



## **Teaching American History using Art: “Dawn Before Gettysburg” (1934) by E. Hopper**

Focus: The Civil War/Battle of Gettysburg: *The image of painting should be viewable to everyone while working on this.*

### **Lesson Sequence:**

1. To begin Part I, display the painting for everyone to see.
2. Analyze the image through discussion using the Image Analysis Questions to guide the discussion. This discussion should be based on a “cold viewing” of the image without utilizing prior instruction on the subject matter.
3. The Notes on the Image should not be given to students, but can be used to help guide students if they are struggling to pick out details from the painting.
4. Use the Historical Context below to provide explicit instruction on the historical event(s) being depicted in the image and/or the historical context surrounding the image. The Historical Context may also be assigned as a reading after the initial “cold viewing” of the image.
5. Re-engage students in discussion about the image using both the details noted in the initial discussion and the information from the Historical Context. Analysis Questions can be asked again or broader questions linking the image and the historical context explicitly can be used.
6. If desired, go to Part II to access the related primary source documents to learn more about the historical context of the image as it was understood by the people involved at the time.

### **Image Analysis Questions:**

*Use these questions to drive discussion and allow the students to freely explore what they are seeing in the painting. There are no right or wrong answers, per se, but certain interpretations are more likely correct than others. Encourage the students to use specific details from the image to support their ideas.*

1. After taking time to look closely at the painting, describe what you see.
2. What is going on in the painting? Why do you think that? Based on what you see in the painting, what do you believe happened just before this moment, or might happen after it?
3. Why do you think the artist painted this scene? What was his or her motivation?
4. What historical documents have you read that provide evidence about what is happening in the painting or what people thought/think about the painting?
5. Compare and contrast what you see in this scene to related situations today.
6. How does looking at this painting today make you feel and why?
7. Do you think people in the past felt differently about the subject of the painting? Why? Note that “the past” can mean the time depicted in the painting and when the painting was made.
8. Does this scene remind you of anything you have experienced in your life, or anything you’ve read about or seen?

### **Notes on the Image:**

1. No regimental insignia are visible, nor is the day of the battle being depicted in the painting specified, so it is impossible to know precisely which unit of men this painting is showcasing. Hopper was from Rockland County, just north of New York City, so this may be a NY regiment, like the 17<sup>th</sup> NY or 53<sup>rd</sup> NY, in honor of his birthplace.
2. The picket fence may be a visual pun of Pickett's Charge, the disastrous last-ditch attempt by Lee's army to break the Union lines at Gettysburg.
3. Despite little discernable facial expressions, Hopper captures the weariness, fear, and indomitable fighting spirit of the soldiers quite effectively.

### **Historical Context of Hopper Painting:**

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 its 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 Plan<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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?>.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

and another crushing victory to bring Lincoln to the negotiating table. This would prevent the 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 Copperhead<sup>4</sup> 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 Reynold'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 tactics<sup>5</sup> 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 troops<sup>6</sup>. 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> A fighting method characterized by massed lines of men firing volleys of bullets.

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

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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 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. 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 at 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.

### **Additional Notes for Teacher**

The Civil War was the height of divisiveness in the United States and can easily cause such divisiveness when teaching it. While historians generally agree that the cause of the Civil War was slavery, it is historically inaccurate to assume the Civil War was a simplistic battle between good (North) and evil (South). Our nation had to fight a war to end slavery, but a few key historical points should be kept in mind to ensure that the historical context of this momentous period in our history is accurately represented. The issue of “presentism” is a constant threat to historical understanding. Presentism is the urge to judge people from radically different times by the standards of our time. We can be gratified knowing that we have relegated slavery to the past, but we accomplished this great task by building on the actions of those in the past. It would be inappropriate to criticize those of the past for not being us, for

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<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History, [https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg\\_address\\_2.html](https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_2.html).

without them, we too would not be us. To aid you as you teach your classes, the following information may prove useful.

1. With the exception of South Carolina (until escaped slaves joined the Union armies), every Confederate state saw hundreds of its men walk north to fight for the Union despite the obvious danger that their families and homes would face.
2. Confederate soldiers, many of whom resented slavery due to economic competition, often deserted the armies and this accelerated following many common soldiers determining that the war was “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”
3. Some Union soldiers deserted the armies when they found out about the Emancipation Proclamation. They declared they enlisted to fight for the Union, not against slavery. At the same time, many in the North enlisted in the armies once abolitionism became a part of the war.
4. Lincoln held nuanced views on slavery and the Union, but he was unequivocal when expressing his reverence for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He believed that the Declaration provided the moral and natural law basis for freedom and that the Constitution was the best means to achieve the ideals of the Declaration.
5. In the Cooper Institute Address,<sup>8</sup> Lincoln traced the words and deeds of the Framers who not only signed the Constitution but also voted to limit the expansion of slavery. Over 90% of the Framers voted to do stop the expansion of slavery and “put it on the course of ultimate extinction.”
6. Lincoln did not initially seek the abolition of slavery, but instead a halt to the expansion of slavery into federal territories. This remained his consistent position until Frederick Douglass convinced him that preserving the Union and abolitionism were one and the same goal.

