

Boxing with the dead: the law of the land and the grip of the ghosts in Gettysburg

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Abstract

This paper explores the laws and regulations that pertain to the spirits of the fallen at the battlefield of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. At this iconic American Civil War field, where 50,000 men fell over three bloody days of battle in July, 1863, a new wave of interest in the realm of the 'paranormal' challenges the site's more conventional structures and traditions of remembering and patriotic honouring. As ghost hunters and other practitioners of the paranormal spill out over Gettysburg's 'hallowed ground' at night-time, they seem to break with, even mock, customary heritage management and reverence for the war dead. At the same time, however, the paranormal laws and systems of understanding seem to incorporate and sometimes mime a number of the more conventional ideas of 'proper', 'rational' and 'scientific' ways of relating to the deaths of the past. The paper, based on fieldwork in 2010 and 2013, deals with the coming of the ghosts at Gettysburg, and the ways in which the blurrings of 'paranormal' and 'normal' law and rationality may shed light on broader cultural processes of place-making and past-making.