

An Analysis of the Background Landscapes from Alexander Gardner's "Harvest of Death" Photo Series

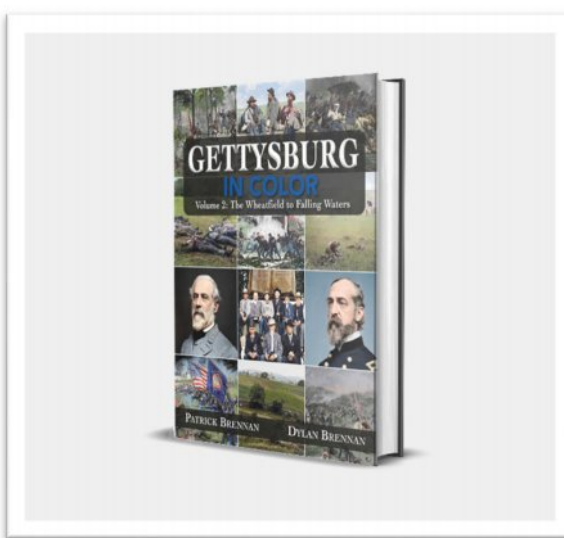
by Patrick Brennan

Author of

Gettysburg in Color

Volume 1: Brandy Station to the Peach Orchard (2022)

Volume 2: The Wheatfield to Falling Waters (2023)



Courtesy of the author and Savas Beatie.

www.savasbeatie.com

* Feel free to share *

Most students of the Civil War know that a photography crew of Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and James Gibson arrived at Gettysburg two days after the battle ended. The trio scoured the field taking dozens of photos of dead soldiers, photos that would shock the nation with their brutality and define the history of the battle for generations to come. Eventually, more photographers would arrive to further document the battered landscape, but by that time the thousands of corpses had been interred by burial crews. Gardner and his crew would remain the only ones to capture Gettysburg's harvest of death.

Over 100 years later, a young battlefield guide and student at Gettysburg College named William Frassanito became deeply interested in these images. He determined to locate the position on the field where each image was created. In 1975, his efforts produced Gettysburg: A Journey in Time. Immediately hailed as a classic, Frassanito's book deservedly remains one of the most important and most popular Gettysburg titles ever published.

Toward the end of his book, the author analyzes five images whose positions he couldn't locate, all of them bodies of Union and Confederate soldiers. Most intriguing are the final three which have become totems of the battle. They depict the same five dead Federals in the foreground taken from two different angles. The backgrounds are markedly different, displaying two different landscapes and varying numbers of additional corpses. The last photo they took also included a Federal burial crew that had already begun digging graves for the unfortunates. Gardner would release them and title one "The Harvest of Death." The image's stark, unsettling beauty still resonates 160 years later.

In the Spring 2022 issue of the Civil War Monitor, I wrote an analysis of the Harvest of Death photos. I don't intend to encapsulate the findings from that article here. For those interested, the issue can be purchased through the Monitor's website. Rather I wanted to produce an addendum that specifically compared the landscapes of the two sets of photos with various modern images.

I hope this addendum will further clarify my theory concerning the Harvest of Death photo location.

* * *

After a series of discoveries which included the possibility that the corpses in the background were Confederates, I developed a theory that Gardner's crew shot the HOD series on the western slope of Seminary Ridge south of the Chambersburg Pike. The theory is supported by the Elliot burial map which places five Union corpses in a single grave in proper geometric relationship to a fourteen-corpse Confederate burial trench and a three-corpse Confederate grave. In the original of HOD 1, what appears to be fourteen dead bodies can be counted in the background. In the HOD 2 series, at least two, possibly three bodies are visible in the left background. Those

three groupings are present on the Elliot Burial Map with the five-man Union grave just west (left) of the “W” in “Works.” The three-man Confederate grave is further west and the fourteen-man Confederate grave is northwest near the Chambersburg Pike.

The burial crew placed the five Unionists in a grave about 220 feet northwest of the Krauth House and 350 feet slightly west of south from Lee’s Headquarters.



Detail from the Elliot Burial Map
The 5-man Union grave is just west (left) of the “W” in “Works.”



A Google Earth image of the same area.

