ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Cycloramas

By **Yoni Appelbaum**

Cycloramas were the blockbusters of their day, cylindrical paintings blended seamlessly with dioramas, drawing millions to revel in their illusions. They were also marvels of technology, blending art with artifice to create an immersive experience. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, they pioneered mass entertainment. In their brief and glorious heyday, cycloramas proliferated through America, depicting a broad range of subjects. Their most popular theme, however, was the battles of the Civil War. Canvasses recreating a half-dozen of its greatest fights toured the country, drawing crowds wherever they went. But none could rival the success of those that depicted the Battle of Gettysburg.

Today, just two of the great American cycloramas remain intact, and on public display. One sits in Atlanta, Georgia, where it brings to life the battles that once ranged all around it. The other, recently restored, attracts crowds in Gettysburg, who stop in to orient themselves on their way to tour the battlefield. Both demand attention, and reward visitors. Step inside these artistic marvels and imagine yourself transported, if only for a moment, a century and a half back in time, amid the thundering roar of the cannon fire and the chaos of combat. The illusion is nearly perfect.

The painting that ignited the craze for cycloramas in America debuted in Chicago in 1884. Paul Philippoteaux's lifelike depiction of the Battle of Gettysburg was much more than a painting. It re-created the battlefield with such painstaking fidelity, and created an illusion so enveloping, that many visitors felt as if they were actually there. "No person should die without seeing this cyclorama," declared a Boston man in 1885. "It's a duty they owe to their country." Its version of the conflict proved so alluring, in fact, that it changed the way America remembered the Civil War.[1]

Cycloramas—paintings wrapped around the interior of a rotunda, their foregrounds filled with props to create an impression of depth—were a familiar sight in Europe throughout the 19th century. Philippoteaux, a French artist, had already painted a number of European battles when he was hired by a consortium of Chicago investors to apply his magic to Gettysburg. He spent months researching the clash and interviewing survivors, and even commissioned photographs of the landscape, before embarking upon the

[1] "Sayings at the Cyclorama," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 19, 1885.

greatest challenge of his career. A team of artists labored for months in Brussels. The finished painting, unveiled in Chicago in 1883, weighed six tons and cost the investors $200,000. The same team produced three other versions, with only minor alterations, for display in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Four hundred feet long. Fifty feet high. It was art on an astonishing scale. All four versions were housed in massive, purpose-built rotundas. In Boston, for example, visitors walked through a grand crenelated archway, paid for their tickets, and proceeded along a dark winding passage toward the viewing platform. They ascended a winding staircase to another time and place. "The impression upon the beholder as he steps upon this platform," one reviewer wrote, "is one of mingled astonishment and awe."[2]

July 3, 1863. The Battle of Gettysburg rages on for a third day. From just behind Cemetery Ridge, visitors watched Pickett's Charge crash against the Union lines. There, in the distance! General Lee and his staff. Much closer, an artillery caisson explodes. All around, soldiers crouch, charge, level rifles, bare bayonets, fight, die.

A dozen different twists heightened the illusion. Drapes hung over the platform from the ceiling, limiting and directing the view and leaving the viewers shrouded in shadows. The indirect lighting shone most brightly on the top of the canvas, illuminating the sky in brilliant blue. The canvas bowed outward by a foot in the middle, receding as it approached the ground and horizon. Tinsel lent a convincing gleam to the bayonets and buckles in the painting.

What most astonished observers, though, was the diorama, which began near the edge of the platform and ended at the painting, 45 feet away. Hundreds of cartloads of earth were covered in sod and studded with vegetation, then topped with the detritus of the battlefield. Shoes, canteens, fences, walls, corpses: near the canvas, these props were cunningly arranged to blend seamlessly into the painting. Two wooden poles, painted on the canvas, met a third leaned against it to form a tripod. A dirt road ran out into the diorama. A stretcher borne by two men, one painted and the other formed of boards, had its poles inserted through holes in the painting. "So perfect is the illusion," as the *Boston Advertiser* voiced the common sentiment, "that it is impossible to tell where reality ends and the painting begins."[3]

