



Historical Context of Edward Hopper’s “Dawn before Gettysburg”

By Gregory Balan

Edward Hopper rose to prominence during the Great Depression and became known for his paintings that explored relationships. Hopper rarely ventured into historical paintings, but he expressed a keen interest in the Civil War and painted a pair of paintings depicting America’s bloodiest conflict.¹

In a war that saw fighting nearly every single day for four straight years, and which still claims the bloodiest single day in American history—the battle of Antietam with nearly 23,000 casualties—Gettysburg stands out in our nation’s memory, and not only because of Lincoln’s immortal address. Gettysburg was the bloodiest battle of the war with approximately 51,000 casualties over three days.² Gettysburg was also the most significant turning point in the Civil War, battering Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, and thus repelling the Confederacy’s best hope of a major victory on Union ground. With the Siege of Vicksburg winding down and with it Confederate resistance along the Mississippi River, the battle of Gettysburg took on tremendous importance. Confederate hopes were pinned to Robert E. Lee’s gambit to win a major victory on Union ground and to put the food-rich Ohio River Valley under threat. With the western campaigns lost as Union armies and navies closed a vice on the Mississippi River and as the Anaconda Plan³ continued to seal off Confederate maritime trade, Lee hoped to push the Union to a negotiated peace following a victory at Gettysburg.

Lee had reasonable confidence that such a spectacular victory on Union ground could be achieved. Lee crushed Union troops under the command of General Ambrose Burnside at the battle of Fredericksburg in Virginia. Months later, Lee defeated the new commander of the Union’s Army of the Potomac, General Joseph Hooker, at Chancellorsville, Virginia. Chancellorsville is arguably Lee’s greatest victory over Union forces, but he learned of the dire situation unfolding in the west. Lee knew his best chance was a rapid advance into Pennsylvania and another crushing victory to bring Lincoln to the negotiating table. This would prevent the

¹ Recent scholarship has increased the number of dead established in an 1889 study to close to a million. See <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-facts#How%20many%20soldiers%20died%20in%20the%20Civil%20War?>.

² See charts at the American Battlefield Trust’s Gettysburg page, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/gettysburg>.

³ The Anaconda Plan was a Union plan drawn up at the beginning of the war that called for the US Navy to blockade the entire coastline from Virginia to Texas in order to prevent the Confederacy from shipping cotton to Europe. The hope was to squeeze off the Confederacy’s primary source of money, hence the name ‘anaconda,’ and force them to capitulate.

Union from moving significant numbers of veteran troops, including those besieging Vicksburg under the command of Ulysses S. Grant, east to engage Lee's determined but woefully undersupplied and outnumbered troops. The psychological effects of a Confederate victory in the heart of Pennsylvania were not lost on Lee either. Lincoln would likely face total collapse of public support for the war, only encouraging Copperhead⁴ resistance, and would find himself in an uphill battle against his embittered former commander, General George McClellan, for the presidency the following year. McClellan was known to have Copperhead sentiments and would almost certainly sue for peace on terms favorable to the Confederacy. With these long-term benefits and a growing sense of invincibility, Lee placed his bet and marched straight through Maryland to Pennsylvania. All local roads converged on the sleepy town of Gettysburg, so Lee sent his advance units there. Despite many troops lacking shoes and rations dwindling as the vice grip of the Anaconda Plan continued to tighten around the Southern coastline, Lee was confident in his troops. They were battle-hardened and accustomed to foraging and sleeping in the open, and were motivated to defeat the Union on Union ground. During the march north, General George Meade, the new commander of the Army of the Potomac, screened Lee's advance to prevent an attack on Washington, and this ironically placed Union troops south of Lee's troops once the two armies arrived in the vicinity of Gettysburg.

On July 1, 1863, Confederate General Henry Heth engaged Union General John Buford's cavalry west of Gettysburg. Intense fighting ensued with Buford's cavalry delaying the Confederate advance until General John Reynolds's troops reinforced the Union position around the town. Lee held the northern end of town and could have moved on further into Union territory, but fatefully decided to stand and fight. Tens of thousands of Confederate troops formed into a massive arc surrounding a significant portion of the town and the Union lines. Under the weight of endless waves of attack the Union lines broke. As the Union fell back through the town, vicious street fighting erupted in the quaint roads of Gettysburg. Despite significant advances in firearm technology, Civil War armies mostly retained Napoleonic tactics⁵ in battle, thus putting the Civil War on the edge of Napoleonic and Modern warfare. Massive line formations on open terrain were the preferred method of attack by typical army units on both sides. These were supported by artillery, cavalry, and irregular troops⁶. However, Civil War tactics became especially chaotic and deadly once dense forests or more urban areas were encountered, as evinced by the Battle of the Wilderness or the Battle of Fredericksburg. Disorganization reigned when Napoleonic line formations were forced to fight in urban sprawl or even the twisting streets of a small town like Gettysburg. Advanced weaponry combined with an environment that simultaneously provided cover to entrenched enemies and left you exposed makes such urban combat the deadliest for infantry. These changes in the 1860s would presage the horrors of urban combat and total war in the 20th and 21st centuries. Civilians were also at greatest risk in urban combat and the people of Gettysburg were no different. The entire town's population was under threat, but black residents were in the most precarious position by far. Numerous free black families lived in the area and runaway slaves swelled the black population.

⁴ Copperheads, named after the snake, were Northern Democrats who adamantly opposed the war. They blamed abolitionists for the war and demanded an immediate end to fighting and a peace treaty with the Confederacy. They took to cutting Lady Liberty's head out of copper pennies and wore them as badges of honor.

⁵ A fighting method characterized by massed lines of men firing volleys of bullets.

