

A Civil War Immersion Tour

By: Tony D'Agnese

A family wedding in Charleston, South Carolina provided a reason for being in the Southeast. Afterward, my fiancé, Janie Brock, and I embarked on a quick, hard-hitting tour of as many Civil War battlefields as possible in four-plus days. Since we included the spot where the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, we were one up on my Aunt Rosemary who joined us in Richmond, Virginia. Here, as well as other stops along the way, we used an excellent Park Service map to visit seven battlefields including Gaines' Mill and Cold Harbor. At each stop, particularly where the Irish Brigade fought I played bugle calls in tribute to the fallen.

The next morning at the Pamplin Historical Park, south of Petersburg, we saw the Museum of the Civil War Soldier, remnants of Confederate trenches and the site of the Union 'Breakthrough' on April 2nd, 1865 which led directly to Lee's surrender a week later. The short film and museum displays here are an excellent primer for anyone interested in the Civil War. After a traditional southern lunch of fried chicken and greens we moved on to more battlefields including the 'Battle of the Crater' featured in the book and movie 'Cold Mountain'.

Next up—Fredericksburg, the site of a disastrous Union defeat on December 13th, 1862. This battlefield had been on my 'must see' list for some time, not only as a tragic example of why it was folly to attack an entrenched enemy, but also because the famed 'Irish Brigade' fought here. Much of this battlefield is now covered with houses but the 'Sunken Road' with its stonewall has been reconstructed. It sits just below the National Cemetery and behind the Visitor's Center.

The next day saw us driving the same roads the soldiers walked on to Chancellorsville, The Wilderness and Spotsylvania. We stood near the place where Stonewall Jackson was shot by friendly fire in 1863, and at a place called the 'Bloody Angle' at Spotsylvania which saw some of the longest, continuous close range and hand-to-hand combat of the war, where both sides fed reinforcements into the same area for twenty-two solid hours and where rifle fire cut down a 22 inch oak tree. (The stump is on display at the Smithsonian.)

Toward evening we traveled north to visit Manassas, the site of the first major battle of the Civil War and where ‘Stonewall’ got his nickname, as well as the site of another battle a year later. It was in the ‘Second Manassas’ that the famous ‘Iron Brigade’ got its ‘Baptism of Fire’ at the Brawner Farm. We spent that night at Harper’s Ferry, where John Brown was captured by U.S. Colonel Robert E. Lee in 1859 and was the site of a battle in 1862.

Again, we drove the same route taken by the soldiers as we approached Sharpsburg, Maryland where the battle of Antietam took place. The countryside was then as it is now: simply beautiful. September 17th, 1862 is the bloodiest day in American history claiming over 23,000 casualties. Places like Miller’s Cornfield, the Dunker Church, and the Sunken Road (later known as ‘Bloody Lane’) saw widespread fighting and death. The film at the Antietam Visitor’s Center was excellent and provided a clear overview of the battle.

From Antietam we drove to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, our last battlefield. Sunset that night was beautiful. As the red sun dipped below the horizon I played the bugle call ‘Extinguish Lights’, better known as ‘Taps’. It echoed from ‘Cemetery Ridge’ across the battlefield.

The next day we toured Gettysburg more completely, stopping for a momentary tribute to the ‘Irish Brigade’ at their monument in the ‘Wheatfield’ and along their position on the last day of battle on ‘Cemetery Ridge’.

At Gettysburg, you can stand at the stonewall and look across the open ground and imagine the Confederate divisions lined up, flags flying, bayonets gleaming, just before they stepped off. You can walk the ground at ‘Devil’s Den’, the ‘Slaughter Pen’, the ‘Peach Orchard’ the ‘Wheatfield’ and ‘Little Round Top’. You can reflect upon the cause for which so many gave the “last full measure of devotion” and the wonderful address given there by Abraham Lincoln. And, you can remember the part of that speech that asks us “... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that, government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Considering all the sacrifices made on the behalf of freedom the least we can do is stand up and be counted; that means voting, participating in your community and honoring your beliefs.