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Civil War Staff Rides

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Civil War Staff Rides

Abstract

"Tired of a visit to historic sites looking like the scene from Chevy Chase's Vacation where they stand as a family looking at the Grand Canyon for 30 seconds and then heading on? In order to make your upcoming summer visit to a Civil War battlefield not only more educational but far more engaging and interesting, consider taking the "staff ride" approach."

Posting about visiting Civil War battlefields from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/civil-war-staff-rides/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Civil War Staff Rides

 [all in allthings.org/civil-war-staff-rides/](https://allthings.org/civil-war-staff-rides/)

Paul Fessler

Tired of a visit to historic sites looking like the scene from Chevy Chase's *Vacation* where they stand as a family looking at the Grand Canyon for 30 seconds and then heading on? In order to make your upcoming summer visit to a Civil War battlefield not only more educational but far more engaging and interesting, I'd like to help you plan a new way to experience the battlefield that may revolutionize how you visit historic sites.

As you've probably become aware over the last several years, this year marks the end of the sesquicentennial (150 years) commemorations of the American Civil War. More than any other event in American history, the Civil War retains a special fascination and interest among the rank and file citizens of the United States. A book with Lincoln or any aspect of the Civil War in its title is almost guaranteed to sell enough books to break even (a reason so many academic presses have specialties in Civil War studies!). There are Civil War Roundtable organizations in almost every state that meet monthly to discuss the conflict.

Why, then, if Americans are so passionate about the subject and travel hours to visit battlefields, do most tourists spend so little time on the battlefield itself? Even at Gettysburg National Park, the most popular battlefield of the American Civil War, visitors spend only about 4 hours per visit (about the same as a visit to the much more compact Statue of Liberty). Most visitors to Civil War battlefields spend more time in the visitors' center and gift shop than they do on the actual battlefield itself! You've likely done the same thing: stop at a battlefield visitors' center, see the movie, spend 15 minutes in the museum and then drive around the battlefield loop and stop at some of the historic markers before leaving. The reason for this is a lack of knowledge and information. People don't have enough background to know where to begin so they merely follow the brochure's suggestions. Investing even a minimal amount of reading and planning will radically change how you will experience a battlefield this summer.

My suggested plan is a modified version of a "staff ride" developed by the United States military that I've used in my own college classes as well as for Dordt alumni "educational vacation" trips. I learned the value of this approach first-hand when I was selected as a fellow for the West Point Summer Seminar at the United States Military Academy in 2007. As one of 30 other historians, I spent a month studying American military history and exploring battlefields on the East Coast of the United States. The military uses a staff ride to teach officers the lessons of leadership and battle by taking the "general staff" to historic battlefields and walking the battlefields after doing research.

Don't worry! You do not have to be an expert in military history or spend months reading to reap some of the benefits of this approach! Here are a few tips on preparing for your visit:

In order to make this approach valuable, you do have to **prepare for your visit** to the battlefield by doing some reading before you set out. Think about it—in order to enjoy a baseball or football game, you have to understand something about the game, right? If you've ever turned on a TV and tried to watch a game of cricket, for example, you likely turned the channel fairly quickly because you really didn't understand how or what the players were doing. Even a minimal amount of preparation can make cricket (or a Civil War battlefield) far more understandable.

Where to start reading with so many books and so little time? First, I suggest that you read a brief

battlefield guide written by historians for the general public—the best examples are part of [This Hallowed Ground: Guides to Civil War Battlefields](#) series by the University of Nebraska. These books are relatively short at about 200 pages long. Be sure to read the introduction and guide to using the book. Each book has an engaging 8-10 page summary of the battle and its significance. The book is written as a series of “stops” on the battlefield—explaining what happened, who the key participants were, and why what happened was important. While you should read over this beforehand, you can also read it while walking the battlefield yourself. Secondly, you should examine a free website, [History Animated](#), that has animated maps and shortened readings for every major Civil War battlefield. Though relatively straightforward and not graphically impressive like an XBOX game, these maps are well annotated with background and details from some of the most important histories written on the subject. Watching the troops move on the battlefield map makes your future visit to the battlefield comprehensible.

Next, you need to **choose a “role”**. Yup, staff rides become active learning not only because you will walk the battlefield but because participants are normally assigned a specific officer or general to focus upon. Even if you only have yourself and another person, then have one person choose the commanding general from one side and the other person choose the commanding general on the other side. When you get to battlefield, you will be the “expert” on that general or officer. You’ll be representing the perspective of that officer and his decisions on the battlefield.

Although it does highlight useful leadership lessons, I’ve found that it highlights what I already try to do as a Christian historian—exploring how worldview and “spirits of the age” impact our motivations and actions on an individual and corporate level. A staff ride is a great way to better understand the worldview and motivation behind the participants of these battles. To many Americans, the Civil War and its legacy is something far more personal than a distant memory. A result, many Christians visit the Civil War sites as “partisans” of either the North or the South. Your Christian perspective likely is hopelessly intertwined with whatever regional loyalty that you or your family identify. If you’re a southerner, then choose a northerner to study (and vice-versa). Ask what motivated them to fight and be willing to die? Examine how your character’s motivations matched up with the larger causes of the Civil War. Though slavery was the cause of the Civil War (take my Civil War class if you want to argue with me), there were many other individual causes and motivations ranging from religion to peer pressure to preservation of the Union to states’ rights, etc. Some radical abolitionists were so filled with hatred that their actions went against good judgment. Know what your officer did but also ask “why” the officer acted the way they did.

