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Seminary Ridge Museum opening to help mark Gettysburg anniversary

By Tom Barnes
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GETTYSBURG, Pa. -- Seminary Ridge, a hill less than a mile west of the center of Gettysburg, just might have been the most important place in America on July 1, 1863.

It was where Confederate forces, brought north into Pennsylvania by Gen. Robert E. Lee in hopes of winning a dramatic victory, opened fire on a small band of Union troops and fought all day before finally driving them off the hill.

The clash -- started by rebel troops headed to Gettysburg in hopes of getting new shoes -- set off the historic three-day Battle of Gettysburg, whose 150th anniversary will be celebrated this summer.

A major part of the celebration will be the opening of the \$15 million Seminary Ridge Museum,



Life-size dioramas of Civil War era scenes at the Seminary Ridge Museum. The Lutheran Seminary was used as a makeshift field hospital where casualties, both Federal and Confederate, were treated. Great attention to detail was made in recreating these scenes, as life castings of people who looked like Civil War era soldiers were used as well as the correct soldiers uniforms and insignia.

which, appropriately, takes place July 1. It's been created in a large building that was a Lutheran theological seminary in 1863 and which became a makeshift hospital for

both Union and Confederate troops wounded in the fighting.

Construction of the new museum "will allow visitors to walk the halls of a building where wounded

soldiers suffered, hear their voices of duty and devotion and stand in the spot in the cupola on Seminary Ridge where Union Gen. John Buford stood to observe the approaching Confederate forces,” said museum director Barbara Franco.

The seminary, which educated Lutheran pastors, was founded on the ridge in 1832 and is still located there, although it has expanded and modernized, with many more classroom and administrative buildings than it had 150 years ago.

The four-story, red brick building that was the original seminary building has been turned into a Civil War museum. It still has its tall cupola on top -- a one-time bell tower where Buford spotted thousands of Confederate troops advancing from the west toward his small band of cavalry, who stepped down from their horses to fight.

“He could see the Confederate campfire lights off in the hills to the west,” Ms. Franco said. “He could see that the Union was vastly outnumbered.”

The building that houses the museum was originally called Schmucker Hall, after the Rev. Samuel Schmucker, who was president of the seminary in 1863. The house where he lived still stands a couple hundred yards down the street. Schmucker disapproved of slavery, which caused a rift in the Lutheran Church at the time and led some Southern congregations to break off and form a new association.

“We did not alter the historic integrity of the original seminary building -- we worked around it,” Ms. Franco said. “You will find the original flooring and wood, original plaster and original window sills. It’s one of the most historically significant structures of the Civil War.”

Meet Gen. Reynolds

The ground floor of the museum includes a lobby for ticket sales, visitors center, gift shop and an exhibit showing papers and letters found in the walls during reconstruction.

It also has a newly commissioned painting depicting a famous meeting on the early morning of July 1 between Buford and another Union general, John Reynolds.

“Reynolds made the decision that the Union should stand its ground” on Seminary Ridge, Ms. Franco said. “He wanted to delay the Confederates as long as possible to let the rest of the Union army arrive” from 20 miles south in Maryland.

Then, about 11 a.m., a Southern sharpshooter shot Reynolds off his horse and killed him.

The second, third and fourth floors of the new museum house artifacts, paintings of soldiers and battles, lifesize figures of Civil War soldiers, plus videos of the battle, historical placards and interactive exhibits that ask visitors questions and tell them if they’re correct.

The fourth, or top floor, is devoted

to details of the fighting on July 1. The third floor focuses on the medical care -- or lack of care -- given to wounded soldiers. as the seminary was converted to a temporary hospital.

The second floor deals with the “moral, civic and spiritual debates of the Civil War era,” such as how different churches and pastors clashed over the divisive issue of slavery, details on the Underground Railroad used by escaping slaves and those helping them, and the formation of a regiment called the United States Colored Troops, manned by African-Americans who wanted to fight for the North.

“None of these areas of emphasis are the focus of any other museum in Gettysburg,” Ms. Franco said.

A narrow wooden staircase on the fourth floor leads up to the cupola, which offers visitors a panoramic, 360-degree view of Gettysburg and its countryside.

The fourth floor will include displays of photographs taken from the cupola in the 1880s, to show how the area looked at that time.

