

Gettysburg Stories

FIRST DAY OF BATTLE

BY

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BATTLEFIELD CHANGES

The vegetation at Gettysburg has changed significantly over the years. In 1863, at least 38 orchards dotted the area that would become the battlefield. No wonder the Rebels were impressed with the bounty that awaited them when they crossed into Pennsylvania (and no wonder many of their digestive systems were upset by the unaccustomed consumption of so much fresh fruit – including, perhaps, Robert E. Lee, who according to at least one account, suffered the effects of too many cherries). The only orchards still there are the famous Peach Orchard, one near the Bliss farm, plus a couple of small ornamental plots on Cemetery Hill.

Today, there are 600 acres of woods that had been cleared land in 1863. This is due to the natural intrusion of vegetation plus the lack of grazing animals, which kept fields clear in the old days. This is especially noticeable in the areas around and west of Devil’s Den and north of Little Round Top. Cemetery Hill, now covered with beautiful giant trees, was an almost barren knoll with a just a few stunted trees and shrubs. Another 150 acres were wooded then but are clear now. All in all, visibility was generally better at the time of the battle than it is now, with the exception, of course, of the thick gun smoke that so obscured the field that opposing soldiers were often invisible to each other. The National Park Service, with the help of volunteers, is working busily to clear some areas and reforest others so the battlefield will be closer to its old appearance, but this is a never-ending struggle.

A network of roads now runs over the battlefield. While some follow the routes of roads or country lanes that existed during the battle, many more were built since to accommodate tourists. As one would expect, this is most noticeable in the areas of the heaviest fighting. On Little Round Top, for example, at the time of the battle there was a single primitive logging road up the eastern side of the hill reaching almost to the summit. A post-battle road was built running over the top from south to north. The road was eventually straightened and widened and parking areas and asphalt foot paths were added. All this construction required the removal of a number of boulders, severely altering the landscape. While the general feel of the landscape is similar to what it was during the battle, many details have been lost.

The same is true in Devil’s Den, the “rocky hill” west of the Wheatfield, on Culp’s Hill and at many other places. Farming, tank maneuvers during WWI, the building

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of the tent city for the 50th Reunion, and the construction of railroad tracks has changed the ground over which Pickett's Charge passed, flattening the field from its original undulating condition.

All in all, it is difficult today to appreciate the challenges of moving bodies of troops and artillery batteries around the battlefield.

MONUMENTS AND MARKERS

At latest count, the Gettysburg Battlefield is peppered with more than 950 monuments and markers (plus hundreds of small regimental flank markers), 410 cannon, and 148 historic buildings. Most of the monuments are, understandably, Union. After all, this was a Union victory on Union soil, and the Gettysburg Battlefield Monuments Commission was not receptive to Confederate monuments until decades after the war. Plus, the South was financially broke, and there was no money for luxuries like monuments to a lost cause.

The monuments and markers commemorate people, units, places, and events. Many, perhaps most, of the monuments are for specific regiments or artillery batteries, and were paid for by the men of those units and their friends. These unit monuments range from simple stone slabs to elaborate stone carvings or beautiful bronze statues.



Pennsylvania Monument

The monument to the 44th New York is the largest regimental monument on the battlefield. This castle-like edifice towers 44 feet tall on the summit of Little Round Top.

Pennsylvania has the biggest state monument at 69 feet tall. Its tablets list the name of over 34,000 Pennsylvania soldiers who were present at the battle.

EQUESTRIAN STATUES

There are seven equestrian statues at Gettysburg. All of them are of infantry commanders. The statue of the most prominent cavalry commander, John

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Buford, portrays him on foot; the same is true of Major William Wells, the only other cavalry officer with a statue. Perhaps more money could be raised for the monuments to infantry officers – horse statues require a lot of bronze.

There is still disagreement over the significance of the placement of the horse's feet in an equestrian statue. Some believe that there is an unwritten rule among sculptors that two hooves off the ground indicates that the rider was killed in the battle, while one raised hoof means he was wounded. Others call this a myth. Noted Civil War historian James McPherson supports the position that it is not a myth. He even states that the sculptor of the recently installed statue of James Longstreet had to get permission from the National Park Service to portray the horse with one foot raised, even though Longstreet was not wounded at Gettysburg.



