

# GETTYSBURG TOURISM COMMUNITY RALLIES AMID GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

Many businesses persevered; some even triumphed during battlefield closure



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CASEY MARTIN

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PAM GRIMES, OWNER OF HICKORY  
HOLLOW FARM HORSE TOURS

October wraps Gettysburg’s hallowed battlefield in gorgeous foliage. Summer’s humidity is a memory. Children are back in school, and both history buffs and senior travelers flock to Gettysburg. Visitation figures typically spike, boosting the region’s tourism industry. In 2013, 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations drove surging battlefield visitation numbers. Between October 1 and 16, 2013, as barricades blocked visitors from entering Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP), all expectations for this banner year could have come crashing down. However, the shutdown highlighted the Gettysburg community’s resiliency. Many unique and creative partnerships helped businesses survive—and in some cases, thrive—without Gettysburg’s primary attraction, its battlefield, open.

### SHUTDOWN: ‘COULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED AT A WORSE TIME’

Functions of the federal government, including America’s 401 national parks, froze on October 1 when Congress could not agree on

the new fiscal year’s spending plan. A ripple effect passed through Gettysburg’s tourism community—considered by many to be Adams County’s top industry—as the government shutdown blocked visitor access to GNMP, the David Wills House and the Eisenhower National Historic Site.

“When we were told we couldn’t tour on the battlefield, it was devastating,” says Pam Grimes, owner of Hickory Hollow Farm Horse Tours. “We lost a lot of money; not just me, but my competitors and the town as a whole. . . . You can’t get that back. I can’t claim a loss; you just have to go on.”

In her 30<sup>th</sup> year of business, Grimes averages 30 weekly tours—10 to 12 riders per tour—in October. Without battlefield access, she improvised by offering trail rides on her farm. While Grimes saved some business, she estimates a loss of 50 tours—500 to 600 riders—during the shutdown. The economic impact, at \$40 to \$45 per rider per hour, measures into the tens of thousands of dollars.

“I’m not a political person, but I don’t know

what shutting all the national parks really did to accomplish anything. That’s what I have trouble understanding. It hurt families,” she says.

The shutdown “couldn’t have happened at a worse time, during our anniversary year,” says Carl Whitehill, media relations manager at Gettysburg Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), citing October as Gettysburg’s third highest month for visitors. “The businesses with the biggest impact were those that provided tours directly on the battlefields.” In addition to horseback tour operators such as Grimes, bike, Segway, and scooter rental companies, horse-drawn carriage and bus tour operators also were affected.

National Park Service (NPS) figures show more than 77,000 people visited GNMP in October, a decrease of more than 33 percent when compared to October 2012 numbers. However, the figures also point to a nearly seven percent increase in total 2013 visitation, when compared to that point in 2012. Overall, tourism leaders were expecting October and

November’s stats to provide a final surge to 2013’s totals. November figures were not available at press time.

GNMP spokesperson Katie Lawhon estimates GNMP lost between 2,000 and 3,000 visitors per day during the shutdown. That means between 32,000 and 48,000 people could have visited the battlefield. Lawhon says 78 full-time permanent NPS employees were furloughed and later received back pay. Eight NPS employees deemed essential were not furloughed.

Gettysburg Tour Center—which manages Gettysburg Battlefield Bus Tours and Gettysburg Group Reservations, and provides shuttle bus service to Eisenhower National Historic Site—was one of the hardest-hit businesses. Based upon NPS figures, slightly more than 3,000 visited the Eisenhower farm in October, a 43 percent decrease compared to October 2012 figures. “October is usually one of the best months for the farm due to [senior] visitor demographics,” according to Gettysburg Tour Center President Max Felty. He says he was forced to lay off three shuttle drivers.



Although traditional battlefield bus tours were not possible during the shutdown, Felty says modified tours continued on private and public property thanks to ingenuity and teamwork with the Licensed Battlefield Guides (LBGs). “The guides developed alternate routes—once they figured it out and came up with battlefield viewpoints. A lot of private businesses and homeowners allowed tour stops on their property. The town rallied around Gettysburg’s visitors,” he explains.

“I think the community really came together—we weren’t really sure how the shutdown would impact the federal sites [at first]. It took us a few days to understand what would be open and closed; that the NPS Visitor Center would be open and LBG tours would continue [off the battlefield],” Whitehill says. “It was very relieving. Their creativity [on behalf of the LBGs and Felty] went a long way; they made a lot of visitors happy.”

“We were pleasantly surprised with guests’ reactions,” says Felty. “They were surprised with the quality of the tours. Thankfully, we had some flexibility because unlike other national parks with an entrance gate, we could still serve Gettysburg’s guests.”

Despite the improvisations, Felty estimates

battlefield tours were down at least 50 percent, or approximately 1,500 visitors, during the shutdown. A two-hour LBG battlefield bus tour garners \$30 per adult; the loss of 1,500 riders equates to \$45,000 in lost revenue. He describes Columbus Day weekend as “a big loss.”