The first day of fighting is consid-



A life-sized mural at the Seminary Ridge Museum shows Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, center, on horseback early on July 1, 1863, directing his troops in battle. Reynolds was shot and killed in action that morning.

ered a defeat for the Union troops, as they had to retreat through the town and reassemble on another area of high ground called Cemetery Ridge, half a mile south of the town's center. It took the Confederates most of July 1 to finally take the seminary building and the ground around it.

But while Day One was technically a defeat for the North, Ms. Franco said, the outgunned troops of Buford and Reynolds bought some crucial time for the North, allowing Union commanding Gen. George Meade and other officers to bring up troops from Maryland and install themselves on Cemetery Hill and adjacent Cemetery Ridge, which stretches out beside the hill that had a cemetery on top.

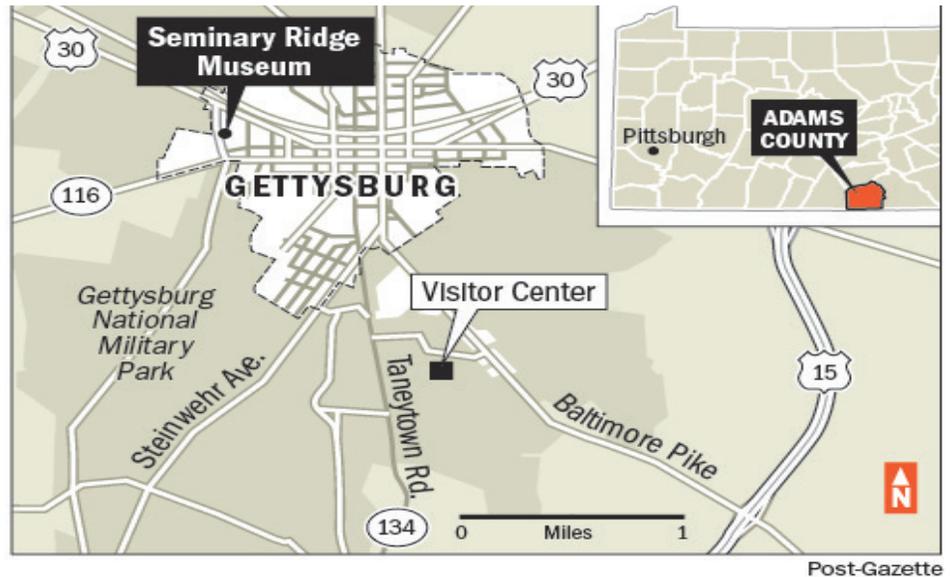
Southern troops spent July 2-3 in an unsuccessful effort to drive the Union off Cemetery Ridge, culminating in the bloody battle called "Pickett's Charge" on July 3, where Rebel Gen. George Pickett lost several thousand men in attacks on the Union lines.

Where healing was hard

The museum's depiction of the medical care includes lifelike, human-size figures created to represent the suffering soldiers, with many stretched out on beds or the floor.

In many cases Union soldiers who were wounded on the first day of battle didn't receive any care for three days because Confederates controlled the makeshift hospital and were tending to their own wounded. Care for these Union soldiers didn't come until July 4, when rebel forces finally retreated south to Virginia. The seminary was used as a hospital until September 1863.

One room shows a surgeon with



PG map: Seminary Ridge Museum.

a saw preparing to amputate the leg of a soldier, with (fake) blood all over the floor. There was chloroform and ether to somewhat ease a patient's suffering.

"The pain these guys must have been in, with broken arms and legs and gunshot wounds, is unbelievable," Ms. Franco said. She added the museum has done research to uncover the names of all the patients treated in the hospital and the nurses who treated them.

The second floor is devoted to moral and theological disputes during the war.

"Religion played a major role in the war, with both North and South claiming God was on their side," Ms. Franco said.

She's hoping to attract a new crowd to Gettysburg -- Christians and others interested in social justice issues, including the owning of slaves and what the Bible has to say about it. She said biblical quotations were used by both pro- and anti-slavery advocates to justify their positions.

One second-floor room is devoted to Adams County abolitionists who helped escaping slaves flee from the South through the Under-

ground Railroad, a series of houses where they stayed.

Ms. Franco hopes to attract 70,000 people a year to the museum.

The Seminary Ridge Historic Preservation Foundation was formed in 1999 to bring greater public knowledge of what happened that July 1. Working with it on the museum were current officials of the seminary and the Adams County Historical Society.

Also, a mile-long outdoor walking trail around the seminary property is being created by the National Park Service and a promotional group called Main Street Gettysburg.