General John Reynolds Statue

At any rate, the equestrian statue of General John Reynolds, killed early in the first day's fighting, is considered an engineering marvel. Horse and rider weigh nine thousand pounds and are perfectly balanced on just two hooves.

JOHN BURNS

One of the great stories to emerge from the Battle of Gettysburg was that of John Burns. Burns was a town character, a 70-year-old veteran of the war of 1812, variously described as cantankerous, highly opinionated and aggressively patriotic. He had served for many years as a town constable at a time when "constables were chosen on the principal of giving the job to a man that had nothing else to do and who, having once been an active member of the community, ought in some way to be provide for." He had also been the target of many practical jokes and pranks, especially by the town boys.

The Rebels had first passed through Gettysburg in late June, undoubtedly stirring up the old veteran's ire. When they reappeared in force and the battle began on the morning of July 1st, he could no longer sit and do nothing. He picked up his

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old flintlock and powder horn and headed toward the front to join the fray, berating his one-eyed neighbor for not grabbing a rifle and joining him. There may have been a handful of other civilians who took part in the fighting, but most of their stories are not well documented. Burns' is.

On McPherson Ridge Burns approached an officer of a Pennsylvania Bucktail regiment and requested that he be allowed to fall in with the officer's command. Not quite believing his eyes nor ears, the officer sent the aged Burns into the woods next to the McPherson Farm, where he fought beside members of the Iron Brigade throughout the afternoon until he was wounded three times. He was left behind by the Union retreat and spent the night lying in a field. Injured and exhausted, the old man made his way through groups of victorious Confederates who, bemused by the old fellow, allowed him to go home unmolested.



John Burns

John Burns survived his wounds and became a national hero, celebrated in story and song. Such was his fame that when Abraham Lincoln arrived in November for the dedication of the Soldiers National Cemetery, he specifically requested to meet John Burns. The President and the old hero attended church services together.

Burns died in 1872 and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Gettysburg. Veterans of the battle felt that something should be done to honor the old vet, and in 1903 a statue of Burns in fighting gear was dedicated where he stood with the Union to face the Confederate attack. Although the statue depicts him with a flintlock, in reality he used a rifled musket borrowed from a wounded Union soldier. The old man was not so stuck in his ways that he declined to take advantage of up-to-date weaponry.

So what makes the story of John Burns so special? Did the people of Gettysburg rise up to meet the invasion of their state and their town? No. Many tended the wounded, some baked bread for the soldiers, but most of them wisely fled or hid and let the soldiers carry the battle. But this would not do for the old man who was pushed to his limit. Instead, this town crank, this butt of many jokes, this veteran of a war fought before most of the townsfolk and soldiers had even been

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born did the rare thing – he shouldered his rifle and advanced toward the sound of the guns.

“SALLIE”

A number of the Gettysburg monuments bear statues or carved likenesses of a particular soldier whose actions at the battle merit special notice. A few, like the John Burns statue, honor civilians. There is one monument, however, that bears the likeness of a participant in the battle who was neither a soldier nor a civilian.

Where Oak Ridge slopes down toward the northwest side of Gettysburg runs Doubleday Avenue. Of course, there was no Doubleday Avenue during the battle, just a low stone wall to separate pasture, orchard and fields of wheat. Along this stone wall, facing west toward the advancing confederates was deployed a brigade made up of regiments from Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. Today, lined up much as the regiments were on July 1, 1863, stand monuments to each of the regiments. One of these monuments commemorates the 11th Pennsylvania, whose men helped hold this position until they were overwhelmed and ordered to fall back through the town.

Atop the 11th Pennsylvania monument stands the bronze statue of a Union soldier, his musket at the ready. The soldier faces to the west, away from Doubleday Avenue. Most battlefield visitors do not bother to stop and walk around to the front of the monument; after all, they are probably a little footsore by now and have seen plenty of monuments. This is a shame, for they will miss gazing into the very determined face of the Yank as he prepares for the Rebel attack which is coming. The visitor will also miss something else, something which makes this monument stand apart from others on the battlefield.

