

Far Above Our Poor Power to Add or Detract:

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National Park Service Administration of the
Gettysburg Battlefield, 1933-1938.

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 **“Far Above Our Poor Power to Add or Detract”:** National
Park Service Administration of the Gettysburg Battlefield,
1933–1938

Jennifer M. Murray

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**“Far Above Our Poor Power to Add or
Detract”:**
National Park Service Administration of the Gettysburg

Battlefield, 1933–1938

Jennifer M. Murray (bio)

On July 8, 1863, Pvt. William Calder, of the 2d North Carolina regiment, wrote a letter to his mother, stating: “No doubt the news of the great three days battle of Gettysburg has resounded throughout the land and fill many a heart with mourning. How many widows and orphans were made by that battle God only knows. It was without the doubt the bloodiest and most terrific battle of the war.” Lt. Frank Haskell, a Union staff officer in the 2d Corps, echoed the sentiment in a letter to his brother written on July 16, “The battle of Gettysburg is distinguished in this war . . . as by far the greatest and severest conflict that has occurred.”¹

Private Calder’s and Lieutenant Haskell’s words typified the sentiment of approximately 170,000 Union and Confederate soldiers who participated in the battle of Gettysburg on July 1–3, 1863. America had never known a battle as large, bloody, or deadly as Gettysburg. The total casualty rate, fifty-one thousand, was unprecedented. Nearly ten thousand Americans courageously sacrificed their lives on the bloodstained Pennsylvania fields. Approximately thirty thousand soldiers were wounded. And over ten thousand became prisoners of war. The small town of Gettysburg, population twenty-four hundred, **[End Page 56]** was devastated. Four months after the battle, on November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal “Gettysburg Address,” further solidifying Gettysburg’s prominent place in American history and memory.

As the Battle of Gettysburg was arguably the turning point in the Civil War and the Union army’s greatest victory, it is not surprising that efforts to preserve and protect those hallowed grounds began only months after the armies departed from the fields. During the battlefield’s 144-year history, the site has been administered by three organizations designated to preserve and protect the historic fields: the Gettysburg

Battlefield Memorial Association (1864–95), the U.S. War Department (1895–1933), and the current administrator, the National Park Service (NPS). During the first five years of the NPS administration, park officials implemented an unprecedented number of changes that permanently altered the battlefield.² Some of the changes, particularly advancements in education and improvements to the park infrastructure, benefited the park service’s preservation and interpretative objectives. Other changes, particularly to the Soldiers’ National Cemetery and the agricultural landscape, adversely affected the historical integrity of the famous fields made sacred by the blood and devotion of the soldiers.

Gettysburg is the most studied battle in Civil War historiography, with thousands of books and articles devoted to the events between the Armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia. Scant attention, however, has been given to the preservation process that followed the fight, particularly to how the National Park Service administered the battlefield. The most comprehensive study of the battlefield to date is the *Administrative History*, completed in July 1991 by Harlan D. Unrau, who examines the “conception, establishment, development, and operation of the park and cemetery.” Unrau’s study, however, was an in-house publication intended primarily to provide administrations with an understanding of the park’s history as well as administration problems and accomplishments. Barbara L. Platt’s *This Is Holy Ground* offers a similar, general overview of the history of the park.³ Additionally, during an annual **[End Page 57]** seminar at Gettysburg National Military Park focusing on the park’s history, Park Ranger Karlton Smith presented “The Changing Faces of Gettysburg: The National Park Service at Gettysburg.” His paper essay focuses broadly on the park service’s sixty-year administration of the battlefield, but Smith’s discussion of the park service takeover and immediate administration years is minimal and incomplete.⁴ In short, while providing a deeper insight into the park service’s administration of Gettysburg, none of these sources analyze the consequences of the NPS acquisition during the 1930s era.

Since the 1990s, scholars have begun shifting the Gettysburg historiography away from issues of tactics and strategy, to address larger questions of commemoration and memory. For example, Amy J. Kinsel, in pioneering research, has offered a better...

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JENNIFER M. MURRAY

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1. William Calder, to mother, July 8, 1863, William Calder Papers, Southern Historical Collections, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Frank Aretas Haskell, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Boston: Commandery of the State of Massachusetts, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1908), 80.



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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