The paintings dazzled their audiences. During the day, they were lit by skylights in the center of the dome. A screen hung above the platform left the audience obscured in dim shadows, gazing out at the blue sky of the canvas sparkling with sunlight. At night, the effect was even more intense. The Boston Cyclorama boasted that its state-of-the-art electric lighting used "a Ball 25-lighter, 10 amphere current," powered by "a Southwark engine and a Hodge Steel boiler." For audiences for whom the electric light remained something of a wondrous novelty, the extended hours offered a new appeal. "Those that have seen the Cyclorama by daylight should see it by electric light," the proprietors

[2] "J.L. Harris, "The Battle of Gettysburg," Zion's Herald, March 18, 1885.
[3] "The Battle of Gettysburg," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 16, 1885.

urged. It was a frozen slice of the past, shining with the incandescent glow of the future.[4]

Stories circulated of credulous visitors for whom illusion displaced reality. A veteran shouted to his companion: "Down, Bill, down! By t' Lord, there's a feller sightin' his gun on us!" Another told his companions, "You see that puff of smoke? Just wait a moment till that clears away, and I'll show you just where I stood." An old woman urged her son, "Come away, John, I canna bear the smell o' these dead horses." Such stories, with stock characters speaking in exaggerated dialect, allowed their tellers to laugh away their own unease. Blinking in the bright daylight outside, still uncertain just where the stone-wall ended and the painting began, they reclaimed their shaken faith in their own senses by telling tales of the truly credulous.[5]

Cycloramas proved capable of confounding even the most sophisticated of observers. In New York, a nighttime burglary of the cyclorama building brought out the police, who spent 30 minutes searching fruitlessly for the suspects. At last, one officer shouted in triumph, "I got him! I got him!" But he had been fooled by the illusion; the figure he clutched was a dummy representing a dead soldier, amid the debris strewn about the foreground. He "felt very bad," the *New York Times* reported, "until another officer made the same mistake."[6]

In marketing their remarkable illusions, the proprietors faced an enormous hurdle. To pull in paying crowds large enough to reward their enormous investment, they needed to carve out a new social space, cutting across class lines. They took pains to lure the burgeoning middle classes alongside workers enjoying the heady mix of cash wages and leisure, stressing the educational value of the experience as well as its visceral appeal. Of all potential entertainments, "there is none where the combination of pleasure and instruction is better obtained," *The Brooklyn Magazine* declared. Lecturers, themselves veterans of the battle, were employed to point out its highlights and to offer their own memories. Children received discounted rates, and school groups were frequent visitors to "the most vivid history lesson they can ever study."[7]

The illusion was so gripping, though, that the history lesson often proved a little too vivid. Many visitors were overwhelmed by the horrific gore, and the thousands dead or dying. A novel of the era had its protagonist, a "model lad", visit the Cyclorama. "Oh! I never thought it was so horrible," he exclaimed. "I used to want to be a soldier, but I guess I will forget that want." Life imitated art. One ten-year-old stared at the canvas,

[4] "Electric Light and Power," *The Electrician and Electrical Engineer ; a Monthly Review of Theoretical and Applied Science* 5 (1886), 477.
[5] Elbert Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of Eminent Painters* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 495; Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. Wisconsin Commandery, *War Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Wisconsin*, vol.1 (Milwaukee, WI: Burdick, Armitage & Allen, 1903), 318; Graham F. Watts, "'The smell o' these dead horses': The Toronto Cyclorama and the Illusion of Reality," in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74, no.4 (Fall 2005): 967.
[6] "Burglars at Gettysburg," *New York Times*, July 11, 1889.
[7] "Publishers Department, " *Brooklyn Magazine*, February 1887, viii; "Battle of Gettysburg Sights," *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1885.

looking at the carnage in the wheatfield. "Pop, isn't that murder?" he asked. His father, a Union captain, affirmed that it was, and "from that time, his soldier ardor abated." Nor were such reactions restricted to children. A young school teacher who spent three hours staring at the painting wrote that "the picture vanished and it became a live battle to me and all things there were real." She left convinced of the futility of violence. A veteran who "never wanted to see another war" found that he "couldn't look at the suffering men," and focused instead on the landscape.[8]

