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Americans have long indulged their fascination with the nation’s historic battlefields, with successive generations of eager tourists descending on popular heritage sites such as Gettysburg and Yorktown. Within the broader scope of American history, however, these reverential excursions so familiar to us today remain relatively recent phenomena. As Thomas A. Chambers explains in this insightful and well-researched volume, the earliest citizens of the United States generally lacked both the means and the inclination to visit the many fields where their countrymen had fallen. Even after an emerging transportation network and the commercialization of leisure facilitated travel for an elite class of tourists during the years of the early Republic, visiting dilapidated forts and overgrown battlefields remained a secondary concern among well-to-do travelers more inclined to “social display, amusement, and dissipation” (63). Not until the 1850s, during the bitter sectional crisis that threatened to sunder the union, says Chambers, would growing numbers of Americans seek to commemorate their sacred grounds of war. By then, however, such sites had become newly politicized, carrying different meanings for the North and the South.

Spanning the century from 1760 to 1860, Memories of War explores the often convoluted and haphazard process by which Americans began to visit, commemorate, and preserve the nation’s battlegrounds. Specifically, the author aims to explain “why it took so long for Americans to remember their battlefields, and what kind of memories they constructed once they began viewing such sites as ‘sacred places’ worth visiting” (x). Privileging visitors’ personal interactions with place, Chambers seeks to illustrate how battle sites help “societies and nations invent and legitimize their histories, traditions, and myths” (15). Within the early United States, he shows, tourism proved instrumental to that enterprise by linking diverse locales to ongoing constructions of historical memory. To illuminate Americans’ place-centered reminiscences, Chambers draws on recent scholarship on American memory and a wide array of manuscript and printed sources, including newspapers, guidebooks, travelogues, personal correspondence, and administrative histories and historical resource surveys from the National Park Service.

1 For constructions of early American memory, see for example Andrew Burstein, America’s Jubilee (New York, 2001); Sarah J. Purcell, Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America (Philadelphia, 2002); Scott E. Casper, Sarah Johnson’s Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine (New York, 2008).
According to Chambers, curious visitors could be seen strolling America’s abandoned battlegrounds during the late 1750s, when passing travelers paused to investigate the sites of the Seven Years’ War. With the remnants of war scarring the landscape and the crisis still resonating in the imperial consciousness, the somber scenes evoked more melancholic contemplation than deep historical reflection. Years later, during the Revolutionary War, locations of earlier British defeats such as Braddock’s Field and Fort Ticonderoga recalled imperial arrogance and provincial resourcefulness among patriot visitors eager to distinguish themselves from their erstwhile transatlantic kindred. Budding nationalists, for instance, proudly trumpeted the young George Washington’s exploits at the scene of General Edward Braddock’s defeat, boldly appropriating the site as “both an example of American distinctiveness and the spot where the nation’s first hero—the father of the country—made his mark and came of age” (34).

Yet into the early nineteenth century, travel remained mostly business or family related, with crude transportation, insufficient accommodations, and a general lack of interest curbing more leisurely excursions to remote battlefields. As Braddock’s Field gave way to local agriculture, the site attracted fewer curiosity seekers and receded from historical memory. To the northeast, however, an expanding transportation system and a growing tourist trade soon brought new traffic to the neglected ruins of Ticonderoga from a privileged set of travelers keen to take in the sights of the celebrated Northern Tour, which encompassed the Revolutionary War battlefields scattered amid the scenic Hudson River Valley and Lake George/Lake Champlain corridor. Well-to-do travelers, guidebooks in hand, now gazed upon the aging fortifications lining the Hudson River from the decks of passing steamboats or took a carriage to the overgrown fields of Saratoga during leisurely stays at the region’s fashionable hotels or resorts.

Ultimately, insists Chambers, the Northern Tour “served nationalistic as well as cultural purposes,” allowing domestic tourists to “express their cultural sophistication, national identity, and emotional nuance” (11). These genteel tourists frequently frustrated the politicized designs of more national-minded authors and orators who longed to create a usable past by turning the Revolution’s battlegrounds into unifying sites of patriotic pilgrimage and remembrance. Embracing a “transatlantic trend” celebrating “picturesque scenery and sentiment” (3), refined travelers instead preferred to fashion more intimate impressions of place based on personal, performative experience. First and foremost, the Northern Tour enabled the status-conscious to perform gentility through culturally scripted sentimental display. Indeed, satisfying historical curiosity proved incidental for visitors more intent on “viewing scenery and displaying class status” (37). Crumbling forts and sprawling bonefields merely served to enhance their panoramic settings, notes Chambers, offering the closest American
equivalent to the classical ruins of old. But for nostalgic-minded tourists eager to reflect on their nation's origins, the region's attractions "struck the perfect balance between historical associations and unspoiled wilderness" (10).

