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Bringing Civic Engagement into Richmond National Battlefield Park: The Story of Lincoln's 1865 Visit

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Paraphrasing and condensing from the Director's Order #75A, let's start with a definition of *civic engagement*: a continuous, dynamic conversation with the public that strengthens public understanding of the full meaning and contemporary relevance of natural and cultural resources. All of our work is connected to real places, real resources, which give ideas substance over and above printed words on a page. Director's Order #6 for *Interpretation and Education* quotes the National Park System Advisory Board's 2001 report, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*:

The study of our nation's history, formal and informal, is an essential part of our civic education. In a democratic society such as ours, it is important to understand the journey of liberty and justice, together with the economic, social, religious, and other forces that barred or opened the ways for our ancestors, and the distances yet to be covered. Visits to historic places, whether managed by the Park Service or by others, allow us to take the measure of our history in immediate ways. Parks should not be just recreational destinations but springboards for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment. The Park Service must ensure that the American story is told faithfully, completely, and accurately.

The national battlefield park where I work in Richmond, Virginia, has a long and distinguished history of interpreting Civil War events. The Richmond area has a lot to interpret, more than we had tapped traditionally. There were some thirty battles around Richmond, some of them Union victories, some Confederate. Bigger-than-life statues of Confederate generals and their horses, installed in the early twentieth century, dot the city's landscape today. Cemeteries honor both Union and Confederate war dead. Roads and bridges are named for Confederate figures and only for a few Civil Rights figures. Our park headquarters is on the site of one of the largest Civil War hospitals.

So, you can see that our stories are diverse, but located in the former capital of the Confederacy makes telling *all* the stories challenging on occasion. We had had a narrowly limited audience until recently, when we have made more efforts along the lines of civic engagement. Telling some stories gets a negative reaction from some of our traditional audiences.

One very significant episode concerning Richmond and the Civil War had not been much told for over 100 years in Virginia, or anywhere else for that matter, except in a passage buried in a thick book, *The Battle Cry of Freedom*. That is the story of President Abraham Lincoln in Richmond in April 1865. Lincoln's visit produced, in the words of the prominent modern historian, James McPherson, "the most unforgettable scenes of this unforgettable

war.” We started telling this story as more than a passing image in our film in April 2003 at our main visitor center at Richmond National Battlefield Park. And when we did so, some members of our community took offense. (Some were members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, some not.) Their reaction sparked a national controversy in the media. I am convinced that the numbers who were incensed across the nation were small, but the story was juicy for the media, which hyped it considerably. When I tried to engage some of the callers in dialogue, it was clear to me that their interest was not in reconciliation over the subject. But, you are captured listeners today, and I will tell you our rationale.

As always, context is important to understanding the significance of a historic event, and I’d like to supply you with that historic context of President Lincoln’s visit to Richmond.

Our country has been called a “unique experiment in democracy” and the Civil War has been called the *watershed* event in our nation’s history. Our Constitution, framed in the late 18th century here in Philadelphia, was a document only delicately held together at the time. Both before and after ratification by the states, differences of opinion existed. The threat of *disunion* surfaced again and again over taxes, slavery, banking, and representation; the threat of disunion was voiced by both northerners and southerners at various times. For many decades early in the country’s history, Virginians were leaders in patching over differences, working for compromise. It’s important to remember that Virginia did not want disunion, and most of her voting citizens opposed secession, but neither did they want any states to be coerced to stay in the Union.

Now, let’s set the scene just prior to the Civil War. Until late 1860, many Richmonders had looked with calm pride upon the city’s past and with confidence toward its future. Prosperity was obvious in the city’s growth and in the number of immigrants and northern workers that had come to work in the city. As an urban center and port city, Richmond reflected a more diversified social structure and economy than was common in the rural South. Of the city’s 38,000 residents in 1860, about 40% were African-American, and of these some 8% were free black. Among whites, almost one-fourth were foreign-born. Slave labor was used extensively in factories and commerce. Richmond competed well against other cities in its four major enterprises: the iron industry, flour milling, tobacco, and the internal slave trade. Canals, railroads, and stage lines connected the city to the larger world.