Success brought flattery, in its sincerest form. Enterprising promoters commissioned their own Gettysburg cycloramas. Some were small, cheap imitations, sharing little more than a name with Philippoteaux's four original paintings. Most, though, were credible facsimiles. Their owners hired artists away from Philippoteaux. A few likely worked from stolen sketches, but high-quality photographs, sold as souvenirs, were also readily available. These pirated works were known as "buckeyes," a pejorative commonly applied to things of inferior quality and, in the art world, used for painters and their works aimed at the commercial market. Some of the better buckeyes were passed off as Philippoteaux's own work. There were at least a dozen buckeyes of *Gettysburg*, and perhaps twice that number, in circulation. These pirated versions toured widely, often stopping at state fairs and exhibitions. It is entirely plausible that Philippoteaux's vision found its largest audience among these fairgoers, lining up to see an imitation of an illusion.

Cycloramas of other Civil War battles followed in rapid succession, all of them depicting notable Union victories and intended primarily for Northern audiences. In August of 1885, Chicago promoters hoping to reproduce the sensational success of the Gettysburg Cyclorama unveiled a new cyclorama of the Battle of Shiloh. It used the features of 2,000 actual participants in the battle, and when it opened just a week after the death of General Ulysses S. Grant, seemed poised for great success. Other cycloramas depicted the clash of the Monitor and the *Virginia* (Merrimac), the Second Battle of Bull Run, the Battle of Lookout Mountain, and Vicksburg. In Milwaukee, William Wehner's American Panorama Company tried its luck depicting the Storming of Missionary Ridge in the Chattanooga campaign. The results were promising enough to justify a second painting, this one depicting the Battle of Atlanta. Although some sources claim it was commissioned to support the vice-presidential aspirations of its hero, General John Logan, the timing makes it more likely that it was a speculative venture, intended to capitalize on his political prominence. When completed in 1887, it was initially displayed in Detroit, Minneapolis, and Indianapolis. It was then purchased by a Georgia businessman, and brought south

To cash in on the cyclorama craze, promoters also turned to unrelated subjects. They tried an erupting Mount Kilauea. Niagara Falls. Bunker Hill. The Johnstown Flood.

[8] Walter Thomas Leahy, *Clarence Belmont; or, A Lad of Honor* (Philadelphia, PA: H.L. Kilner, 1894),115; Arthur Firmin Jack, *"Chet," Also Other Writings* (New York: privately printed, 1899), 151; Sara Thacker, *The Logos of the New Dispensation of Time* (Sacramento, CA: D Johnson, 1899), 4; "Items," *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal* , May 7, 1886, 335.

Even the Crucifixion. All fell short. There was something about the Battle of Gettysburg, as Philippoteaux depicted it, that proved perfectly matched to its time and place.

But all illusions, no matter how convincing, are eventually dispelled. "We once obtained permission to go behind the scenes in ... *The Battle of Gettysburg*," a critic later recalled. "After that the illusion was destroyed. Most of the cannon in the foreground were of galvanized iron, the thickness of a sheet of tin, and so were the soldiers and wagons. When we returned to the platform the skill of the deception seemed to us greater than ever, but we were thoroughly disillusioned." Familiarity turned the marvelous mundane, made the breathtaking banal.[9]

Cycloramas might still have extended their appeal through ever-more lavish effects and confounding illusions, but they faced a far greater problem. Philippoteaux's painting of Gettysburg was the most immersive, most convincing depiction of a scene ever placed on canvas. For millennia, painters labored to conjure living tableau with oil and brush; Philippoteaux succeeded as never before. But his triumph came as realism peaked. Photography could capture images with more perfect fidelity; moving pictures soon offered scenes of greater immediacy. Painters began to strive, instead, for less literal truths. By 1894, a critic could sneer that "in the *salon carré* at the Louvre is Murillo's Immaculate Conception; no one ever mistook its figures for real objects, yet who would not give for it a thousand Gettysburg cycloramas?"[10]