At the base of the monument, curled up beneath the soldier's feet, is a bronze statue of a small, nondescript dog. This is Sallie, the mascot of the 11th Pennsylvania. As a puppy, Sallie had been given to the regiment early in the war, and she had shared all the hardships with the men since then. She was present at all their battles, taking her position at the end of the line of battle, barking loudly at



Sallie near base of monument

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the enemy. She was a friendly mutt, but was known to hate three things: “Rebels, Democrats and Women!”

At Gettysburg she once again accompanied the troops as they tried to hold off the Confederate attack. During the confused retreat through town no one noticed at first that Sallie was missing. By the time the regiment reformed, it was apparent to all that their little comrade was not with them.

After the battle’s end, some men from the 11th Pennsylvania ventured north of town in search of Sallie. They found her, weak from hunger but alive, still lying among her dead comrades on Oak Ridge, faithfully guarding their bodies.

Sallie was nursed back to health and, like many of the wounded, rejoined the regiment and served for almost two more years. A soldier to the end, she was shot and killed while going into battle at Hatchers Run, Virginia in February 1865. Had she lived just a couple of more months, she would have survived the war. The men of the regiment buried her on the field despite being under heavy enemy fire.

But Sallie would not be forgotten by the men with whom she had shared so much. When the regimental monument was designed the survivors insisted that it include their faithful comrade. There she lies today, at her master’s feet, forever ready to answer the call to form ranks.

BEN CRIPPEN

It was a great honor for a Civil War soldier to be chosen as a color bearer. These were the men who carried the regimental and national flags. On parade, they led the ranks, both identifying the regiment and guiding the way. In battle, they performed much the same roles, but under infinitely different circumstances.

Because they drew the fire of the enemy, the men who carried the colors often had short life spans. Civil War battles are replete with incidents of color bearers being shot down, only to have the flag scooped up by another soldier, who in turn was felled. This might be repeated half a dozen times during a single engagement. A dangerous job, indeed.

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There are a number of monuments at Gettysburg that include the likenesses of regimental color bearers. So moved were the surviving members of these regiments by the courage of their color bearer that they chose to feature him when the time came to design their monuments. One in particular stands out for the pose in which the color bearer is depicted.

On the afternoon of the first day of the battle, the Union troops on McPherson Ridge were being hard pressed by the attacking Confederates. They had bravely held for several hours against the increasing tide of Rebels who were starting to flank the Union lines, but now word came that it was time to fall back to Seminary Ridge.

Not all the Yanks were pleased with this order. Near the McPherson farm Sergeant Ben Crippen, the color bearer of the 143rd Pennsylvania, followed the order to withdraw. But rather than simply skedaddle, he periodically turned and shook his fist at the advancing enemy. The flag fluttering above his head, his 6' 1" stature, and his challenging gesture eventually attracted the fire of Confederates. Confederate General A. P. Hill, commanding the III Corps that was attacking the Federals, saw Crippen fall. According to Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Freemantle of Britain's Coldstream Guards, who was an observer traveling with the Army of Northern Virginia, "General Hill was sorry when he met his fate."

Crippen's body was engulfed by the Rebel flood sweeping over McPherson's Ridge and the flag he bore was undoubtedly snatched up as a trophy. His body was never identified and he likely lies today among the unknowns in Gettysburg's Soldiers National Cemetery.

But the comrades who witnessed Crippen's gutsy act did not forget him. They chose a likeness of the obstinate Crippen shaking his fist to adorn their regimental monument, which stands near the spot where they last saw him, defiant to the end.



Ben Crippen appears on the 143rd PA Infantry monument

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"THE CHILDREN OF THE BATTLEFIELD"

When the Union line north and west of Gettysburg finally collapsed on the afternoon of the first day's fighting, a sea of blue uniforms began flowing south through town toward Cemetery Hill. Hot on their heels was a seemingly unstoppable Confederate army bent on shooting down or capturing every Federal in sight.