**Primary Source:** *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.*

1. Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History, [https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg\\_address\\_2.html](https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_2.html)
2. 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>.
3. 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>
4. Various NY Soldiers, “Letters Describing the Battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg,” <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/mssc/cwletters/index.html>
5. Abraham Lincoln, “Cooper Institute Address,” <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/cooper.htm>

### Discussion Questions based on Primary Sources:

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Cooper Institute Address,” Teaching American History, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/address-at-cooper-union/>.

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

#### Reference #2 Exerpts

How well I recall the giant form of Colonel Randolph, as he sat and talked of the olden days of Virginia, of his illustrious grandfather, and of the Legislature of Virginia in 1832, when the whole State was so deeply stirred by the scheme for the emancipation of the negroes. He was a member of that body, and he told me that a large majority of the members was in favor of the measure; but after careful consideration it was deemed wiser to postpone action upon

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it until the next session, in order that the details of the scheme might be more maturely considered.

But before the Legislature reassembled, there occurred a violent ebullition of fanaticism on the part of the Abolitionists of New England. The Southern slave-holders were held up to the scorn and detestation of mankind, and the vengeance of God and man was invoked against them for the awful crime of slavery.

The consequence was a complete reaction of public opinion in Virginia on the subject of the abolition of slavery, so that when the Legislature next assembled, the whole project was dropped. Thus was wrecked the most hopeful scheme of getting rid of the institution of slavery that had ever been proposed since its introduction in 1619. We may lament that the men of Virginia did not rise superior to the feelings naturally begotten by this unfair and fanatical assault, but, human nature being what it is, we cannot be surprised that the affair terminated as it did.

Had it been otherwise--had the gradual emancipation of the slaves been decreed by Virginia--there can be little doubt that Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee would have followed her example; and in time the moral pressure on the cotton States would have been so strong that they, too, must have adopted some scheme of emancipation. That this blessed consummation was not realized must be set down to the account of the fanatical Abolitionists, because of their violent and unjust arraignment of the South for an institution which she did not create, but had inherited, and against which the State of Virginia had many times protested in her early history.

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It is not always remembered by students of American history that the original draft of the Declaration of Independence as drawn by Thos. Jefferson arraigned the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the people of the colonies against their will. It is also too often forgotten that the first government on earth to abolish the slave trade was the Commonwealth of Virginia. It was one of the first acts of the Old Dominion after her independence had been established, long before old England passed her ordinance against it. And when the thirteen colonies formed the United States, in 1789, the voice of Virginia was raised in earnest advocacy of the immediate abolition of the

trade in negro slaves, but owing to the opposition of New England, in alliance with some of the cotton States, the evil traffic was given a twenty years further lease of life.

But that same profound respect for the convictions which conscience enforces makes it impossible for us who stood for the South in 1861 to profess any repentance, or any regret, for the course we then took. A man cannot repent of an act done in the fear of God and under the behest of conscience. We did what we believed in our hearts was right. We gave all for our belief. We cannot regret obeying the most solemn and sacred dictates of duty as we saw it.

We would not do aught to perpetuate the angry passions of the Civil War, or to foster any feeling of hostility to our fellow citizens of other parts of the Union. But we must forevermore do honor to our heroic dead. We must forevermore cherish the sacred memories of those four terrible but glorious years of unequal strife. We must forevermore consecrate in our hearts our old battle flag of the Southern Cross --not now as a political symbol, but as the consecrated emblem of an heroic epoch. The people that forgets its heroic dead is already dying at the heart and we believe we shall be truer and better citizens of the United States if we are true to our past.

The Southern people have already shown the world how the defeats of war may be turned into the victories of peace. They have given mankind an example of how a brave and proud race may sustain disaster, and endure long years of humiliation, yet rise again to power and glory.

I have said elsewhere two things of the Confederate soldier which I wish to repeat here.

The first is that the supreme issue in his mind in all that great struggle was not, as is generally supposed, the dissolution of the Union. No, the dissolution of

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the Union was not what the Confederate soldier had chiefly at heart. Nor was the establishment of the Southern Confederacy what he had chiefly at heart. Both the one and the other were secondary to the preservation of the supreme and sacred right of self-government. They were means to the end, not the end itself.

