What Could Joshua Chamberlain See At Gettysburg?

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This summer, I worked with Professor Hall to answer the question “What could Joshua Chamberlain see at Gettysburg?” using historical evidence and computational tools.

Digital humanities methods and tools enabled us to reconsider the Battle of Little Round Top at Gettysburg. Chamberlain is well known for ordering a bayonet charge that helped the Union line secure Little Round Top. He is also a prominent figure in Bowdoin’s history. Until now, Chamberlain’s line of sight and perspective during the battle have not been thoroughly examined.

I worked with the visualization software Gephi to create a network of Chamberlain’s correspondence. Using over 500 original letters that were available in Bowdoin’s Special Collections and Archives, I created visualization networks that focus on the Civil War and Chamberlain’s correspondence overall. Gephi enabled us to repurpose the original letters to gain insight into the humanistic side of Chamberlain’s decisions during the battle. (Visualizations below)

I then used GIS, a mapping software, to examine the geography of Little Round Top and compare the accuracy of historical and modern maps. I created an image that shows the visibility at Little Round Top from Chamberlain’s position (visualization below, green is visible and pink is not). The digital tools had to account for variables in this project, which included whether Chamberlain was crouching or standing, what the vegetation was like in July, 1863, and how dense the army line was.

Through this research in digital humanities, I was able to create a richer narrative of Chamberlain’s vision at Little Round Top by combining contemporary tools with historical evidence. The information from this research will be incorporated into a new and innovative class offered as part of the Digital and Computational Studies Initiative this fall. I am extremely grateful to Professor Hall, the Gibbons Fellowship, and Bowdoin’s resources for the chance to be part of this new and exciting initiative.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Crystal Hall

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