



Beacons OF REMEMBRANCE

*Antietam Battlefield
Illuminates 150 Years*

by Linda Barrett

As darkness befalls Antietam National Battlefield on December 1st, a glow will rise from tens of thousands of candles visible as far as the eye can see. 23,110 candles in all, each representing the life of brave soldier wounded or killed in the Battle of Antietam, the single bloodiest day in American history.

There is a certain reverence felt at any hallowed ground, but nothing prepares visitors for the emotional impact delivered at the Antietam National Battlefield Memorial Illumination. Especially this year, at its 150th anniversary.

“This is likely the most moving and emotional thing I’ve seen in my many years with the Park Service,” explains John Howard, superintendent, National Park Service, Antietam National Battlefield. “To see the battlefield covered with these tiny little lights for miles and miles and miles is probably the one concrete way you can evaluate what sacrifice is all about.”

“You can see photographs or videos, but they don’t do it justice,” he continues. “We can remember our ancestors, then bring it to modern day to contemplate the sacrifice given over the years, even with our soldiers today.”

The Battle of Antietam

In 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had just completed his stunning victory at Second Manassas and planned to march north to threaten Washington.

To ensure that communication and supply lines remained open, Lee divided his troops, sending some to Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg, West Virginia. Others continued north toward Hagerstown, Maryland.

Concurrently, Union General George McClellan pursued, aided by the discovery of Lee’s orders on September 13th. McClellan moved quickly to catch Lee before he could reunite his army.

On the morning of September 17, 1862, the two armies collided among the ridges above Sharpsburg and along Antietam Creek. Intense fighting took place in the cornfields, woods, creeks, roads, and around a country church—Bloody Lane, Sunken Road, the Cornfield, West Woods, Burnside Bridge, names now familiar. Federal losses were 12,410, Confederate casualties numbered 10,700.

The Battle of Antietam ended the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia’s first Northern invasion, and led ultimately to Abraham Lincoln’s issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

The Illumination

The first Illumination was held in 1988 when founder and general chairperson Georgene Charles coordinated elementary schoolchildren to release 23,110 balloons at the battlefield. The next year, luminarias were substituted and the lighting has become a tradition the first Saturday in December.

“I never realized this would be an annual event, nor did I realize the magnitude of the experience. But every year people wanted more. The interest has not diminished, in fact, it grows every year,” Charles says.

Cars line up for miles awaiting the 6 p.m. access to the free Battlefield driving tour. On average about 8,500 vehicles crawl the 5.8-mile, 20-minute-long tour, to view the lights and pass by vignettes staged by Civil War reenactors, both Northern and Southern camps representing actual encampments of 1862.

The route begins at the main entrance at Richardson Avenue, off Maryland Route 34, and visitors can expect to wait up to two hours for entrance. Drivers are encouraged to use their parking lights only, or to cover their headlights. Over 20,000 visitors are recorded each year.

The Volunteer Army

It takes a virtual army of up to 1,400 volunteers from around the country to pull off this yearly event. Volunteers blanket the battlefield, systematically placing the 23,110 candles in sand-filled brown paper bags over a six-mile portion of the battlefield.

Luminarias are precisely placed in exact rows spaced 15 feet apart, using GPS mapping, compasses, transits, and even rope to ensure position. “Every group has developed its own way of achieving accuracy in the field,” Charles says.

Volunteers begin laying candles on site in 35 quadrants at about 8 a.m., and by 1 p.m. they are finished. Lighting begins at 2 p.m. “With 1,400 volunteers, we can light the entire battlefield in about 45 minutes.”

Local Girl and Boy Scouts, the Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau and others take pride in preparing North America’s largest memorial illumination.

“We’re not here just to light candles,” Charles adds. “We want to help the public interpret in a visual way what happened. We hope each person takes a little piece and adapts it to their own use.”

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