⁶ Soldiers that used unorthodox tactics or weapons, or who did not adopt the standard Napoleonic line fighting techniques.

Black men and women moved back and forth between the battle lines as slaves escaped to freedom under the Emancipation Proclamation, while free blacks were captured and dragged to Confederate lines to labor for Lee's army.

With thousands dead on both sides, on Day Two the battle shifted south of Gettysburg as the Union formed a sprawling line roughly resembling a fishhook around a series of hills that constituted the high ground overlooking Gettysburg. Union General Daniel Sickles, a politician who knew little of military tactics, broke rank and took his entire corps off the high ground to engage Confederate troops in a nearby peach orchard. This move decimated his corps, which had casualty rates upward of 40%, and jeopardized the rest of Meade's army as he rushed reinforcements to Sickles' position. As Day Two of the battle raged on, an all-out assault by Lee's army nearly overwhelmed the Union's left flank where Sickles had foolishly advanced. Fighting seesawed at a rock formation called Devil's Den and the Union left flank was only secured after a bayonet charge downhill by a Maine regiment forced Confederate troops away from the strategic hill known as Little Round Top. A daring attack by Confederate General Richard Ewell as night fell overwhelmed Union troops near Cemetery Hill, another strategic hilltop south of Gettysburg. A desperate counterattack by Union troops forced Ewell's men back, but outnumbered Union troops on nearby Culps Hill are partially pushed back due to their numbers being depleted from reinforcing General Sickles on the other side of the battle. Fighting only ended well after dark with the Union still holding the high ground, but precariously so.

Day Three, July 3rd, dawned red as fighting renewed on Culps Hill and battle weary men like those in Hopper's painting rushed to their defensive lines to repel coordinated Confederate attacks. Reinforced Union lines repulsed repeated attacks by Confederate troops there and General Meade's prediction that a Confederate assault would take place at the center of his lines proved prescient. Meade had reinforced his center overnight and they awaited the Confederate assault. After an hours-long artillery bombardment that did little to the entrenched Union lines, Lee ordered one of his most able commanders, General James Longstreet, to lead the assault. General George Pickett's battered but relatively fresh division was selected to lead the assault.

Pickett's Charge across a mile of open terrain against the fortified Union center would go down in American history as one of the great military blunders and defeats. It was perhaps the famed General Lee's worst tactical decision. Pickett's division was annihilated as artillery and rifle fire poured into his totally exposed troops, who were trying to run across open terrain and up a hill after fighting during some of the hottest days of the year. A small fraction of Pickett's men reached the Union lines and vicious hand-to-hand combat ensued. Historians have come to call these few Confederates to have made it to the Union lines "the High Watermark of the Confederacy." Ultimately, the Confederate assault was thrown back with upwards of 60% casualties.

On Independence Day, General Lee attempted to bait Meade from his positions atop the hills overlooking the battle scarred town of Gettysburg. Meade, ever cautious, refused to engage and Lee pulled his badly wounded army back toward Virginia. Lee fully expected an all-out assault on his rear guard, as the Army of Northern Virginia had to cross several rivers and nearly four dozen miles of hostile territory before reaching the relative safety of northern Virginia, but the attack never came. Lee slipped safely back into Confederate territory and a livid President Lincoln effectively demoted General Meade by giving General Grant, victor of Vicksburg,

supreme command. The failure to finish off Lee guaranteed that the war would drag on for almost two more years.

Months passed as the wounded were moved out of the once bucolic town of Gettysburg and plans for a national cemetery honoring the tens of thousands of men who fell at Gettysburg took shape. In November of 1863, thousands gathered to hear the oration of America's finest speaker, Edward Everett, deliver a speech dedicating the national cemetery at Gettysburg. President Lincoln, whose popularity was taking a drubbing from Copperheads in the North, was relegated to a few brief remarks before Everett took the stage. Lincoln made the most of his two minutes on stage, to say the least. Whereas Hopper zeroed in on individuals awaiting their individual fates and holding the fate of a nation in the balance, Lincoln swept broadly across our national history and our national creed. Both men immortalized, in their own ways, the men who "gave the last full measure of devotion."⁷ In doing so, both Lincoln and Hopper emphasized to Americans across time the grand principles battled over during Gettysburg and the Civil War while maintaining reverence for those many thousands who took their last breaths in defense of those principles.

Suggested Readings Primary Source Documents: *These readings provide a sense of what the common soldier, who does the fighting and the dying, had to say about the conflict, what civilian witnesses experienced, and what leaders like Lincoln understood to be the significance of the fighting.*

Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address," Smithsonian National Museum of American History, https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_2.html

Randolph Harrison McKim, "Chapter XV: The Battle of Gettysburg" in *A Soldier's Recollections: Leaves from the Diary of a Young Confederate, with an Oration on the Motives and Aims of the Soldiers of the South*, Documenting the American South, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/mckim/mckim.html#mckim168>.

Catherine Mary White Foster, "Eyewitness Account of the Battle of Gettysburg," edited by David A. Murdoch, <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=ach>.

Various NY Soldiers, "Letters Describing the Battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg," <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/mssc/cwletters/index.html>.

Abraham Lincoln, "Cooper Institute Address," <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/cooper.htm>.

Questions for Primary Sources:

1. How does Lincoln directly link Gettysburg to our nation's founding and our nation's future?
2. Do any common themes emerge from the writings of ordinary soldiers who fought at Gettysburg? How did they perceive the war or their role in it?

⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address," Smithsonian National Museum of American History, https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_2.html.

3. What was the most significant aspect of Gettysburg to a civilian like Catherine Mary White Foster?