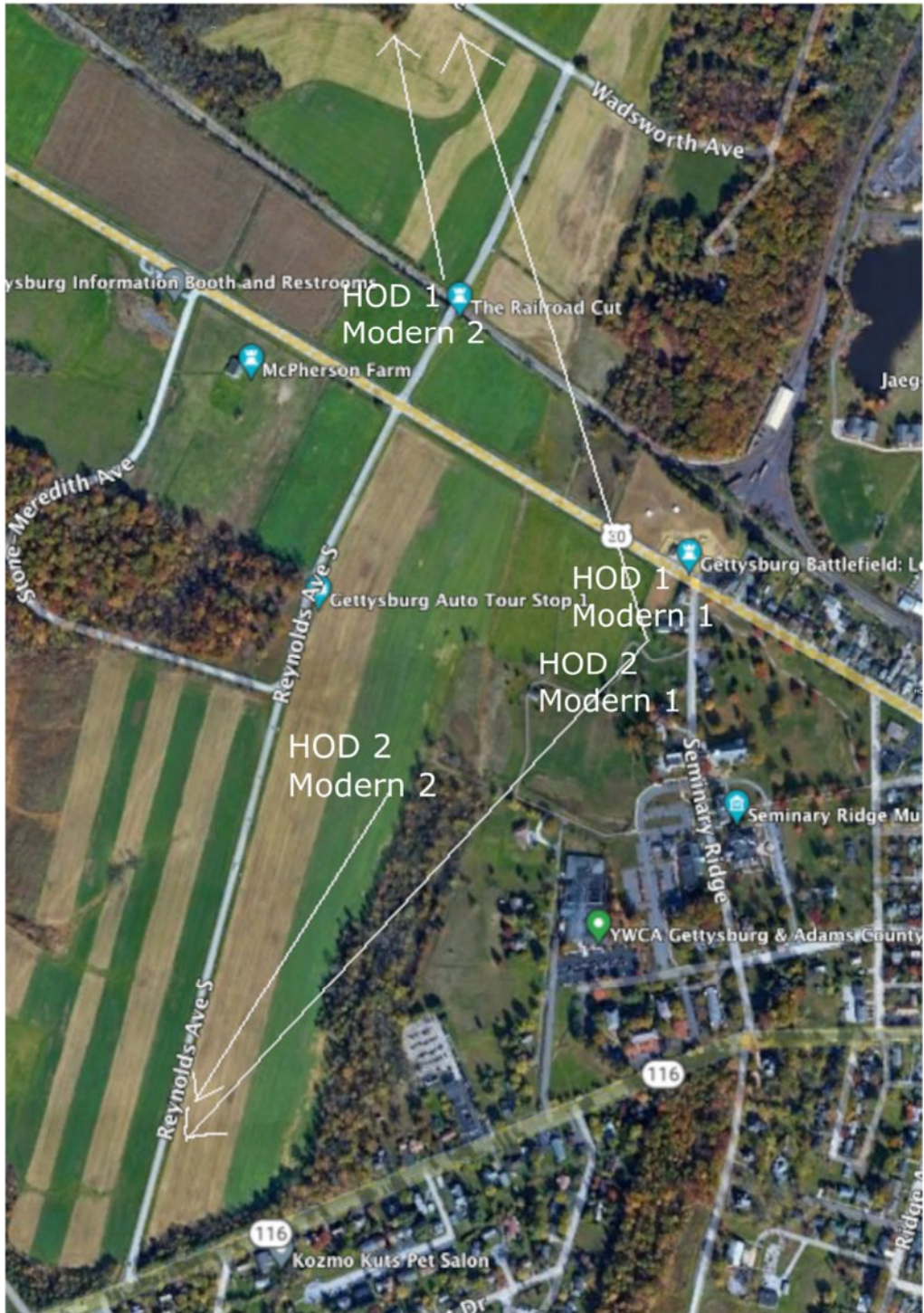


Image Angles Map

An expansion of the same Google Earth image including the camera angles of the two series of HOD images.

A visit to the location today can be slightly confusing. The area has been subject to many changes, the most impactful being the large stand of trees that now separates McPherson Ridge from the southern half of Seminary Ridge. However, the view to the northwest is also effected by tree growth to various degrees.

HOD 1



The five Union dead in the foreground, the fourteen Confederate dead in the background, the horseman and soldiers standing in the Chambersburg Pike, and South Mountain on the horizon.

HOD 1—Modern 1



Photo by John Kameron

As is obvious, changes in both the vegetation and the topography have markedly altered the view shed. However much of the basic topography remains, especially in comparison to the 1867 Warren Map. To get a view of distant South Mountain as is visible in the original, I accessed the car bridge over the Railroad Cut which is marked as **HOD 1—Modern 2** on the **Image Angles Map**.

HOD 1—Modern 2



On the upper left border, the heights that slope down from left to right are closer to the camera than the rest of the mountains on the horizon. This relationship exactly matches the same formation in the original. The rest of the modern horizon closely matches the original despite the possibility that the photographers manipulated the sky (as was typical) in the original.

HOD 2



After Gardner, O'Sullivan, and Gibson captured the HOD 1 series, they rotated their camera to the southwest to capture the same five corpses from a different angle, what I call HOD 2. After the trio took two exposures, a Federal burial crew arrived and began to dig. Evidently Gardner (possibly pictured here in the right background) convinced the soldiers to pause and pose. The photographers then captured this final shot.

HOD 2—Modern 1(a)



Photo by John Kameron

Although this is a much wider view than the original HOD 2, I include this image for perspective. In the center distance is the stand of trees that now separates McPherson Ridge from southern Seminary Ridge. These trees block the view of McPherson Ridge from HOD 2's location. However, you can see a section of McPherson Ridge in the open area past the telephone pole.

HOD 2—Modern 1(b)



Photo by John Kameron

At this point, McPherson Ridge is .53 miles to the southwest. As is obvious, the large tree stand blocks the view of the ridge from the camera POV. The topography has also changed somewhat with the installation of the Seminary Ridge Interpretive Trail and the construction of a private residence.

To view what Seminary Ridge would have looked like from the original camera location, I advanced about 1000 feet to a point past the large tree stand on an

approximate line with the original camera angle. The position is designated **HOD 2--Modern 2** on the **Image Angles Map**.

HOD 2—Modern 2



This position is in the vale between McPherson and Seminary Ridges and can be approximated in HOD 2. In the left center of the original, locate the bush behind the single soldier with a shovel. **HOD 2--Modern 2** is in this general area to the right of the bush.

The contour of modern McPherson Ridge as it descends to the Fairfield Road matches HOD 2 exactly.

* * *

I'll continue to explore this fascinating subject, and I do hope my analysis further illuminates this 160-year old mystery.

Photos by the author unless otherwise noted.