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## **A Story-Teller as Great as the Story**

### **Walking Gettysburg National Military Park with Professor James McPherson**



*Jim McPherson begins our walk at the Peach Orchard, site of an epic battle on July, 2, 1863.*

What do Francis Scott Key, the invention of anesthesia, and a right leg still on display at the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC, have in common? They're all part how James M. McPherson, Princeton's George Henry Davis '86 Professor Emeritus of United States History, tells the story of the Battle of Gettysburg.

On a sparkling spring weekend, fifty Princetonians and I shared the pleasure of seeing Gettysburg through Professor McPherson's eyes. We were lucky, he told us; the weather would be cooler than it was during the battle. On July 1, 1863, it was 76 degrees and cloudy; it warmed up to 82 degrees under partly cloudy skies on July 2, and

a hot 87 degrees on July 3. Professor McPherson cited records kept by Dr. Michael Jacobs, a professor of mathematics and science at Pennsylvania College (now Gettysburg University) for these historic weather reports. Clearly, we were in for quite a tour.

History takes on a present-day relevance when details from different sources are woven together, and Jim McPherson made those three days in a long-ago summer seem like last month. For the better part of a Saturday, he told tales of military strategy, advancements in weaponry, medical science, colorful personalities, and more. His detailed stories prompted many questions, and he had the answer for every one of them, with a single exception.

For starters, did the Confederates fail to press their advantage on the first day of the battle? “That may be,” McPherson answered, but the blame Confederate General Richard Ewell gets for his actions on July 1, 1863, is unfair. Robert E. Lee deserves at least as much responsibility; his style of suggesting, not ordering troop movements – which had worked well with Stonewall Jackson - wasn’t suited for Ewell, who had taken command of the Army of Northern Virginia’s Second Corps after Jackson’s death at Chancellorsville six weeks earlier. “And the film version of *Gloria* got it wrong,” McPherson continued. “Ewell hesitated near Culp’s Hill on the Highlands, not at Cemetery Ridge, like you see in the movies.”

Answering another question, McPherson explained that most of the casualties at Gettysburg were from cavalry rifles, not from infantry, or from the mortars and cannons that seem to be everywhere around us in the park. Mobile artillery was relatively new in 1863; mortars were evolving from their use as naval weapons, in siege warfare, and to

hold static defensive lines. Their use was limited, because they couldn't be fired once an army's infantry moved forward.



*Mobile artillery was used more than ever before in this "first modern war."*

Infections were a leading cause of death from Civil War bullet wounds, because a 58 caliber bullet traveled more slowly than the more modern 30 caliber ones, and while a faster bullet is sterilized by friction as it flies, a larger, slower bullet wasn't. Larger bullets were also more likely to lodge in the body, increasing the chance for infection. Even more important, in the 1860s, no one knew about germs. Surgeons would probe wounds with their fingers, and surgical knives and saws weren't cleaned after use. However, the discovery of ether and chloroform in the 1840s improved the outcomes of surgery, dramatically lowering the death rate from battle wounds.

Telegrams were used in the Civil War, most effectively by the army fighting on its own land. For General Lee, messages could be sent by wire as far north as Frederick

County, Virginia. Further north, they were delivered by horse. This took hours, but the information was still current and useful for the Confederates at Gettysburg.

Each of our questions brought ever more insightful details. What were the roles of women in the Civil War? They were mostly nurses and cooks near the battlefields, and factory workers in the cities soldiers left behind – except for “Crazy Bett,” a Union spy in Richmond. “Look her up,” Jim McPherson invited us, and I did. She was Elizabeth Van Lew, a Virginia abolitionist and philanthropist. Her spy ring infiltrated the Confederacy’s war and navy departments, and even Jefferson Davis’s “White House.” General Ulysses Grant celebrated her contributions to the Union cause by having tea with her after the war. In her later years, she was ostracized as a traitor in her hometown, and turned to the family of Boston’s Paul Revere for financial support.

Was the Civil War the first “modern war”? McPherson answered this question by acknowledging the claim, quickly adding, “but all this means is that it was more modern than the last one, and less modern than the one that followed.”

How did the battlefields get their names? Round Top was named before the battle, but Little Round Top had none until afterwards. The Confederates simply called it “the rocky hill” during their famous July 2 assault. Devil’s Den got its name because of the many snakes living in its rock formations, and the scriptural link between serpents and the devil. McPherson answered this question as we walked, and, right on cue, a small snake exited the rocks in front of us - a slithering punctuation mark for this chapter of his story.



*An unexpected guest helps Jim McPherson tell the story of Devil's Den.*

Our walk's most colorful story might have been that of Union Major General Daniel E. Sickles, who disobeyed orders to defend the Round Tops and moved his men to the Peach Orchard on July 2, suffering a major defeat. McPherson's story about him began before the war. In 1859, Sickles discovered that his wife was having an affair, and shot and killed his rival, Francis Barton Key, who was the son of Francis Scott Key. At his trial, Sickles is said to be the first defendant in American history to claim "temporary insanity" and win acquittal. At Gettysburg, he suffered a serious leg wound and his men

thought he had been killed. To rally their spirits, Sickles asked the soldiers carrying him off the field to put a cigar in his mouth, and he puffed great clouds of smoke to show he was alive. His leg was amputated and Sickles saved it, donating it to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC. Until he died in 1914, he visited it every year on the anniversary of the battle. “It’s still there. You can visit it today,” McPherson offered. Sickles’s long life gave him plenty of time to tell and re-tell the history of the Battle of Gettysburg; like other old generals, he used the time to shape his reputation as a hero.

Generals attending reunions half a century after the battle to tell their stories isn’t the end of Gettysburg’s links to living history far beyond 1863. In *Hallowed Ground*, McPherson’s book describing his own walks on the battlefields, he tells the story of the last gathering of Civil War widows, during the funeral at Arlington National Cemetery for an unknown soldier whose remains were discovered years after the battle. Professor McPherson, who delivered the eulogy, wrote,

“The most notable feature of this event was the attendance of two genuine Civil War widows – the last of their kind – women who had been married as teenagers in the 1920s to elderly Civil War veterans. Both were now in their nineties, and watched the ceremonies from their wheelchairs. One was white, from Alabama; the other was black, from Colorado.”

The date was July 1, 1997.

Our springtime walk lasted well into the afternoon, and none of us – certainly not Jim McPherson – grew tired from the day’s brisk pace of stories, questions, and answers. And oh, that one question he couldn’t answer? It was about the 22-man detail Confederate Colonel William Oates sent to find water on the hot afternoon of July 2,

1863. They were captured by Union soldiers on their way back, their full canteens confiscated. Where did they find water? “To this day, nobody knows where they got it, not even the best guide at Gettysburg National Park,” McPherson noted, with a smile.