The great canvasses portraying Gettysburg became anachronistic curiosities. In Sioux City, Iowa, a twister lifted the roof off the cyclorama building and destroyed the artwork. Another canvas was sliced into pieces, and sewn together into a tent for a restaurant. Most of the massive paintings, though, met more prosaic ends. They fell victim to leaky roofs and sagging supports, burned, or were left to decompose. One buckeye was shipped across the Pacific to the Japanese Military Academy, so that officers could study tactics in the run up to the Russo-Japanese War. A second painting wound up stranded in Wellington; the government of New Zealand offered it for sale with the helpful suggestion that it might "be converted into a modern Battle Scene at very reasonable cost." One wound up on offer at a Brooklyn amusement agency, which listed, among its other wares, "circus wagons, performing dogs, 'The Battle of Gettysburg' cyclorama, a Pullman car and a demon child."[11]

By 1888, the proprietors of the Boston Cyclorama decided that *Gettysburg* had exhausted its appeal, and commissioned *General Custer's Last Fight* to replace it. After *Custer* left on tour, *Gettysburg* returned for a few months in the fall of 1889, before being taken down for the final time. More than a dozen workers labored for two weeks to remove the

[9] "The Passing of the Cyclorama," *The Advance,* April 24, 1913, 2165.
[10] "Romance and Reality," *The Nassau Literary Magazine* 49, no.8 (March 1894): 590.
[11] For a discussion of the fate of many of the paintings including the one sent to Japan see "Frederic William Heiné, Painter of Famous Panoramas Won For Milwaukee Distinctive Place in History", *Milwaukee Journal*, October 2, 1921; *Evening Post* (Wellington, New Zealand), August 18, 1921; *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 3, 1889.

massive canvas; they spent at least a day just rolling it up. It toured for a few years before slipping from public view. In 1901, the astonished *Boston Globe* discovered the painting in a crate on a vacant lot, topped by an improvised roof, "going to rack and ruin." The story of a painting that once cost $100,000 rotting in a box, entombed in "a sort of mausoleum of greatness", captured national attention but provoked no efforts at salvage. The Boston Cyclorama Company dissolved three years later. And there the orphaned painting sat.[12]

No other American cyclorama ever came close to matching the popularity of Philippoteaux's *Gettysburg*. It had an educational purpose and also offered a voyeuristic thrill, but the same might be said of the other great canvasses depicting battles of the Civil War. It gained its decisive edge from its particular subject, Pickett's Charge. More than 12,000 Confederates advanced toward the Union lines in a last, desperate assault on the battle's third day. Philippoteaux captured the moment they reached the top of the ridge. The two armies grappled furiously, but the Union held, and more than half the Confederates fell as casualties. The battle was over. The canvas showed the "fierce onslaught which fixed the nation's destiny," as one reviewer put it.[13]

Just like its tinfoil cannon, though, the cyclorama's presentation of Pickett's Charge was a convincing illusion that could not sustain closer scrutiny. Philippoteaux took his cue from the work of John Bachelder, a painter and lithographer who had embedded himself with the Union army. Bachelder wanted to make the war's decisive moment the subject of his greatest work, an ambition that required him to identify a single iconic scene. After Gettysburg, he seized upon Pickett's Charge, famously labeling the point at which the Confederates were driven back "the high water mark of the rebellion."[14]

It was a brilliant turn of phrase, but the idea itself remained merely an artistic conceit. The Confederate forces came no closer to victory on the third day at Gettysburg than they had on the second. Pickett's Charge was a final gamble, and even if it had succeeded, it was unlikely to have altered the course of the war. Indeed, when it failed, few believed the defeat decisive. It was not even the most important event of July 3, 1863; 1,000 miles to the southwest, a few hours before Pickett mounted his charge, the Confederate defenders of Vicksburg sued for surrender, ceding the Mississippi River to the Union and splitting the Confederacy in two. General Grant later argued that "the fate of the Confederacy was sealed when Vicksburg fell." Other candidates for a decisive

[12] For the story of how the Cyclorama was dismantled see Custer's Last Fight," *The Boston Globe*, March 22, 1889 and "Moving a Cyclorama", *Boston Daily Globe*, December 7, 1890; For the story of the discovery of the cyclorama in a crate in a vacant lot see "Going to Ruin", *Boston Daily Globe*, March 19, 1901; "Fate of a $100,000 Painting", Gettysburg Compiler, March 19, 1901.
[13] "The Great Battle", *Wisconsin Labor Advocate*, February 4, 1887.
[14] Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 95-102.

