

Promise and Challenge: Interpreting Race and Slavery at Civil War Sites (Session Summary)

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The development of newly expanded interpretive programs presents unique promises and challenges for Civil War battlefield sites. The larger context of the war—the debate about slavery—is slowly becoming a regular part of interpretive programs. Given the strong emotions about and sensitivity to the topic, presenting competing views and memories of the Civil War challenges the well-established practice of remembering it through the narrow lens of military endeavors. Nonetheless, the promise of stimulating dialogue, prompting questions, and fostering new understanding about the Civil War and its meanings for different people is the end goal of developing renewed interpretations at Civil War historic sites.

Pitcaithley's Remarks

With the ending of the Civil War, there was a fervent and triumphant effort by the South to tell its version of the war: its causes, its events, and its legacy. Indeed, white America was preoccupied with reconciling the differences between North and South.

The “Lost Cause” interpretation was forwarded by figures such as Jubal Early, Jefferson Davis, and Alex Stephens. The United Daughters of the Confederacy and other women’s groups worked to institutionalize this view of the war and the “Lost Cause” ideology quickly took hold on the popular level. Essentially, the “Lost Cause” contends that the Confederacy is the rightful inheritor of the legacy of the American Revolution; that secession was constitutionally authorized; that the Confederacy was defeated by superior military might, not by a morally superior society; and that the war was about states’ rights and not slavery.

The “Lost Cause” became a kind of cottage industry in the South and it expanded at the same time that reconciliation among white northerners and southerners was a powerful force. With no strong opposing interpretation, the “Lost Cause” interpretation took hold not

only in the South, but also in many other parts of the country. With few exceptions, the academic community largely accepted it as well.

Change in the dominant interpretation would not come until the 1950s with the work of scholars such as Kenneth Stampp and C. Vann Woodward. Since then, there has been an explosion of scholarship placing slavery at the center of the controversies that caused the Civil War.

These new interpretations were not acknowledged widely throughout the country nor were they integrated into historic site interpretations. The 1998 gathering in which park superintendents developed a consensus to expand the interpretation of Civil War sites to include the causes of the war marked an important beginning to the transformation currently underway. In 2000, a directive from the U.S. Congress stated that Civil War battlefield sites must include in its public educational presentations the broader context of the war’s causes, particularly the unique role played by the institution of slavery.

The National Park Service is not doing at Civil War sites anything different than what it does at other sites: we ask and attempt to answer, What happened? Why? and, So what? Change is controversial. However, once

the new exhibits go up, the new handbooks are distributed, and other programs are implemented, I think we will find there is little or no controversy about the expanded interpretations.

Hennessy's Remarks

Beginning with the landmark 1998 meeting in Nashville, superintendents of Civil War-related parks initiated the re-evaluation and revision of interpretive programs to tell more than the stories of specific battles. Interestingly, only one of the issues addressed at the meeting was interpretation. We also dealt with roads, landscape issues, recreational uses, adjacent land use, and the like. However, over time, interpretation has emerged as the dominant issue.

This is not because interpretation alone is the most important issue, but because it is so difficult and complex, for many reasons. It is historically complex—social, political, economic, and military come together. This is, of course, for the interpreter both virtue and opportunity. It is politically charged—which is to say it's highly relevant (another virtue). It is culturally difficult; we are firmly rooted in the idea of viewing the Civil War almost exclusively through military eyes. And it is logistically difficult—it is more than just getting certain people to say different things.

Changing or expanding America's interpretation of its single most important national experience requires much more than the simple decision to do so. Understanding why this is so requires us to retreat backward—to understand the origins of the lens through which we view the Civil War.

Most of the legislation for America's battlefield parks is a legacy of the commemorative and reconciliatory efforts of veterans—conceived in a period where a visitor's understanding of context was assumed, when the ownership of the war's memory, legacy, and meaning was unchallenged. Though the veterans are now gone, the National Park Service faithfully carries on the veterans' traditions. We as a nation still use our battlefields to define the nation's Civil War experience in largely military terms—through the eyes of the

participants of battle.

There may be many reasons why the Park Service has largely remained faithful to this monolithic interpretation, but there is one very large one: slavery. No issue more frightens public historians than slavery. The great fear is that by acknowledging slavery as a cause of the war, we will all presume that it was, therefore, the cause for which men fought.

We know, however, that different people, depending on one's race, gender, geography, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, experienced the war differently. Focusing on the military experience alone ignores the fact that other franchises are challenging the traditional bastions of Civil War memory. It ignores the reams of research over the last half-decade that clearly reveal the complex web of people, places, trends, and places that comprised the Civil War.

We who manage Civil War parks work in the vortex of a great debate—a great battle raging over how this nation will remember and interpret its Civil War. There are forces on all sides who seek to co-opt history and use it to further an agenda. If we don't act intelligently, someone will act for us—and not necessarily with intelligence and historical validity.

The challenge that faces the National Park Service today is a huge one: to convey the significance and relevance of the Civil War in all its aspects while at the same time sustaining the agency's invaluable tradition of resource-based interpretation (a concept that is at the very foundation of the National Park Service's mission).