### ‘A SILVER LINING’

“People who normally would have spent hours on the battlefield instead explored a bit more of Gettysburg and Adams County,” Whitehill explains. “I don’t have actual figures, but there were times I saw a lot of people downtown...that could definitely be a silver lining.”

One Gettysburg establishment more than doubled its business during the shutdown. “People who came to town wanted to learn about history, and that’s the reason we benefitted,” explains Nancie Gudmestad, Shriver House Museum owner. “They might never have come to Shriver House and learned another side to Gettysburg’s story, the civilian story.”

Gudmestad refers to October as “Noah’s ark month,” because visitors typically come two by two, averaging two people per half hour. Instead, staff members led tours of 12 to 16 people every half hour during the shutdown, with the museum remaining



(left to right) Visitors board a bus at the Gettysburg Tour Center for a Licensed Battlefield Guided tour. “Gettysburg 150” banners drape from the windows at the Gettysburg Hotel on Lincoln Square in downtown Gettysburg. Tasha Fridinger stretches a horse’s legs before a ride at Hickory Hollow Farm Horse Tours.



open on Tuesdays—normally an “off” day in October. She was grateful that many local businesses sent visitors her way, and she returned the favor by recommending historic sites, such as the Jennie Wade House and Seminary Ridge Museum.

“We felt bad for those who came to Gettysburg and could not experience it in whole. Therefore, we opened our museum free of charge while the government was shut down,” explains Tammy Myers, president of the Gettysburg Civil War Wax Museum. She describes visitors’ reactions as “overwhelmingly grateful.”

According to Andrea Proulx, Director of Sales and Marketing for the Historic Gettysburg Hotel, “There was panic at first and a lot of frustration. Everyone was negative about the government; nobody necessarily blamed Gettysburg. When people heard they couldn’t go on the battlefield, most actually took it in stride.”

Proulx estimates the 119-room hotel lost about 10 percent of its total room nights due to cancellations, including valuable “peak rate” October weekends. “Had the shutdown not ended when it did, we definitely would have seen more of an impact,” she explains. “We had a number of groups coming into town toward the end of the month. There would have been major implications to our revenues, our staffing and loss of wages.”


In Washington, D.C., the House and Senate eventually approved a spending plan (through January 15). President Obama signed it after midnight on October 17, ending the shutdown.

### ‘BACK TO BUSINESS’

In terms of takeaways, Felty believes the Gettysburg tourism community learned how to work together for a greater good. “Everybody was in the same boat, whether you were a hotel or an attraction. We were all grasping at ways to mitigate the effects of the shutdown,” he says. “We were all willing to share advice and ideas with the CVB, to be shared among the membership.

“We don’t know if [shutdowns] will happen again. It gives people pause, before they plan a vacation to another national park around budget time—it could have an impact,” he says.

Proulx reflects further. “Overall as a community, we rebounded some, but we’re not able to make up all lost ground,” she says. “The first weekend after the shutdown [October 19 and 20] was crazy with traffic, and it was good to see people touring the battlefield again. It was back to business.”

Grimes is climbing back into the saddle, with newfound appreciation. “I’ve learned not to take things for granted—to enjoy every day. It’s a gift to be on the battlefield.” 

**Stats and facts at [celebrategettysburg.com](http://celebrategettysburg.com)**  
How much did the government shutdown impact tourism at National Park Service sites across the country and here in Gettysburg? We have the numbers at [celebrategettysburg.com](http://celebrategettysburg.com) (look for the web-only content links on the home page).

## THE VALUE OF A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP) Museum and Visitor Center was the only one of 401 National Park Service (NPS) visitor centers that remained open to the public during the entire government shutdown.

The nonprofit Gettysburg Foundation staffed the museum during the shutdown—a remarkable feat, according to Cindy Small, Gettysburg Foundation marketing and communications director. “There were huge holes left behind through the park rangers leaving. They normally staff the main desk, so Foundation employees

staffed the desk in their absence,” she explains. “The main reaction from visitors—they were glad we were open. They knew it was not going to be the normal full, rich experience. But we were very happy to be here with a full museum prepared and designed by the NPS that was accessible.”

GNMP spokesperson Katie Lawhon says, “It was a great benefit to the public that the Foundation was able to continue operating the facility, including public access to the museum exhibits. An experience in the Museum and Visitor Center though was never

meant to stand alone—the purpose is to prepare you for a visit to the Gettysburg battlefield itself. Visitors during the shutdown enjoyed a great appetizer but they didn’t get the main course. It was disappointing and frustrating for everyone involved... park staff, the community, certainly our tourism partners and most of all, the visiting public.”

Visitation figures to the Museum and Visitor Center were down by 15 percent compared to October 2012, faring better than the 30 percent Small predicted prior to the release of the stats.