moment abound. But none shared the artistic potential of Pickett's Charge.[15]

Bachelder engraved a best-selling overview of the battlefield. He commissioned a painting of Pickett's Charge, sending it on a national tour. In lectures and pamphlets, he thrilled audiences with his description of the decisive moment that kept the nation united, and not divided. Bachelder's relentless efforts began to reshape the memory of the battle. His commercial successes may well have inspired the Chicago investors who commissioned the first *Gettysburg* cyclorama. And emblazoned on Philippoteaux's massive canvases, Bachelder's vision of the battle seared itself into the nation's collective memory.

Millions flocked to the cyclorama to see the moment at which the Union was saved and the Rebellion defeated. The initial reviews presented the painting as a depiction of the Union's greatest triumph, where it smashed "the desperate and disastrous charge of Pickett's column." A Union veteran recast Bachelder's "high water mark" in more sanguinary terms -- as the spot where "the wave of rebellion reached its greatest height" and was "thrown back in a bloody spray." A former Confederate, visiting a friend in Boston, found the reminder of defeat a little too vivid. "He watched the picture in silence, and then strode out of the hall, while with a fierce gesture he exclaimed: 'Why don't you Yankees paint Bull Run?'"[16]

It was an understandable reaction. But as time wore on, Pickett's Charge assumed a new significance. While few survivors initially remembered the battle as glorious, the image crafted by Bachelder and popularized by Philippoteaux ultimately proved irresistible to most Confederate veterans. It offered them a chance to celebrate their valor and sacrifices. "I saw two veterans watching the cyclorama of Gettysburg and the tears streamed down their cheeks," a top official of the United Confederate Veterans reported approvingly. A notice in the *Confederate Veteran* in 1897 applauded the painting of "brave Pickett and the grey-coated heroes" and its "tale of heroism unequaled in history." It urged that the cyclorama, when on display at Tennessee's Centennial Exhibition, "be seen by every one who visits the grounds."[17]

The painting also hinted at tantalizing possibilities. If the war had a single decisive moment—its outcome in the balance—then it might have ended differently. It

[15] For a discussion of why Pickett's Charge would not have been a turning point in the war see Earl J. Hess, *Pickett's Charge: The Last Attack at Gettysburg* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 385; Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*. 2 vols. 2010 edition (New York: Charles Webster, 1885), 213. For a discussion of different turning points of the Civil War see Wikipedia contributors, "Turning point of the American Civil War," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Turning_point_of_the_American_Civil_War&oldid=57578109.
[16] "The Battle of Gettysburg," *Sunday Boston Herald*, December 21, 1884; John Ritchie, "Gettysburg," *Daily News* (NY), October 24, 1883; "The Confederate Soldier," *Boston Globe*, August 12, 1895.
[17] For a discussion of survivors' initial memories see Hess, *Pickett's Charge,* 397; For a discussion of how these views changed over time see Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market and an American Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 110; *Minutes of the Eighteenth Meeting of the United Confederate Veterans* (New Orleans: Schumert & Warfield, 1908), 22; "The Battle of Gettysburg," *The Confederate Veteran*, June 1897, 307.

was the sentiment best captured by William Faulkner a half century later, as he painted the by-then familiar scene:

> For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet...and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time. Maybe this time ...*[18]

Perhaps the greatest appeal of the painting was that it captured both Northern heroism and Southern valor in a single vivid picture. By 1883, when the first cyclorama opened, the North had largely retreated from its efforts to reconstruct the South, leaving that revolution unfinished. Reconciliation was the order of the day. The cover of the Boston Program of the Cyclorama showed a Union soldier clasping hands with a Confederate. Such appeals were not only good politics; they were good business. In New York, the lecturer took pains to praise the heroism of both sides. "No ex-Confederate could listen, except with a full heart, to the panegyric heaped upon Pickett's men at the cyclorama of 'Gettysburg,'" the *Blue and Gray* observed in 1893. The cyclorama offered an image that both sides could regard with pride. And, by fixing the war firmly in the past, it offered the public a chance to celebrate how far it had come.[19]