Now you’re ready to visit to the battlefield! Get ready to hike and explore—get out of the car! Be sure to have a good map of the battlefield, water, sunscreen and long pants. Where possible, you won’t be following roads or even paths. For example, most people when they visit Gettysburg never stray far from the road or the car. Instead, I’d want you to walk all the way across the fields where Pickett’s Charge took place or, if you have time, walk the route Longstreet’s men followed all the way up to Little Round Top! Why? As you walk, you get a far different perspective on the distances and terrain involved. Trust me, while you know you’re on a commanding hill when standing on Little Round Top, if you’ve walked over a mile up wooded terrain and weedy fields, that terrain becomes far more important and real. Our 21st century perspective is often skewed by our reliance on motorized vehicles that make distances less impressive. Terrain also matters greatly when figuring out how sound travels or the obstructions and limited view that the officer has without the benefit of “google maps” or aerial views. So, remember, if you go to Wilson’s Creek outside of Springfield, Missouri—don’t follow the trails, get out of the car and walk across Ray’s Cornfield and hike up Bloody Hill!

When you’re out there with family and friends, people should talk about happened there from their officer’s perspective. You do not need to dress up or talk in first-person, either (though I suppose you can). Rather, you should be presenting that officer’s perspective and why that officer did what he did. Other officers should chime in to support, disagree or state different perspective. This is precisely what a staff ride-like

tour should be like. With everyone having a different perspective—that a stop on the battlefield isn't just a mere historical marker, but an opportunity to get into a deeper discussion with families and friends. Don't let the conversation bog down into numbers and details, either. While they can be important—the point is to focus on leadership, vision and perspective.

Finally, when you're done walking the battlefield, reserve some time to wrap things up in what the military calls the "integration" phase of a staff ride. What did you learn from walking the battlefield that you didn't from your reading beforehand or the exhibits in the visitor's center? What did you learn from each other's comments on the battlefield that you didn't realize previously? What worldviews and perspectives were different on each side? What ones were shared by officers on both sides? Finally, end with a discussion of "heroes and zeroes" of the battle. While this is a fairly black-and-white view of an officer's performance in the battle, it forces discussion and decision. Who performed admirably and exhibited great leadership? Who performed horribly? How did their performance fit into standards of Christian just war theory (if you've had a chance to read about it in advance)? It doesn't have to be the main general who was a hero but perhaps a minor officer who made a stand at the beginning of the battle that made a huge difference in the end. Go around your group and have each person name the key "hero" and "zero". You can do this on the car ride back home, sitting on the battlefield under a tree, or over a beer in a local pub. This last part is essential for often understanding the "so what" questions of a battlefield and the significance of the battle themselves.

You can tailor this approach to your own level of expertise and preparation. If you don't have time to prepare too much, then reading the material online (see above) and a few links will still make a difference. If you buy one book in advance and have people read maybe 30 pages, it will make an even bigger difference. After experiencing a staff ride, people who rarely care about military issues wind up not only enjoying themselves but developing a greater appreciation for understanding the significance of military issues.

Where to go

You may be limited by your geographic proximity—but don't let that deter you. After all, not everyone is driving to Gettysburg this summer. There are many lesser known battlefields of the Civil War that may not have a lot written about them, but can still be a great trip if you prepare. In fact, some of the lesser visited battlefields can be in far more pristine state without many monuments and tourists.

For readers in the Great Plains and Midwest, I'd suggest a visit to Missouri and northern Arkansas would take you to two of the largest 4 battles in the first year of the Civil War: Wilson's Creek outside of Springfield, MO (animated maps and another online guide) and Pea Ridge outside of Bentonville, AR (animated maps and guide) provides great context for a visit. These two battles ensured that Missouri would remain securely in the Union and allowed northern forces to invade down the Mississippi without fear of being outflanked. Make sure to buy the battlefield guide for these two battles, as well. These battlefields are great for exploring. You can drive along still existing portions of Wire Road that connected these two sites. It is beautiful country in the Ozarks with fun places to eat like Lambert's Café, too! There are many other battlefields in Missouri and Arkansas, too—so if you're in Kansas City driving to St. Louis, there are also some sites like Lexington, Missouri that aren't too far off the road (though you likely need to do more research.

If you're in Michigan (or Illinois or somewhere like there) then head to Shiloh battlefield in western Tennessee where the first grand battle of the Civil War. You can prepare by examining the animated map and battlefield guide or you could also read the historical fiction by Shelby Foote aptly titled Shiloh, for those more willing to read fiction. Shiloh may have more monuments than the ones in Missouri but it is well preserved and invites exploration. Bring your bikes along so you can go back and forth more quickly to explore various perspectives. You can lock them up for walking excursions.

On the East Coast, while Gettysburg is always fascinating, I'd suggest exploring the battle of Antietam (and nearby Harper's Ferry and South Mountain) for something away from the crowds but equally as important. Antietam remains the single deadliest day of battle in American history. It was the "victory" at Antietam that afforded President Lincoln the opportunity to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Again be sure to get out and walk around near Burnside's Bridge that was a bottleneck for Union troops for hours. (When I was last there, someone in my party waded across the creek in clothing to show how easy it would have been to ford the river even there!) The animated maps and battlefield guide will help you not only explore Antietam but nearby South Mountain and Harper's Ferry. Harper's Ferry is the headquarters of the Appalachian Trail and goes right through town, as well! Be sure to set aside some time to hike along the trail while here!

Dig Deeper

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War of the United States (1861-1865). To polish up on your [Civil War](#) history, we're featuring four articles on the Civil War this week. On Tuesday, Scott Culpepper discussed faith in the Civil War in the article, [They Prayed to the Same God](#). Yesterday iAt featured an article by Patrick L. Connelly on the flag-raising at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1865 called [Fort Sumter and the Rhyme of Hope and History](#). Return to iAt tomorrow to read suggestions on teaching and talking about the Civil War with children.