

# Don't Know Much About History

by John Farrow

The weather is warming and the thoughts of runners everywhere are turning to races in far-off places. Where? You might consider some of the following, with a bit of history thrown in to boot.

## **Freedom 5,000 (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)**

In early July of 1863, the pivotal battle of the Civil War took place in and around this picturesque little Amish town in south-central Pennsylvania. And this mid-July race provides an idea of the stifling heat and humidity that the men who contested this rocky soil more than a century ago surely confronted as well.

The start is near the Lutheran Seminary on the north edge of town and quickly passes the small rock house that served as the headquarters for General Robert E. Lee during the battle. You would have thought he might have been more comfortable at the Day's Inn next door.

The race covers roughly the same area contested during the first day of the three-day conflict when on-rushing Confederates pushed Union forces through town, took hundreds of prisoners in the old Railroad Cut and generally had their way on the field. Many of the stone buildings still proudly display bullet holes from the battle.

About two miles into the race, the course passes Barlow's Knoll, where one of the most poignant but lesser-known events of the Civil War occurred on the afternoon of the first day. A Federal division under the command of General Francis Barlow was attempting to stem the Confederate advance, but was overrun. Barlow fell grievously wounded.

As he rode up with his men, Confederate General John Gordon saw the enemy officer lying on the ground. He dismounted, gave him water

and, thinking Barlow was dying, had him moved to the shade of some trees on the knoll. He spoke briefly with Barlow and agreed to deliver a note to his wife.

But Barlow survived. After the war, the former adversaries met by chance on the street in Washington. "Are you Barlow, who was killed at Gettysburg?" asked an incredulous Gordon.

"Yes," replied Barlow, "and are you the man who killed me?" Thus began a life-long friendship.

The finish of the race is back at the Seminary, which had served as a hospital during the battle. There were lots of bodies lying about on the cool green grass, but fortunately for a different reason.

## **Run Through History 10k (Vicksburg, Mississippi)**

Called by Jefferson Davis the Gibraltar of America, Vicksburg sits high atop a bluff at a strategic bend in the Mississippi River. During the Civil War, the city was an integral part of the lifeline of the Confederacy. Lincoln call it "the key to the war."

Vicksburg, however, was not an easy prize. Protected by artillery batteries on the riverfront and earthen forts inland, the city would never be taken by force. Assaults by Grant's seasoned troops resulted in heavy Union casualties and not an inch of ground gained. The Federals then dug in for a long siege that ultimately resulted in the surrender of the hungry Confederate defenders on July 4, 1863.

The Run Through History starts in the historic Vicksburg National Military Park and winds around the scenic battlefield on two paved loops. Runners can take in the many forts built by the defenders as well as the zig-zag trenches dug by the Federals in a vain attempt to approach them. During the siege, Confederates would snipe by day at the Federals trenching their way toward the fortifications, but at night an undeclared truce reigned during which the adversaries exchanged tobacco, coffee, newspapers and stories of the war under cover of darkness.

Modern Vicksburg has grown out to the Park and at times even intrudes onto the battlefield.

One can just imagine blue-clad Federals massing over by the Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken before sweeping across the Motel 6 parking lot to attack entrenched Confederates in the Waffle House parking lot.

**Fiesta 10,000 (San Antonio, Texas)**

Outside the Alamodome at the start, everyone was hunkering down with their fingers in their ears. *They must know something I don't*, I thought to myself as I followed suit. Good thing. The replica of the Alamo-era cannon used as a starting gun literally shook the pavement.

We coughed and wheezed and waved our way through clouds of acrid, bluish-grey smoke, heading downtown. Soon the race turned a corner and there we were - running directly in front of the Alamo - the Shrine of Texas Liberty.

In years past, I had driven by it any number of times without giving the matter a second thought. Now running a foot-race over the area that had once comprised the main plaza within the walls of the Alamo, and where some of the fiercest combat had occurred, just didn't seem quite right.

Texas takes its history very seriously, and children growing up in that state are taught a proper reverence for the Alamo virtually from the day they are born. A trip there is something special, akin to a pilgrimage. Step out of line and you were in big trouble. *Jim Bob, don't you DARE go in there with that cap on or I'll smack you from here to Galveston! Betty Faye, you and Donna Beth hush up back there. I swanee . . .*

Why, Davy Crockett died defending a spot to the right of the chapel just so those tour buses could have a place to park while belching clouds of diesel exhaust and disgorging swarms of Japanese tourists.

Across the street, you imagine Mexican soldiers fighting their way through the wax museum and IMAX Theater, perhaps even stopping for a sno-cone before storming the walls.

The race swings by La Villita, part of the original settlement with the towers of San Fernando Cathedral, Santa Anna's headquarters during the siege, clearly visible. The course then passes through the King William District with its

substantial rock houses built by early German pioneers before finishing back near the start.

The cool, dry Spring weather was invigorating, in retrospect a perfect celebration of hard-won freedoms, whether to run a race through town, have a sno-cone at one's leisure or simply enjoy the weather.□

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Albuquerque Road Runners Club