After moldering in its mausoleum for a decade, the Boston cyclorama received a new lease on life. In 1910, the department-store mogul Albert Hahne dispatched an agent to procure the massive painting. He used large sections cut from the canvas to adorn the soaring atrium of his new flagship store in Newark, New Jersey. From there, the painting traveled to New York, Baltimore, and Washington, arriving in Gettysburg in May 1913. It was installed in a crude, temporary building, where it would remain for the next 47 years. The convex canvas was flattened against the wall behind it, and many of the remnants of the tattered blue sky were shorn off. Gone was the elaborate diorama that had blurred the line between foreground and painting. But even in its straitened state, the picture retained some of its old power.[20]

It was installed in time for the 50th anniversary of the battle. That reunion, trumpeted as the Peace Jubilee, brought more than 50,000 veterans of the war together on the field of battle. Union men mingled with old Confederates. They listened to President

[18] William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 194-5.
[19] For a discussion of the development of changes in memory of the Civil War see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Paul Philippoteaux, *Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*, souvenir program (Boston, M.J. Kelly, 1886); William J. Hardy, "What Might Have Been," *The Blue and Gray*, July 1893, 35.
[20] "Battle Picture is Brought Here," *Adams County News*, May 10, 1913.

Woodrow Wilson, the first southerner in the White House since the Civil War, as he praised the fruits of reconciliation:

> How wholesome and healing the peace has been! We have found one another again as brothers and comrades in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten—except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other's eyes.[21]

The cyclorama provided the perfect complement to the occasion. The landmarks had changed over the decades, and memories had faded. Staring at the painting, though, veterans moved effortlessly back through time. The cyclorama, despite its mistakes and flaws, now offered a vision of Gettysburg with which not even the actual battlefield could compete. Inside the cyclorama, "men of both sides gathered, finding it easier to locate their positions in the vivid reproductions of the scenes than on the wide-spreading landscape." Two such veterans found themselves standing side by side. They shook hands. They recalled their units, and realized that they had fought each other nearby, 50 years earlier. They stood there silently for a moment, the heart of each too full for speech. Then the Confederate rallied. "We're all comrades now," he said.[22]

It was the great theme of the Peace Jubilee, and the cyclorama became its physical embodiment. Visitors came from around the country to remember the courage of those who fought, and the horror of the fight itself. "More and more," the cyclorama's lecturer told his audiences, "the country is coming to feel the plain truth of the fact that the valor of both sides in the Civil War is the equal heritage."[23]

Not everyone agreed. "The occasion is to be called a Reunion!" exclaimed the Washington *Bee* in disbelief. "A Reunion of whom? Only of those who fought for the preservation of the Union and the extinction of human slavery? Is it to be an assemblage of those who fought to destroy the Union and perpetuate slavery, and who are now employing every artifice and argument known to deceit and sophistry to propagate a national sentiment in favor of their nefarious contention that emancipation, reconstruction and enfranchisement are dismal failures?"[24]

By explicitly naming slavery the cause of the conflict, and identifying emancipation as its crowning achievement, the newspaper brushed aside the gauzy veil of nostalgia. It had not lost sight of the meaning of the struggle, nor was it prepared to forfeit its dear-bought gains for the sake of reconciliation. *The New York Age*, another black newspaper, took aim at the pieties of peace, mocking the assertion that there was

[21] August Heckscher, ed., *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson: Selections from his Speeches and Writings* (New York: Harper, 1956), 2334.
[22] "Comrades at Gettysburg," *Gettysburg Compiler*, July 16, 1913.
[23] "On Cemetery Ridge," *Charlotte Observer*, September 27, 1913.
[24] "Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg," *Washington Bee*, May 24, 1913.