Superintendents are working from the bottom up to make these changes. We are working on an initiative that will expand America's interpretation of the Civil War, and we hope to do it by the Sesquicentennial.

For the public to view the Civil War as more than a succession of battles and campaigns, the nation (and therefore the National Park Service) must expand its definition of a Civil War site to go beyond battlefields. While each battlefield must clearly demonstrate how it fits into the continuum of the war, and while each battlefield will be able to illuminate sev-

eral larger themes, most battle sites are ill suited to tell anything approaching the entire story of the American Civil War. Indeed, for them to do so would be a disavowal of the National Park Service's invaluable tradition of resource-based interpretation.

Instead of asking battle sites to do everything, the National Park Service must look to other sites within the system (or perhaps identify new sites) that can illuminate some of the larger themes of the war. These sites are readily identifiable; in fact, most are anxious to assume their rightful place as part of the Civil War mosaic.

Americans have for 140 years viewed the nation's Civil War largely through the eyes of men who waged battle. The military lens on the Civil War is indispensable and inviolable, but it is not the only lens through which to view the struggle. The National Park Service will give voice to observers and participants with differing, relevant perspectives on key events and places. Such an approach will enhance rather than diminish the perceived significance and relevance of both military and non-military events.

For the National Park Service to expand its interpretation beyond traditional bounds, it needs to be guided by strong thematic statements that are both grounded in solid scholarship and reflective of differing perspectives of the war and its meaning. The themes are intended to act as a point of departure for developing media and live programs and engaging visitors in figurative or literal discussions about the nation's most destructive and transforming epoch.

Gates Moresi's Remarks

The research project, "Presenting Race and Slavery at Historic Sites," will be undertaken through a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the Center for the Study of Public Culture and Public History of the George Washington University. We are extending the work of previous visitor surveys, supervised by Professor James Horton, that were conducted at the historic sites of Gettysburg, a Civil War battlefield park, and Monticello, the home of

Thomas Jefferson in Charlottesville, Virginia (not a National Park service unit). Under this new cooperative agreement we are planning to conduct surveys at Arlington House/Robert E. Lee Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, the Frederick Douglass Home in Washington, D.C., and at Manassas National Battlefield Park, in Manassas, Virginia.

We are currently in the planning stages for these surveys to take place over the next three years. The previous surveys will serve as models for the next surveys. Here, I describe my impressions, rather than quantitative results, about the Gettysburg and Monticello surveys in which I participated as an interviewer.

A team of graduate students conducted both visitor surveys and one or two interviews with staff interpreters. We asked visitors about the content of both self-guided and guided tours and at both sites, focused on the interpretation of slavery. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

For both types of interviews we developed questions in consultation with a sociologist in order to elicit four basic things: information on what the visitor saw/heard/read at the site; what they thought about what they saw/heard/read at the site; and how that compared with what they already knew or understood about the topic of slavery in general, or the site in particular. Fourth, the survey was intended to allow people to express their opinion about how the topic was or was not presented at the site.

We were operating very consciously with the understanding that discussions about race and slavery in all kinds of venues are a contested topic with plenty of opinions and opposing ideas. One of the goals of the surveys, then, was to collect information about *how* visitors receive this information and *what* they expect from interpretive programs. Also, a more general goal of the project is to establish dialogue among site historians, site interpreters, and academic resources, because they can learn from each other.

At Gettysburg, we noticed some important aspects of the site that strongly influenced visitor responses to questions about slavery. Because of the high death toll at this site (more

than 51,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured over the three-day battle), because the site includes a large cemetery in which soldiers of this battle and other war veterans are buried, and because there are so many monuments to individual infantrymen who participated in the battle, these realities all work to make Gettysburg a memorial site dedicated to the sacrifice of thousands of young lives. Discussing slavery in this context is more sensitive than at other kinds of historic sites, so we were very careful about where we stood and approached visitors. We also noticed, in contrast to the Jefferson site (which had its own particular issues making it a sensitive topic there) a very somber mood at Gettysburg.

The visitors themselves expressed the idea that the site was “hallowed ground” and some expressed that slavery was not relevant to the Civil War (at that moment) or to the site—in contrast again to the Jefferson site. I believe the new museum and visitors’ center plan for Gettysburg is a useful way to contextualize the battle and its larger meaning without detracting from the park setting and its memorial aspect.

While every historic site has its particular issues that make it unique, we did discover some general findings about the presentation of slavery. First, visitors are more receptive and even interested in the topic than one might think. Also, staff interpreters love their job and are excited to be able to work with new material, to use new material in ways that really engage visitors, and to learn more about their topic. Finally, discussing slavery and race relations can be particularly difficult in the public setting: talking about it in the past is hard because dealing with it in the present is hard, too.

We learned that while new interpretive methods were employed, getting information to visitors about slavery, and to relay how it was significant to a particular site, really depended upon the tour guide and the face time that he or she had with visitors. Handbooks and labels are very good and useful, but it is up to the guide to point visitors in those directions.