By the late 1830s, the developing tourist infrastructure of the Niagara River region between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario had converged with the memories and material remains of the War of 1812 to stimulate another surge of battlefield tourism, as visitors flocked to Fort Niagara, Queenston Heights, and Lundy's Lane during trips to the neighboring falls. Like the groups journeying along the Hudson on the Northern Tour, these travelers were not "nationalistic heritage seekers" (145) but picturesque-seeking tourists lured to locations where beauty and history merged and the memories of past battles echoed amid majestic surroundings. Generally the scenes of American military setbacks, the region's attractions proved ill-suited to eliciting patriotic reflection. Similar to the battlefields of the Revolutionary War, these sites were more apt to induce a carefully cultivated sentimentality springing from genteel travelers' romantic sensibilities. By the early 1840s, improved relations between Canada and the United States had diminished wartime resentments and softened memories of the hostilities, with the physical remnants of war increasingly recalling "shared sacrifice rather than bitter conflict" (140). As Chambers observes, the Niagara region ultimately invited a "generic engagement with battlefields that paid little attention to the causes and consequences of the war, much less the merits of either side" (142).

Long neglected, short of alluring settings, and more removed from newly established tourist routes, southern battlefields languished by comparison, attracting fewer visitors than the more heavily trafficked sites to the north. Along the coast in Charleston, urban development gradually eroded traces of the War for Independence, while deep in the rural interior Cowpens and Kings Mountain in South Carolina and Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina stood beyond the reach of all but the most determined tourists. Even Yorktown, where Americans had finally secured their independence, slowly shrank in historical relevance, as local residents struggled to recover from the war's physical devastation and repeated commemorative initiatives founndered for lack of support. The marquis de Lafayette's return to Yorktown during the battle's forty-third anniversary celebration promised to revitalize the site by renewing Americans' enthusiasm for revolutionary commemoration. Yet a generation later, Yorktown remained a relative backwater, bearing few signs of its contribution to national events.

Indeed, as Chambers explains, for all their fascination with the Revolution and its heroes, Americans proved slow to dedicate lasting monuments at the locations where the war unfolded, with "decaying fortifications and half-buried bones" often the "only battlefield reminders
of the past” (66). Even in the North, where inquisitive travelers enjoyed easier access to historic attractions, public interest rarely culminated in permanent commemorative displays. Of the dozen or more battle sites that Lafayette graced during his triumphant 1824–25 U.S. tour, only a few featured formal monuments. “Parades, speeches, artillery salutes, and banquets captured American interest more than did completing monuments,” writes Chambers, leaving many battlegrounds “unremembered or barely commemorated” (92). Not until more than a century after General Charles Cornwallis’s surrender would Yorktown boast a permanent marble column commemorating the American victory. Until then the town provided but a “canvas upon which visitors painted their own memories” (96).

The 1850s brought new attention to Revolutionary War battlefields, as Northerners and Southerners harnessed sites traditionally associated with the nation’s founding to their conflicting sectional agendas, invoking memories of the War for Independence to justify union or secession. Locations long celebrated as sacred grounds hallowed by Americans’ shared patriotic sacrifice suddenly resonated differently across North and South. Proud Southerners increasingly singled out their own battlefields as scenes sanctified by the blood of patriots, “where sturdy yeomen defended their home soil” (166) against external enemies. At Cowpens and Kings Mountain past and present merged ominously, with defiant observers drawing “martial inspiration” (160) from imagined parallels between British tyranny and Northern fanaticism. States’ rights advocates now lauded the South’s revolutionary victories to showcase Southern virtues. By 1860, growing numbers of Virginians hailed Yorktown as more of a Southern triumph than a shared victory for the United States. Meanwhile, to the north, many looked to battlefield commemorations in hopes of preserving the union, while others recoiled at their Southern rivals’ perversion of revolutionary memory.

Elegantly written and imaginatively researched, Chambers’s study draws a welcome connection between constructions of memory and individual encounters with place. But while making a valuable contribution to understandings of early battlefield tourism, the volume occasionally frustrates. Chambers offers fresh insights, for example, when distinguishing between Americans’ ceremonial and vernacular battlefield recollections, but he might have delved even more deeply into the “multiplicity of memory” (13). The book is especially illuminating when the author grounds visitors’ particular perceptions of place in their prevailing hopes and anxieties, such as in his excellent final chapter set amid the bitter sectional controversy of the 1850s. But he neglects to explore whether earlier generations of tourists nurtured their own similarly politicized recollections of war. Americans began contesting revolutionary memory as early as the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Though Chambers makes a compelling case for elite travelers’ transatlantic cultural sensibility, he hesitates to investigate the degree to which competing interpretations of the Revolution
informed popular perceptions of the places where the battles had raged. Readers might wonder whether during the fierce factional strife of the early Republic, sites of revolutionary memory elicited little more from tourists than generic expressions of romantic sentiment wholly divorced from contemporary politics. Yet for readers keen to understand Americans’ long and ambivalent history with their nation’s battlegrounds, Chambers’s thoughtful volume merits careful consideration.