

Guide aims to help people better explore Antietambattlefield

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While a recent wave of new scholarship about the battle of Antietam is helping experts more clearly understand the conflict, two historians are hoping their guidebook will also give visitors a better appreciation of the pivotal Civil War engagement, as well as the people who lived, fought and died in what became the bloodiest day in American military history.

The battle of Antietam, which occurred near the farming community of Sharpsburg, Maryland on Sept. 17, 1862, is a deceptively complex contest, according to Carol Reardon, George Winfree Professor of American History, Penn State, who wrote "A Field Guide to Antietam" (The University of North Carolina Press, August 2016) with retired U.S. Army Col. Tom Vossler.

"We broke the battle down into 21 stops in the guide," said Reardon. "When we wrote the guide on the battle of Gettysburg, we did it in 35 stops—that's a 3-day battle—and we're doing the 12-hour battle of Antietam in 21, so that tells you how much we had to break it down."

The guide covers the most famous parts of the battle—such as the Bloody Cornfield, the Sunken Lane and Burnside's Bridge—but also reveals less explored points of the battle. Writing the guide helped Reardon, who has spent decades studying the Civil War and Antietam, draw out some of these lesser known, but important stops, from historical obscurity.

"As Civil War historians, we get obsessed about places like Burnside's

Bridge, but I'll be honest, I became far more fascinated about what happened before the bridge fight and especially after the bridge fight," Reardon said. "A whole Union division under the command of General Orlando Willcox, for example, not only attacked the Confederate line, but broke through and nearly reached the outskirts of Sharpsburg, itself—and it's not on the standard tour of Antietam."

Spending time on the battlefield and writing the guide has also given Reardon new insights on the battle.

"I learned bucketloads," Reardon said. "Did I have the big picture down? Sure, but the devil is in the details, and every little element of the battle, when you're trying to write about it, and make it clear to someone who is visiting for the first time, that's when you start to realize where the fuzzy spots are."

Reardon said that ongoing restoration efforts are offering visitors and historians an increasingly better understanding of the ebb and flow of complex tactical movements. Several groups dedicated to restoring the battlefield have recently bought and demolished modern buildings that were not present during the battle.

"For interpretation purposes, if it was a field during the battle, it's nice if it's a field now," said Reardon. "You can better follow the movements. We are really benefitting from about 30 or 40 years of outstanding preservation efforts by the Civil War Trust and Save Historic Antietam Foundation."

She added that the restoration effort at Antietam is continuing so fast that she and Vossler had to revise the book several times because crews were demolishing buildings that were referenced in the text.

The guide is arranged to help readers answer six questions: What

happened here? Who fought here? Who commanded here? Who fell here? Who lived here? How did participants remember the events? The historians kept this format—the same format they used in their book on Gettysburg—because of the positive feedback they received.

"We think you'll certainly walk away with a better idea of who the players were," said Reardon. "You'll have a much better idea of what they could see and what they could not see from each of their various angles of approach," said Reardon.

The researchers used trips to the battlefield itself, along with official reports and personal correspondence written in the postwar years by participants, to write the book. Databases that have recently gone online—for instance, the Pennsylvania digitized Civil War newspapers—were particularly helpful, Reardon said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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