And the second thing I wish to say is that I do not believe the valor and devotion of the armies of the South were so lavishly poured out in vain. By their all-sacrificing patriotism they arraigned before the world the usurpation of powers and functions which by the Constitution were reserved to the States--and their arraignment has not been in vain. Silently, as the years have rolled by since Appomattox, its accusing voice has been heard, and its protest has become effective, until to-day the rights of the States--of all the States--are recognized as inviolate by both the executive, the legislative, and the judicial departments of the Government. And therefore I hold that just as surely as the enemies of the North saved the Union from dissolution, so surely did the armies of the South save the rights of the States within the Union. So that, if it is due to the valor of the Northern Army and Navy that we have to-day an indissoluble Union, it is equally due to the valor of the Confederate soldiers and sailors that that indissoluble Union is composed of indestructible States.

Thus victor and vanquished will both be crowned with the laurel of victory by the future historian.

I will add one other conviction which I deeply cherish. The Confederate soldier has left a legacy of valor and of liberty to his fellow countrymen, North



and South, which is destined to be recognized as a part of the national inheritance.

A recent historian of "The Greatness and Decline of Rome"<sup>1</sup> has remarked that the whole course of ancient history proves the tenacity and depth of republican ideas and traditions in the little Greek or Italian republics, and the difficulty of abolishing their liberties. He tells us that the republicanism of ancient Rome which the empire *seemed* to crush and destroy has still been mighty in modern Europe. It has inspired Europe to fight for her great ideals of liberty, without which European history would have been a counterpart of Oriental history, a continuous succession of despotisms, rising one upon the ruins of another.

It is thus that I believe the heroic spirit of liberty which animated the soldiers of the Confederacy, though it seemed to be crushed and destroyed at Appomattox, will in generations to come inspire Americans to fight for the high ideals of freedom and self-government which the men of the North and the men of the South have alike inherited from their forefathers. It will be recognized that the men who followed the battle flags of the Confederacy at such cost of hardship and trial and peril--exhibiting a devotion, a fortitude, a valor, and a self-sacrifice never surpassed--were animated by motives as pure and unselfish as ever stirred the hearts and nerved the arms of patriots. And so it will come to pass that the glorious valor and steadfast devotion to liberty which characterized the Confederate soldier will be acknowledged as a part of the national inheritance, to be treasured and guarded by every American who loves his country and values

1 Professor Ferrero.

the traditions of her glory. The fact that he did not succeed in his enterprise will abate no jot or tittle from the honor paid to his memory; for I dare to believe that the American of the future will recognize the eternal truth that it is not success which ennobles, but duty well done--manhood illustriously displayed, whether in victory or defeat.

Thus the fame of the Confederate soldier will shine with imperishable lustre:

4. "Immota manet, sæcula vincit."

## Reference #3

### Gettysburg

**Braman, Waters Whipple** (1840-?). Captain, 93rd New York Infantry.

Letters (1862-1865). 2 boxes (0.50 cu. ft.).

New York State Library call number: SC12780.

Born and raised in Troy, New York, Waters Whipple Braman enlisted December 7, 1861 to serve three years in the army. He mustered in 24 January 1862, as first lieutenant, Company C of the 93rd New York Infantry Regiment; he was discharged from service January 14, 1865. After the war, he settled in Watervliet, New York, and entered the lumber business.

The letters, addressed to Braman's family in Troy, include one written to his uncle after the Battle of Gettysburg.

[From a letter from Waters Whipple Braman to his Uncle on July 5, 1863:](#)  (1.36 MB)

Camp of 93d N.Y.V.  
Near Gettysburg Pa.  
July 5th, 1863

Dear Uncle,

... We have had an awful fight here, but thank the Lord, our Army has given the Rebels an ever-lasting thrashing. The heaviest fighting was yesterday, and to-day they are in full retreat, and our army entire is after them. This is the first time since the organization of the army of the Potomac that the rebels have met our men in open field, fight, and I don't believe they would this time but that (as the prisoners say) their officers told them they were to fight the militia, but they found to their cost that the old army of the Potomac was around. We must have taken about 8,000 prisoners. The loss in killed and wounded on both sides must be 25,000, and some say the rebels alone have lost that number. Gen'l Lee tried to come the flag of truce game on Gen'l Meade, but it failed to work. Gen'l Meade sent back that he would bury their dead for them.

We are encamped about  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mile from Gettysburg, right on the Battlefield which is very large. I have seen but very little of it, as we have been momentarily under orders to be ready to move ...