In a drastic bid to slow the Rebel advance, a brigade under Colonel Charles Coster was ordered to move down the northern slope of Cemetery Hill and take on the Rebels. As Union soldiers fled past them toward safety, Coster's men moved north through the streets until they arrived at Kuhn's brickyard on the outskirts of town. Coster deployed his three regiments east of Stratton Street. In the center of the formation was the 154th New York, and in the 154th New York was a sergeant named Amos Humiston.

Born in a small town in the remote reaches of New York state, Amos originally apprenticed to be a harness maker. Seeking adventure, he signed on with a whaler out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. A single three-and-half-year voyage was enough for Amos, and when his ship arrived back in New Bedford, he returned home, got married, fathered three children, and opened a harness shop in Portville, New York.

When war broke out in April 1861, Amos was anxious to enlist, but his duties to family held him back. When President Lincoln called for 300,000 three-year volunteers in July 1862, Amos could no longer resist, and he was one of the first men from Portville to answer the call. The patriotic pull must have been strong in Amos, since at 32 he was 6 years older than the average Union soldier, plus he had three small children at home.

Amos tried to be diligent in writing regularly to his wife, Philinda, and his letters expressed a mixture of homesickness, love for his wife and children, and commitment to do his duty. Amos' unit did not see much action until the spring of 1863. However, his life was threatened on two occasions by serious bouts of

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fever and diarrhea. Nevertheless, Amos performed well enough to be promoted to sergeant.

In May 1863, Amos' regiment took fearful losses at Chancellorsville. Not long after, Amos received a present from Philinda. It was a simple gift, but one that was destined to become famous – an ambrotype of their three children. He wrote to his wife, "I got the likeness of the children and it pleased me more than any thing that you could have sent to me. How I want to see them and their mother is more than I can tell I hope that we may all live to see each other again if this war does not last too long." The war would not last much longer for Amos. In June he marched north with the Army of the Potomac, dogging Robert E. Lee's foray into Pennsylvania.

July 1st found him stationed with his regiment in Kuhn's brickyard on the north side of Gettysburg, as the war swirled about him. The outnumbered Union troops stood as long as they could, but finally the thin line crumbled and fled and Amos fled with them. He made it a few blocks south to the corner of Hanover and Stratton streets.

We don't know the circumstance of Amos' death. Did he die bravely, turning to take one last shot at the advancing enemy? Or was he struck down fleeing in desperation? We'll never know, and it doesn't really matter. For Amos was destined to become famous, not for fighting but for dying.



The Children of the Battlefield memorial

After the Confederate withdrawal, a girl found Amos' body. Clutched in his stiff fingers was a picture – a picture of three small children, a girl and two boys. He must have pulled it from his pocket so he could gaze upon their faces before he breathed his last. The picture bore no names and Amos' body had no identification. An anonymous soldier destined to be buried with the unknowns.

The girl gave the picture to her father, who operated a tavern about a dozen miles west of Gettysburg. He posted it behind the bar for all to see.

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Volunteers were pouring into Gettysburg to help the wounded, and by sheer happenstance a wagon carrying four men broke down near the tavern. One of the men was a Philadelphia physician named John Francis Bourns. Visiting the tavern, he saw the ambrotype and heard the story of how and where it had been found. Intrigued, he talked the tavern owner into relinquishing the picture and set out to try to identify its owner.

When he got to Gettysburg, he found the soldier's grave and ensured that it was well marked. Returning to Philadelphia, he set forth on his quest to track down the fallen man's identity. He had local photographers produce hundreds of duplicates of the picture. Then he contacted a number of newspapers to spread the story of "the children of the battlefield." Although newspapers of the day could not reproduce photographs, they described the unknown soldier's ambrotype in enough detail that a reader might be able to recognize the children. The story included Dr. Bourn's address and asked interested parties to contact him.

In Portville, New York, Mrs. Philinda Humiston waited and worried. She had not heard from her husband Amos in some time. She knew there had been a great battle at Gettysburg and that her husband's regiment had been there. Was he alive and unscathed, or captured, wounded, missing, killed? No word came.