In Virginia, even after the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln, many influential politicians had almost blind hope that peace would prevail. Virginia’s Governor John Lechter said on January 7, 1861, “Surely, no people have been blessed as we have been, and it is melancholy to think that all is now about to be sacrificed on the Altar of Passion. If the judgments of men were consulted, if the admonitions of their consciences were respected, the Union would yet be saved from overthrow.”

Only after the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in mid-April 1861, when President Lincoln then called for volunteer troops to suppress the rebellion, did Virginia decide to secede from the Union and ally itself with the nascent Confederate government.

At the close of the Civil War, after four bloody years with many of the battles within earshot of Richmond, this was an occupied city under Union rather than Confederate martial law. Imagine the scene that Lincoln chose to visit—against the advice of many. Burned-out hulks of buildings lined streets; smoke still hung in the air; uncertainty of the final out-

come must have caused fear and apprehension of what would be next. Streets and houses were becoming densely crowded with returned Confederate soldiers, returned former residents, and occupying Union troops. While black Richmonders celebrated the end of slavery, the former slaveholders found their wealth in slaves gone.

Much of Richmond's business and industrial section lay in rubble and ashes. No telegraph lines and none of the five railroads were in operation. The Army's Provost Guard, expecting disorder, arrested freed black men and women who gathered on the street and forbade their presence in Capitol Square. Such actions of the Union Army reassured many white Richmonders, while suggesting to black Richmonders that the meaning of freedom remained to be established.

Timing often means everything—and it's true here. Remember President Lincoln's speech from just a month prior to his visit to Richmond. In his concise and powerful second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, the president delivered the now-famous passage: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right ... let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

Lincoln seemed to want only three things. Three simple but monumental things. If there was agreement to end the war, abolish slavery, and restore the national authority, he would consider all other conditions "in a spirit of sincere liberality." "Let 'em up easy," was Lincoln's message to his military staff. He was not interested in trying southerners for treason or confiscating property. So that's the context of Lincoln's April 1865 visit to Richmond.

In the midst of telling the story of Civil War Richmond and its battlefields, it seemed appropriate to us to remind people of the pivotal role of President Abraham Lincoln, and his amazing trip with his son to Richmond, and we have done so with an interpretive exhibit that includes a statue of him with his son, Tad. They came up from City Point, Virginia, on various boats on the James River. The trip was fraught with mishap, some describing it as ignominious as he finally arrived on a rowboat with no fanfare or guards to meet him at Rockett's Landing, whence he walked into the city. Little is recorded of his route or his words that day.

Remember that Lincoln's visit produced, in the words of the prominent modern historian, James McPherson, "the most unforgettable scenes of this unforgettable war." How could we ignore Lincoln in Richmond?

The Civil War framed the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Within weeks of his election in 1860 as the sixteenth American president, South Carolina seceded from the Union. The primary Confederate army surrendered on April 9, 1865, only days before Lincoln's assassination.

Here we have the head of state of the enemy force visiting Richmond only a day after its evacuation by the Confederate government. The visit was remarkably daring for its timing and circumstances. Weary of war and worried about the country's future, he came on a mission of peace and reconciliation, we know from his second inaugural address.

You need to recall Lincoln's bone-tired physique in 1865 and his bone-strong determination for reuniting the United States. During his long walk into Richmond, Lincoln received a boisterous and prolonged welcome from the large population of African-Americans. In contrast, most white residents greeted the president with stony silence. As we know,

only a few days later he was shot dead by an assassin in the other capital, where he had resided as president.

You may be tired of hearing how author William Faulkner reminded us that in the South the past isn't dead, it isn't even past. Maybe because it is still so much alive, we find ourselves on contested ground when we try to engage its various aspects. But try we must, and in the process include more people in the appreciation and discussion of our history.