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National Parks and the Interpretive Message Since 1990

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In a 1994 article titled “Sites of Shame,” published in *National Parks*, Robin Winks suggested that

Education is best done with examples. These examples must include that which we regret, that which is to be avoided, as well as that for which we strive. No effective system of education can be based on unqualified praise, for all education instructs people of the difference between moral and wanton acts and how to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable. If this premise is correct, we cannot omit the negative lessons of history.¹

Winks might have been describing a fundamental change that was then transforming the National Park Service (NPS) into an organization fundamentally different from the agency it had been a decade earlier. The decade of the 1990s brought considerable change to the NPS—change that came from within and change that came from outside the organization.

Congress played a major role in moving the NPS to a different place. In 1991, Congress passed legislation changing the name of Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The legislation further directed the secretary of the interior to erect a monument to the Indians who fell there in order to “provide visitors with an improved understanding of the events leading up to and the consequences of the fateful battle.”² Through this act, Congress directed the National Park Service to move the management of this park from a shrine to George Armstrong Custer to an educational site where the visiting public could understand the battle from the perspective of the Sioux and Cheyenne as well as that of the 7th Cavalry.

Congress followed the Little Bighorn legislation with a string of acts that designated new kinds of historical parks, parks that require that we understand the past, not simply celebrate it. They require us to think about the past, not merely feel good about the past. These new parks included Manzanar National Historic Site, Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Nicodemus National Historic Site, Lower East Side Tenement National Historic Site, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, Oklahoma City National Memorial, Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, and the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail. These parks require more of the Park Service—they require us to dig a little deeper for these stories get to the heart of American democracy.

At the same time, perceptions within the National Park Service were changing. The agency began to clarify and expand its interpretation of the educational mission established by Congress in the Historic Sites Act of 1935, but recognized by Stephen Mather and Horace Albright from the beginning. It restructured its interpretive training program to place equal emphasis on the message as on the medium. The agency began to support openly and

aggressively the telling of untold stories, stories that had not traditionally been part of the dominant narrative told at parks. These stories represented different or under-represented voices, different views, different interpretations of a single event. The National Park Service gradually came to the realization that the telling of stories that conflicted with each other was OK; that the goal was not in the story, but in the connection the visitor made to the place. Different visitors respond to different stories. The National Park Service could and should tell the stories of its parks through a range of voices and perspectives. The Northeast Region produced *The Road Ahead*, which required each park to develop interpretive presentations that were not part of the traditional and expected story.

The new direction taken by the Park Service's Civil War battlefield managers represents this new direction. Not feeling content to simply talk about who shot whom and where, the battlefield superintendents decided in 1998 that their parks would start presenting the causes of the Civil War and its consequences, in addition to the recounting of the details of the battles. At Civil War battlefield parks throughout the system one finds new exhibits and publications that explain the causes of the war, placing the war in the social, political, and economic context of mid-nineteenth-century America. The blueprint for this new direction is *Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes* (1998) which sets the policy direction for explaining the Civil War in a broader context. The philosophical and historical direction is found in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (2001). This national conference, held in historic Ford's Theatre in May 2000, featured presentations by seven Civil War scholars, including the Pulitzer Prize winner James McPherson, David Blight, Ira Berlin, Drew Gilpin Faust, Eric Foner, James Horton, and Edward Linenthal. Although this new direction has been opposed by those who wish the Civil War to be remembered strictly as military history, the opposition, though quite vocal, has been more concerned with what they fear the NPS will do rather than what it is, in reality, doing. Those exhibits that have already been produced have been greeted with little or no criticism.

In 1990, Congress directed (see Public Law 101-628) the National Park Service to revise its thematic framework for history, which dated, with minor revisions, from the 1930s. The act specifically directed the Park Service to work with "major scholarly and professional organizations" to effect the revision. It was also specific in stating that "the Secretary shall ensure that the full diversity of American history and prehistory are [sic] represented." The new framework, which the Park Service produced in 1994, recognized and embraced the revolution in historical scholarship characterized by the New Social History/New American History, which has altered our perspective of ourselves since the 1970s.

During the decade of the 1990s, the National Park Service established closer and more active working relationships with professional and related organizations. The Canon Scholarship Program designed by the NPS chief scientist, Mike Soukup, is an excellent example of the linking of NPS research needs with those of the academy. The natural resource program has also developed a new network of Cooperative Educational Study Units (CESUs) with major universities throughout the country. At the same time, the National Park Service developed cooperative agreements with the Organization of American Historians, Western History Association, and National Council on Public History. These arrangements allow the

NPS to work in a collaborative fashion with the leading scholars in American history. And finally, the NPS is developing a professional relationship with the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

This rising professionalism or maturation or evolution of the NPS is also reflected in several recent reports on and by the NPS.

