sup>2</sup> The future of this building will likely remain unclear for some time.

In the meantime, the ambitious new museum is up and running just in time for the sesquicentennial. And if the National Park Service has its way, beginning in 2011, all roads will lead to Gettysburg.

JUDITH GIESBERG  
*Villanova University*

NOTES

1. Jim McClure, "Old Gettysburg Visitors Center comes down as sole visitor looks on," March 24, 2009, <http://www.yorkblog.com/yorktownsquare/2009/03/observer-of-old-gettysburg-vis.html>.
2. "Old Visitor Center Is New Battle of Gettysburg," Alex Schmidt, WHYY (NPR), Morning Edition, October 7, 2008.