In early November, a resident of Portville shared with his townsfolk a single copy of *The American Presbyterian*, a Philadelphia religious journal which contained a story titled "Whose Father Was He?" The copy came into the hands of Philinda Humiston, who recognized the description of the picture.

Dr. Bourn had received many letters from people who thought they might know the children in the picture, and he sent each of them a copy. But nothing came from it. When a letter from Philinda Humiston arrived, he dutifully mailed her a picture, but had no reason to believe that this was any different from the other inquiries. When Philinda received Dr. Bourn's letter, she knew her questions had been answered and her worst fears had been realized. Gazing back at her were the cherubic faces of her little Franklin, Alice and Frederick.

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The American Presbyterian broke the news in an article published on November 19, the same day that Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous address at the Soldiers National Cemetery in Gettysburg.

The Humiston story does not end there. Impressed by the national outpouring of sympathy stirred up by his campaign to identify the father of the “children of the battlefield,” Dr. Bourns set out on a second campaign to raise funds for an orphanage in Gettysburg for children of Union soldiers who had been killed in the battle. Donations came from all over the country and in October 1866 the orphanage opened with 22 children. At Dr. Bourns’ request, Philinda Humiston moved there with her three children and helped run the home. But Gettysburg did not agree with Philinda, and in 1869 she remarried and moved to Massachusetts.

The orphanage grew to almost 100 children, but in a sad turn of events, it closed a dozen years after opening, plagued with charges of child abuse and embezzlement by Dr. Bourns.

Amos Humiston is not interred with the unknowns. He rests today in Grave 14, Row B of the New York section of the Soldiers National Cemetery. In 1993 a group of concerned Gettysburg and Portville citizens, with help from descendants of the members of the 154th New York, erected a monument featuring likenesses of Amos and his three children near the spot where his body was found.

Amos Humiston is famous today because through a series of coincidences and the persistence of one man, the poignant story of the “children of the battlefield” attained national attention. But we might want to remember Sergeant Humiston not just as one of the anonymous fallen whose identity was finally revealed. In a larger sense, perhaps we should think of him as a representative of the thousands of unknown Gettysburg soldiers who deserve to be honored not for any particular heroics on the battlefield, but for giving, in Lincoln’s words, the “last full measure of devotion” for the cause they believed in.

THE UNFORTUNATE DEATH OF JOHN BUFORD

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Union Brigadier General John Buford, whose cavalry troopers so masterfully delayed the Confederate army on the first day at Gettysburg, was recognized as one of the best cavalry commanders of the war. His family was originally from Virginia and he was born in Kentucky. When he was eight, his family moved to Illinois, where his father was a prominent Democratic politician and an opponent of Abraham Lincoln. Buford graduated from West Point in 1848 and was serving in the army when hostilities between North and South broke out. His cousin became a cavalry brigadier general in the Confederate Army. General John Gibbon, who commanded the Union division at the Angle during Pickett's Charge, tells in his memoirs of the night in 1861 when Buford decided to stay with the Union:



John Buford

“One night after the arrival of the mail we were in his room, when Buford said in his slow and deliberate way ‘I got a letter from the Governor of Kentucky. He sent me word to come to Kentucky at once and I shall have anything I want.’ With a good deal of anxiety, I asked ‘What did you answer, John?’ and my relief was great when he replied ‘I sent him word I was a Captain in the United States Army and I intended to remain one!’”

Gibbon, also a West Pointer, was from North Carolina but, like his friend Buford, opted to serve the Union.

Unfortunately, John Buford would not live to see the end of the conflict. Late in 1863 he became ill, from what is believed to be typhoid. He died on December 16, 1863. It was a loss to the army to which he had remained faithful. His final words were reported to be, "Put guards on all the roads, and don't let the men run to the rear."

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ELIZABETH THORN

The most famous female connected with Gettysburg has to be Jennie Wade, the only civilian known to have been killed during the battle. Jennie had the misfortune of being struck by a stray bullet while she was baking bread in the kitchen of her sister's house on Baltimore Street, near the base of Cemetery Hill. While today Jennie is well-known for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, others whose contributions were greater have not achieved such popularity. Among them is Elizabeth Thorn. Elizabeth and her husband, Peter, emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania, where Peter became the caretaker of Gettysburg's Evergreen Cemetery. They lived in the now-famous gatehouse, along with their three children and her parents. In 1862, Peter enlisted in the Union army, and Elizabeth was left to manage the cemetery and raise their children.

