

***Talismans of the Long Gray Trail: Vistas, the Valley, and the Veterans of '85
Battlefield Landscapes in Sepia and Gray***

Works drawn and collaged upon veterans' photographs of Winchester, Kernstown, Cedar Creek and Fisher's Hill--dated September 1885

Essay on the exhibition

The works in this series are about memory and the past, reflection and retrospection, pastoral harmony and domestic bliss, smoothed surfaces and explosive rifts, picturesque enclosures and sublime vistas. Throughout, Shenandoah Valley battlefields provide the template for the rhythmic movement of pencil and brush, followed by repeated touches of particulate matter and repeated overlays of grasses, shells, and stones. "The Long Gray Trail," an anonymous lyric poem composed during the Civil War and resuscitated by Valley historian John W. Wayland, provides both continuo and direction through the series. As well, the Valley Road, or Valley Turnpike (U.S. Route 11), the "long gray trail" of the poem, serves to direct those who take this journey through its intricate passages and expansive fields.

Complexly interwoven ideas and emotions fuel what I believe to be the inner power of these images. In great part this comes from the initial prints or better, imprints, drawn from the photographic record of anonymous veteran photographers revisiting battle memories of March 1862, June 1863, or September-October 1864, in battlefield visits of September 1885. How were they procured? During the course of researching images of the Valley dating 1840-1940, with a focus on the Civil War, my husband and I spent a day of paging through and digitally recording Shenandoah Valley photographs in albums archived by the U. S. Army Military History Institute in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Grouped by battle therein were a number of cabinet-card sized landscapes, each photo carefully and internally captioned by the battle it referenced and, occasionally, by the moment, movement, or position it revived. Singly or even as a battlefield group, the images at first appeared to present not so much a point of view but a point of reference—an illustration of, say, the views south, east and west from General Robert H. Milroy's Fort near Winchester, a key site in the Battle of Second Winchester (June 13-15, 1863); or the ford across the Shenandoah River used by General Joseph B. Kershaw to surprise Sheridan at the Battle of Cedar Creek (October 19, 1864).

However, the photographs indexed more than coordinates, positions or troop movements, and this became apparent as I assembled and organized the digital files, noting relationships between and within pictures. For example, several were taken in panoramic format, intending that the viewer mentally join them to recapture a strategic view or position. Others were similar in vantage point, as they were taken from above (from long-gone forts or, fortifications) or below, in entrenchments. Still others focused on fields, rocky outcroppings and small-town cemeteries. And three were taken astride the Valley Turnpike, reverifying its by then well-known fame as the "track" of Sheridan's Ride from Winchester to Cedar Creek and as the "trudge" of his army up and down Fisher's Hill.

What I began to sense was a convening of pictorial energies reaching across space and time from one veteran to another, and from the anonymous soldiers as a group to their descendants—future veteran association members whom they hoped to enkindle as keepers of the battle fires—thence to us. Looking at and into these deceptively simple landscapes, I saw wistful remembrance, dramatic aggrandizement, pastoral reconciliation and, most significantly, a desire to be reunited with memories and comrades now buried

under Valley soil. I felt compelled to bring these ideas to the surface by metaphorically and literally “working them up,” drawing into them and over them, then collaging bits of material on top of them. By so doing, I began to understand the images of War in the Valley.

It is important to note that my work is authorial—a new chapter in the evolution of my mixed-media and photo-based assemblages; historical—a chapter in Valley image history; and interpretive—a meditation on the pictorial and textual layers that these veterans’ images very patently present. Hence a bit of background and textual referencing is in order. All of these images were taken by Civil War veterans who convened in large groups to revisit key battlefield sites during what might be called the first war revival period, the mid-1880s. Collected by the Massachusetts Commandery, one of six region-based veteran officers’ associations, they were probably taken by the officers themselves during these massive reunions.

Key references are the 1878 memoirs of Richard Taylor, a general in the service of Thomas H. (Stonewall) Jackson during his victorious Confederate Valley campaign in the spring of 1862, and the 1883 diaries of Sheridan’s Veterans, documenting the recapitulation of his victorious and definitive Union Valley campaign in the fall of 1864. Taylor opined on the perils of Jackson’s retreat up the Valley in late May 1862, inasmuch as “[n]o sound could be heard, save the clattering of hoofs on the pike, which, as the night wore on, became constant. Hour after hour passed, when, thinking I heard firing to the north, I mounted, and looked for the pike. The darkness was so intense that I could not have found it but for the whiteness of the limestone” (“Stonewall Jackson and the Valley Campaign,” *The North American Review*, March 1878, p. 251). Similarly, the chronicler of Sheridan’s Veterans found Fisher’s Hill exhilarating as “[g]roups of eager visitors at once thronged the positions held by [General Jubal] Early on the afternoon of September 22, 1864. . . . Nature certainly spread before him a rare landscape” (*Sheridan’s Veterans*, Boston, 1883-86, p. 86). Again and again, these and other chroniclers of Valley military history, from the writers of the late 1860s to John Wayland in the mid-1920s, overlaid the beauty of nature upon the perils of battle, clarifying both while embedding the reader/viewer in its metaphorical trenches.

A series in process, *Talismans of the Long Gray Trail* seeks likewise to clarify and to embed, to bring the histories of Valley battles to life while enmeshing the viewer in a meditation on death. Views from the heights are paralleled with views from the depths. Prospects towards recognizable landforms are paralleled with penetrations into declivities whose landmarks are not so readily accessible. The image captions are in some cases visible, in others, partially visible and in still others, almost completely obscured. The intent is to have the pictures read on a variety of levels simultaneously, and, presented en masse, to affect the viewer poetically and imaginatively. The titles suggest this intertextuality as well, as they are grouped into series by conflict, then redefined into meditations by effect.

Finally, the shadow box format has its own representational structure: it allows the images to read more fully as three-dimensional reliefs, and it permits the collector to add his/her own bits of memorabilia, which can be placed directly in front or to the side of the images. Should one desire to present the work in a more traditional frame or alternative format, the works may be purchased unframed. Particular views or combinations of views, derived from the image archive shown in the exhibition scrapbook, may also be commissioned by contacting the artist, who resides and works along The Long Gray Trail.

It is gray with dust of limestone,

Ground by myriad pounding feet,
And by wheels that turn unceasing
Through the hours and minutes fleet;
For the whole long trail is bordered
With the native rocks of gray,
Strewn in scattered heaps about it,
As from giant hands at play
(John W. Wayland, *Whispers of the Hills*, 1923, p. 80)

Geraldine Wojno Kiefer, July 2004