I think that the most important thing that can happen out of these kinds of collaborative projects between the Park Service and academic institutions is the exchange of ideas and the exchange of experience. Both sides gain from this mutually beneficial project. The site historians and interpreters learn from the surveys and can establish a relationship with an academic institution.

By conducting the surveys, graduate students have a unique opportunity to speak with interpreters on the “front line” of history. In addition, the students themselves are put in a situation that does not happen in the protected world of the classroom nor in the sometimes quite-removed experience of graduate studies research. By conducting these surveys, they have to confront the public. Students are then faced with beginning to understand the unique promises and challenges of interpretation in the National Park Service.

Tucker’s Remarks

Fort Sumter National Monument was authorized by an act of Congress in 1948, which simply stated that the site “shall be a public national memorial commemorating historical events at or near Fort Sumter.” Without further direction from Congress, the National Park Service relied upon its staff to clarify the interpretive purposes for Fort Sumter National Monument. Interpretation consisted of guides leading small groups to interesting spots within the fort.

When the Park Service published the first master plan for Fort Sumter in the 1950s, the fort’s interpretive program was based on the 1860 election of President Abraham Lincoln, the secession of South Carolina, and the subsequent movement of Major Robert Anderson from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter. The major focus was on the initial Confederate attack of 1861 and the Federal bombardments of 1863 and 1864, known as the Siege of Charleston.

During the following decade, once the archeology was completed, permanent exhibit facilities were needed to enhance the visitor experience at Fort Sumter. A new museum was constructed with Mission 66 funding in the disappearing gun position of Battery

Huger—an Endicott Battery completed in 1899. But the focus of interpretation did not appreciably expand with the museum exhibits. The events of 1861 and the bombardments of 1863–64 remained the central interpretive themes.

By the 1990s, National Park Service interpretive rangers were beginning to make a re-evaluation of the role of holistic interpretation in programming within the national parks. Those responsible for interpretation began this re-evaluation long before Congress or the Washington Office identified it as a need. Interpretive efforts such as those begun at Fort Sumter in the early 1990s were reflected in many Civil War sites around the country. Washington supported these individual park efforts. National Park Service regional offices helped formalize the efforts with the multi-regional conference of battlefield superintendents held in Nashville during the summer of 1998.

In this new environment, the interpretation at Fort Sumter began to change. Park staff redid the 1960s-era museum at historic Fort Sumter in the early 1990s. Completed in 1995, the new museum retained many of the treasured artifacts that were a part of the old museum, now exhibited in fresh surroundings with a more sweeping story line.

A high priority was bringing the text in line with current scholarship. New exhibit text and graphics includes an introductory section that deals with the growth of sectionalism, antebellum politics, and slavery as the causes of secession and war. Most of the exhibit remains site-specific, dealing with topics such as the fort's construction, people and events leading to the firing of the first shot of the Civil War, and what happened to the fort during the ensuing war. A section was added on the participation of African-Americans in the war, highlighting the role of the 54th Massachusetts on nearby Morris Island.

An even more ambitious exhibit project began in the fall of 1999 with exhibit planning for the new Fort Sumter tour boat facility at Liberty Square. Museum exhibits at Liberty Square are within the new visitor education and transportation center in downtown

Charleston. Fixed media in the landscaped area highlight contributions to America's liberties from the Constitution era to modern times.

As it turned out, the name of the site was fortuitous since the word "Liberty" became a unifying interpretive theme that finally brought into focus the interpretive themes of Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Fort Moultrie, and Fort Sumter National Monument under a single umbrella. The word "Liberty" provided a platform that allowed the staff to explore the advancements of this ideal from our birth as a nation through the Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century. The exhibit plan for the new visitor education center and dock facility at Liberty Square would provide orientation and enticement to visit the historic fort, exhibit and interpret the Garrison flag, and interpret the causes of the Civil War, with a special emphasis on the role of slavery in America and the role of Charleston in particular.

During the intervening months between the time the facility opened and the permanent exhibits were installed, full-scale vinyl color prints of each permanent exhibit were hung on temporary plywood frames. This gave visitors a chance to see and comment on the exhibit program prior to its production. Several comments were received, ranging from glowing to condemning. Most were positive, appreciative, and constructive.

Change is difficult. Even for the dedicated staff assembled at Fort Sumter, changing Civil War interpretation was difficult. Each of us brings to the table a particular set of experiences, education, and cultural background depending on to whom we were born, where we have lived, and how we have been educated. Much has been done over the past ten years to implement an expanded interpretive program. It has involved increasing staff understanding and perception and broadening our community partnerships. The staff has participated in conferences, training programs, dedications, special resource studies, sensitivity sessions, and diverse cultural events to help with the transition. Today the staff sits on the "point of the sword" for the

Racial and Ethnic Diversity: Acknowledging the Past, Planning for the Future

National Park Service doing their job. They are prepared to tell the story faithfully, completely, and accurately.

[Ed. note: A full version of Tucker's presenta-

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