When the war came to Gettysburg, Elizabeth's life changed even more. She left this account of the first of July:

"I was busy baking bread and was so occupied when the soldiers began to come up the Taneytown Road and through the cemetery. As fast as I could cut the hot bread they took it out of my hands.... Every vessel I had in the house, all the tin cups and tumblers were out along the old pump inside the gate and the vessels were kept filled with water for the thirsty soldiers.... They would take a drink and hurry off and this lasted until the pump broke."

A Union officer came to the gatehouse trying to find a man who could guide the troops through the maze of roads. Elizabeth said her father spoke little English, but she would be willing to go. The officer refused, saying there was too much danger for a woman. He gave in after the third time Elizabeth told him she would go. The officer insisted that she walk on the side of his horse away from the fighting to give her some protection. When they arrived where the soldiers were waiting, they asked what she was doing there. According to Elizabeth, "the officer said I was all right, and



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the men gave me three cheers.” After she pointed out the main roads, the officer accompanied her back home, again keeping her on the off side of his horse.

Later that day she was enlisted to make supper for General Oliver O. Howard, who was heading the Army of the Potomac until General Meade could arrive. Howard finally showed up at the gatehouse about midnight with Generals Slocum and Sickles, and ate a supper of dough cakes, pan cakes, meat, apple butter and coffee.

She asked Howard whether the family should move out of the house, and the general said they should stay, but he would send word if the danger got too great. He also offered to have any “good things” put in a safe place. Then he laughed and said “I guess you think all your things are good.” Elizabeth replied that “some were better than others.” Howard sent two men to carry the valuables down into the cellar, including a chest of linens that the family had brought from Germany.

Elizabeth and her family did not get any sleep that night, and in the morning a soldier arrived and announced “This family is commanded by General Howard to leave this house as quick as they can, to pick up nothing to take with them but their children.” They went some distance down the Baltimore Pike to stay at a farmhouse. But Elizabeth was not one to just sit around, and during the night of July 2nd she and her father returned to the gatehouse. At the cemetery they could hear the groans of the wounded. They found that their pigs were gone, their stable and pig pen had been torn apart for firewood, and even their bee hives were missing. She also found that their house was full of wounded men. They went back to the farmhouse on the Baltimore Pike.

After the battle, there were “sixteen soldiers and one colored man buried in the garden.... In one field lay fifteen dead horses and in the other field nineteen dead horses. They were right beside the cemetery and were not buried and the stench was awful. For days I could hardly eat because of the disagreeable odor.”

Up until July of 1863 the Evergreen Cemetery had averaged five burials per month. All that changed. According to Elizabeth “father and I dug 105 graves in the next three weeks.... For all the extra work of burying the soldiers we never received any extra pay from the cemetery nor from any other source, only the monthly salary of \$13.”

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During all this, Elizabeth was six months pregnant. Three months later she gave birth to a daughter, Rose Meade Thorn. Despite the destruction of her property and the agony her family suffered, apparently Elizabeth's patriotism was not dimmed, since her daughter's middle name honored the Union commander. Unfortunately, Rose was not a strong baby, which Elizabeth blamed on the arduous work required of her after the battle. Rose died at the age of just fourteen months. On a brighter note, Elizabeth's husband Peter, though wounded, survived the war and was present at Appomattox. He returned home in 1865 and he and Elizabeth continued to manage the cemetery until 1874. They had five more children. Elizabeth died in 1907 at the age of 75.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth Thorn is not well known today outside of Civil War buffs and Gettysburg residents. Most visitors seem more enthralled with the story of Jennie Wade. However, for those who look for it, Elizabeth's memory lives on. Just south of the Evergreen Cemetery gatehouse along the Baltimore Pike stands the Civil War Women's Memorial. It is a statue of Elizabeth Thorn, leaning on a shovel and wiping her brow as she labors to bury the Union dead.