



**Susan Boardman**

-- On --

## **Gettysburg Cyclorama**

The Civil War Roundtable of Chicago  
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by: Bruce Allardice



“What is a cyclorama?” is a frequent question heard in the visitor center at Gettysburg.

In 1884, painter Paul Philippoteaux took brush to canvas to create an experience of gigantic proportion. On a 377-foot painting in the round, he recreated Pickett’s Charge, the peak of fighting at the Battle of Gettysburg. Four versions were painted, two of which are among the last surviving cycloramas in the United States. When it was first displayed, the Gettysburg Cyclorama painting was so emotionally stirring that grown men openly wept. This was state-of-the-art entertainment for its time, likened to a modern IMAX theater. Today, restored to its original glory, the six ton behemoth is on display at the Gettysburg Museum and Visitor Center.

On March 11, Sue Boardman will describe the genre of cycloramas in general and the American paintings in particular: Why they were made, who made them and how. She will then focus on the Gettysburg cycloramas with specific attention to the very first Chicago version and the one currently on display at the Gettysburg National Military Park (made for Boston).

Sue Boardman, a Gettysburg Licensed Battlefield Guide since 2000, is a two-time recipient of the Superintendent’s Award for Excellence in Guiding. Sue is a recognized expert of not only the Battle of Gettysburg but also the National Park’s early history including the National Cemetery.

Beginning in 2004, Sue served as historical consultant for the Gettysburg Foundation for the new museum project as well as for the massive project to conserve and restore the Gettysburg cyclorama. She has authored a book on the history of the Cyclorama titled *The Gettysburg Cyclorama: A History and Guide*.

**Review: by Mark Matranga**

The cyclorama, a large panoramic painting shown in the round, was initially patented in the late 18th Century, but this ‘art for the masses’ was not introduced to the United States until the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Rotunda style buildings were built to house these huge canvases after they became standardized (400’ x 50’). Hundreds were painted and exhibited but

most were lost or destroyed. The Civil War was the subject of the majority of the cycloramas produced in the United States.

Teams of artists worked together to produce a cyclorama: there were specialists in perspective, landscapes, architecture, vegetation, and uniforms and weapons. Twenty artists worked on the Gettysburg painting. The cyclorama utilized a unique method of display which helped create the illusion of reality in the painting. The circular canvas, hyperbolic shape, overhead canopy, diorama, and elevated viewing platform all contributed to a 3-dimensional effect which immersed the viewer in the scene.

Paul Philippoteaux (1846-1923), principal artist and creator of the Gettysburg Cyclorama, first visited the battlefield in 1882. To prepare the project, he built a 30 foot platform on site to view the landscape. He studied War Department maps and conducted interviews with participants—Generals Hancock, Webb, Gibbon, and Doubleday, among others. He also relied on photographs of the battlefield taken by William Tipton. Philippoteaux first created a 1/10 scale oil study. He then sketched the entire composition in pen and ink upon which he drew grid lines and projected the drawing, with grid lines, onto the full canvas. The process of planning and executing the project took about two years.

The Philippoteaux team executed four versions of the Gettysburg cyclorama. The first, in Chicago, opened on October 22, 1883 in its Rotunda at Wabash and Hubbard. The other three followed: Boston, December, 1884; Philadelphia, July, 1886; and Brooklyn, October, 1886. The effect of these creations was variously described as “simply astounding” and creating “a suspension of reality that took one’s breath away.” It was called “so realistic it could be confused with reality.” General John Gibbon, who commanded a division at Gettysburg, extolled the virtues of the painting:

*“...you may rest assured you have got a sight to see before you die. It is simply wonderful and I never before had an idea that the eye could be so deceived by paint and canvas....The perspective and representation of the landscape is simply perfect....it was difficult to disabuse my mind of the impression that I was actually on the ground.”*

The success of the Chicago Cyclorama generated imitators – at one time there were two dozen such paintings. These “buckeyes,” defined as “work of low quality, based on the ‘buckeye’ being an inferior tree, useless for building, fencing and even fuel,” were often fine copies. One exhibited in Dayton, Ohio earned \$2,000 a week; the original grossed one million dollars in its first year, however. But by the end of the 1880s, the cyclorama was no longer the attraction it once was.

The Chicago Cyclorama closed in 1890 but was refurbished for the Columbian Exposition in 1893. It closed in 1895 and was allegedly destroyed in a fire. Philadelphia’s moved to Cincinnati in 1887 where it remained for two years and then disappeared. Brooklyn’s “Gettysburg” moved to several cities and eventually was cut into pieces and distributed to Veterans’ Posts – some are now in the Park collection. The Boston version transferred to Philadelphia for a year, after which its whereabouts were unknown until 1901. Two large pieces were bought by Newark store owner Albert Hahne in 1910 and were brought to Gettysburg for the 50th anniversary of the battle. The painting remained in the Hahne family until 1942 when it was acquired by the NPS. Restoration using infra-red technology to locate the original grid lines began in 2006.

The restored Philippoteaux painting now resides in the new Visitor Center at Gettysburg where the “pageantry of war” it so realistically portrays is again on display.