"no North and no South, but one country and no Union or Confederate soldiers, but one soldier; and no loyalty and no treason but just a 'misunderstanding' between brothers which time had made plain, in which the Confederates have proven that the Union soldiers were in the wrong and the Confederate soldiers were in the right."[25]

Hundreds of black veterans made the journey to Gettysburg to mark the 50th anniversary. They greeted the reenacted rebel yells with cold silence. And, like many of their white comrades in the Grand Army of the Republic, they distinguished between forgiving and forgetting. A wave of recent scholarship has rediscovered the lingering idealism harbored by many Union veterans, both black and white. They regarded secession as treason, and emancipation as a noble cause. The *New York Age* reported that the "mock lovefest at the Gettysburg celebration did not conceal the skeleton in the national closet. Negro Grand Army men who attended the celebration have told us that there were constant disputes and rows among the Union and Confederate veterans."[26]

For black veterans, in particular, the war was not over. If the price of reconciliation was turning a blind eye to Jim Crow, rebuilding the nation around a compact of white supremacy, they wanted no part of the bargain.

The cyclorama that showed the Union victory in the Battle of Atlanta found a new home in the city it depicted. It became a shrine to the Lost Cause, a semi-sacred site of public memory. So dramatic was the shift in perceptions that by the twentieth century, some had trouble reconciling the painting's origin with the evidence before their own eyes. "The first version was painted by General John "Blackjack" Logan and had a definite Union slant on the battle. I guess I saw the second painting because the pendulum had swung the other way and the new painting depicted Sherman's retreat through Georgia," one visitor later recalled. The same appeared true to Sterling Allen Brown, the noted black essayist, who upon paying a visit to Atlanta in the 1930s observed that, "they have a cyclorama of the Battle of Atlanta to recall the Lost Cause." That, by then, was precisely the function it served. A painting intended to record a Union triumph had instead, through the alchemy of historical memory, been transmuted into a shrine to Confederate glory.[27]

The great cycloramas recorded battles in stunning realism, with impeccable attention to the smallest minutiae. Yet they offered not a single clue as to why these

[25] "President Lincoln and President Wilson at Gettysburg," *New York Age,* July 17, 1913.
[26] For recent scholarship on the limits of reconciliation between Union and Confederate veterans see Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Michael Keith Harris, "Across The Bloody Chasm: Reconciliation in the Wake of the Civil War," Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2012 and John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); "President Lincoln and President Wilson at Gettysburg," *New York Age*, July 17, 1913.
[27] Robert Edward Dudley, *Our Side of the Story* (Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2002), 109; Sterling A. Brown, "Gone With the Wind," in Sterling A. Brown's 'A Negro Looks at the South,'" John Edgar Tiswell and Mark A. Sanders, eds. (New York: Oxford, 2007), 125.

battles had been fought. No matter how hard they looked, or how long they stared, no visitor would find in these paintings any trace of the cause of the war. There was carnage. There was valor. But there was no purpose.

The Gettysburg cyclorama helped the North and South forget their old divisions, and unite around a shared memory of common valor and sacrifice. The painting created an experience so vivid, so visceral, that it supplanted the fading memories of the war itself. It showed a desperate fight so real as to utterly obscure the underlying clash of conflicting ideals. It froze time itself, isolating Pickett's Charge from all that had produced the effort and all that would follow. And it enjoyed the greatest popular success of its day.

A few years ago, the cyclorama at Gettysburg was restored to its former glory. Conservators repaired the painting and re-created the elaborate diorama in its foreground. Once again, it works its old, beguiling magic. "The visitor will miss much," warned a 19th-century critic, "if he fails to notice this blending of the real and the illusory." And every visitor to the Pennsylvania battlefield, not once but whenever he or she wants, can relive that moment on a July afternoon in 1863 when it all hung in the balance. Staring at the brave soldiers, it is all too simple to forget the causes of the war, and its consequences; all too easy to imagine that both sides fought with equal justice, and that the war was all a horrid, bloody tragedy.[28]

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[28] For a discussion of the restoration of the Gettysburg Cyclorama see Lisanne Renner, "Big Touch Up for the Blue and Gray," *New York Times,* July 27, 2008, E1; J.L. Harris, "The Battle of Gettysburg," Zion's Herald, March 18, 1885, 86;

Portions of this essay originally appeared in The Atlantic as "The Great Illusion of Gettysburg" (Feb 5, 2012) and as "The Half-Life of Illusion: On the Brief and Glorious Heyday of the Cyclorama" (Feb 12, 2012).