National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda (1992), a product of the Park Service's 75th Anniversary Symposium, argued that the NPS should be a model "that can teach valuable lessons to a world increasingly concerned with environmental degradation, threats to wilderness values, and rapid cultural and historical change." National Park Service employees, it continued, should have greater opportunities to educate themselves about the issues they confront so they can be better educators; the NPS should interpret controversial or contentious events and sites and do so from multiple perspectives; finally, it suggested, the NPS should "bring scientific expertise and scholarship into management decision making as early as possible."³

The *National Park Service Strategic Plan* (1997) likewise reflected changing sensibilities about who the National Park Service is and what its role in a changing America ought to be. The plan acknowledges the Park Service's role as a public educator and the national park system as "the nation's greatest university without walls." It should, the plan argues, help visitors "understand the complexity of the land and its history" and provide all interpretation through the establishment of larger natural and cultural contexts. This changed attitude within the Park Service "also means increased outreach and interaction with educational institutions at all levels, broadening the intellectual enrichment of all."⁴

That same year, 1997, the National Park Service convened an educational summit in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to explore its role as an educational organization. The result was *Findings and Recommendations: Education Initiative Symposium* (1997), which outlined an NPS strategy for the future. The report stressed the importance of presenting different perspectives throughout its interpretive programs and of using a variety of technologies to reach those who may never visit a national park. It also recognized that to be good teachers, NPS employees must also be good students. The NPS should "create an environment that encourages employees to pursue advanced studies to remain current in their field."⁵

The National Park System Advisory Board's recent report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2001) clearly indicates that the world has turned and that the National Park Service functions in a social and political environment far removed from that in which it was created (in 1916) or even in which it celebrated the bicentennial of the nation's birth in 1976. The Park Service's protection of biodiversity is simply a concept Stephen Mather never had to confront. And Horace Albright's vision for historic interpretation during the 1930s never embraced the idea that this country's story "is often noble, but sometimes shameful and sad." With cultural diversity becoming increasingly apparent, the Park Service has and must continue to change, and this report endorses and encourages that change. The challenge is critical, the report states. "Our nation's history is our civic glue. Without it, our national character is diminished."⁶

Finally, in 2002, the National Park Service produced *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement*, a report of a workshop on civic engagement held in New York City in

December 2001. Taking its direction from the Advisory Board's report, "participants argued for broadening historical context, for giving expression to diverse American voices, and for strengthening the public's understanding of the contemporary relevance of heritage resources." A second civic engagement workshop was held in Atlanta in December 2002, with more being contemplated in other regions.

Without question, the most telling example of how the National Park Service has evolved over the past ten or so years is its reception of Richard Sellars' critique of its natural resource management program. *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (1997) assesses the Park Service's management of natural resources since the creation of the agency in 1916.⁷ It is detailed and thorough, and documents the traditional preference of the agency for preserving pretty scenery over viable biotic systems. In earlier years, the Park Service would have either absorbed the book without modifying its management practices or fought to suppress its publication. Instead, Director Robert Stanton established a working group to assess the problem and provide recommendations on how to fix them. The result was the Natural Resource Challenge that is currently pumping millions of dollars into a reinvigorated park management system.

Civic dialogue is important in every age from George Washington to George Bush. It is important today, and the National Park Service and other managers of historic places and public programs have important roles to play. Public space should serve as public forums for the discussion of the past's unfinished business; common ground for the exploration of what Barbara Kingsolver calls "the spaces between," those cultural divides that separate us—northerners from southerners, east from west, urban from rural, men from women. The issues that are ripe for public discussion are often controversial, and they are controversial precisely because they are important to our national psyche, and quite often they have deep roots in the past. Understanding the depth of those roots allows us to discuss our common problems with a much better chance of crafting a better future for all Americans.

Indeed, understanding the past so we can create a better, more equitable future, is what the study of history is all about. The National History Standards developed through the National Endowment for the Humanities (1996) got to the heart of the matter:

Knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence. Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been, what its core values are, or what decisions of the past account for present circumstances. Without history, we cannot undertake any sensible inquiry into the political, social, or moral issues in society. And without historical knowledge and inquiry, we cannot achieve the informed, discriminating citizenship essential to effective participation in the democratic processes of governance and the fulfillment for all our citizens of the nation's democratic ideals.⁸

The National Park Service occupies a unique position in the United States. It manages many of the most significant historic places in the country; places that possess stories about the development of this democracy, stories that tell us who we have been and how we got to this place and time, stories that define us as a people, as a community, as a society. These sto-

ries about our past are useful to a society interested in where it is going. Indeed, they are essential. As the historian Michael Wallace tells us, “Understanding the way in which the present has emerged from the past maximizes our capacity for effective action in the present—whoever we are. The truth doesn’t make us free—but it is an indispensable precondition for freedom.”⁹

Endnotes

1. Robin Winks, “Sites of Shame: Disgraceful Episodes from Our Past Should be Included in the Park System to Present a Complete Picture of Our History,” *National Parks* (March–April 1994), 22–23.
2. Public Law 102-201, December 10, 1991.
3. National Park Service, *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: NPS, 1992).
4. National Park Service, *National Park Service Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C.: NPS, 1997).
5. National Park Service, *Findings and Recommendations: Education Initiative Symposium* (Washington, D.C.: NPS, 1997).
6. National Park System Advisory Board, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2001).
7. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).
8. Gary B. Nash and Charlotte Crabtree, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), 41.
9. Michael Wallace, “The Politics of Public History,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, edited by Jo Blatti (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 38.