The Future of the NPS History Program

The presentation of history in public settings has recently been the subject of great debate in this country. The conceptualization of museum exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress prompted a flurry of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage; the development of standards for the exploration of history in the public schools drew significant criticism; federal funding of cultural programs by the National Endowment for the Humanities prompted extensive debate within Congress. Within the current initiative to reexamine federal roles and programs, the National Park Service has reorganized and decentralized, and, in the process, fundamentally altered its approach to managing the National Park System. The NPS must now decide how its history program can best respond to these changing cultural and organizational conditions.

As we begin to chart a new course, I am optimistic that the NPS can, and will, take advantage of opportunities that were not available during earlier times. As Chief Historian (and a twenty-year employee of the National Park Service), I am also mindful that the agency has a long tradition of excellence in preservation and education that is emulated in local, state, and private historic sites throughout the country.

Our system is not perfect, however. There are many areas that can be refined and strengthened. The following essay reflects my thoughts on the future direction of the program. It is grounded in my conviction that the study of history is not only relevant to our contemporary society, but essential, if we are to understand our current condition and create a future based on knowledge and wisdom. It is also based on my belief that, to be meaningful, history must be examined totally—the uncomfortable along with the comfortable, the complex along with the simple, the controversial along with the inspirational. We cannot learn from the past unless we explore it in its entirety.

In its sixty-five-year history, the National Park Service’s history program has undergone significant change. Starting with the hiring of Verne Chatelain in 1931 as the first Chief Historian, the direction and emphasis of the program has evolved with the changing requirements of the times. Chatelain was first assigned to the Division of Education under the direction of Harold C. Bryant, but quickly won support for the creation of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings. Chatelain and his fellow historians (at that time, the few histo-
rians in the NPS were all men) focused on establishing the role for history within the agency, developing historic preservation standards, and dealing with the crushing demands of the New Deal programs. They also struggled with defining that role in the shadow of Colonial Williamsburg, which was successfully setting a new standard for the entire concept of historic preservation. It seems that the program skillfully combined historic preservation issues—philosophical and practical—with the need for quality research for resource management and interpretive purposes.

Following the enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which considerably broadened the definition of preservation throughout the country, NPS historians assumed a leading role in the agency’s Section 106 compliance responsibilities. The signing by President Nixon of Executive Order 11593 in May 1971, requiring federal agencies to locate, document, and carefully attend to their historic properties, further moved the history program in the direction of legislative compliance and cultural resource management (CRM). This focus on the CRM aspects of historic preservation resulted, over time, in a gradual separation of the history program from issues dealing with the interpretation of history and of historic places. Many, if not most, history research projects following 1966 were designed to provide information for the physical preservation (or restoration and reconstruction) of historic sites, rather than for the interpretation of those sites to the public. Even though much, if not most, of that research could have been used for educational purposes, the perception was that it had been designed for other purposes. The reality of that estrangement between the history and interpretation programs was that “historians” in the National Park Service became involved almost exclusively in CRM, and “interpreters” (although many had, and have, academic backgrounds in history) designed and implemented the NPS’s educational programs.

The reorganization and re-engineering of the National Park Service over the past two years has once again required the history program to reevaluate its purpose and reexamine its role within this new organizational and philosophical structure. Several factors, internal and external, have influenced this process. The Vail Agenda (1992) calls for heightened professionalism in all of the NPS’s programs, and specifically recommends creating “a greater appreciation for research and scholarly activity.” At the same time, it recognizes that our understanding of the past is not static, but rather “an evolving mosaic, crafted anew by each successive generation.” As historians know, these are not profound thoughts. They do, however, represent a fundamental shift in approach for an agency that has not, at times, appreciated the basic nature and evolution of thought within the field of historical inquiry.
In 1993, at the request of Congress, the National Park Service requested the assistance of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) in reconceptualizing the NPS thematic framework for history and prehistory. Originally designed during the 1930s, the framework had been modified over the years, but in relatively minor ways. The resulting work group, consisting of NPS historians and scholars from outside the NPS and chaired by Page Miller, completely revised the existing framework and brought the NPS’s outline for history in line with current scholarship.

Recognizing the benefits that come from working closely with the NPS’s academic partners, Director Roger G. Kennedy, in late 1993, asked the National Park System Advisory Board to create a humanities subcommittee that would make recommendations for improving the NPS’s history and archaeology programs. Chaired by James O. Horton of George Washington University, the committee consisted of Frederick Hoxie, Raymond Arsenault, Lois Horton, Laurence Glasco, Alan Kraut, Marie Tyler-McGraw, and Holly Robinson, and an equal number of NPS historians and archaeologists. Written in February 1994 and adopted by the Advisory Board the following month, *Humanities and the National Parks: Adapting to Change* identifies ways to strengthen the environment for education within the Park Service. Its recommendations are designed to strengthen NPS research and scholarship in the parks, encourage the professional development of its people, and help the agency reach a national audience more effectively with the story of the parks.

Finally—but equally important—the historical profession itself has become more interested in the public presentation of the past. The rise of “public history” as a legitimate branch of the profession, complete with its own organization, has prompted much greater interaction between the academy and historians who work in more public settings. Over the last ten years, the Organization of American Historians has greatly expanded its interest in public history, as evidenced by the addition of film and exhibit reviews in its journal, as well as the creation of both a public history committee and a National Park Service Committee chaired presently by Gary Nash from the University of California at Los Angeles.

This new organizational and professional environment requires a new vision for history—one that takes advantage of the many opportunities presently available for strengthening the program throughout the NPS. This new direction is based on two fundamental thoughts: 1) the necessity for the history program, in all its manifestations, to renew its links with the historical profession and its standards and processes; and 2) the importance of the inherent and appropriate connection between the ongoing pursuit of historical knowledge
and the NPS’s interpretive and education responsibilities. This new emphasis is important—indeed, critical—if the NPS is to foster a renewed intellectual vitality for its educational programs and play a more meaningful role in public education. Many of the following ideas are, of course, not new, and have been, and are being, implemented throughout the National Park System. What is different is that they need to become a regular and consistent part of the agency’s way of doing business. They need to be institutionalized.

Over the past twenty-five to thirty years, as the NPS defined its history program within the developing field of cultural resource management, it largely lost contact with the profession of history outside the agency, and with the sense that such contact was important. A renewed emphasis on professionalism for historians and historical work implies a renewal of those lost connections. Professionalization implies an acceptance of the need for historians (those in the 170 series, as well as those engaged in the interpretation of history) to attend professional conferences and participate in the discussion that historians have about the past. It may mean that for some, due to lack of travel funds, participation is limited to following the discussion in the many historical journals that regularly deal with issues relevant to NPS sites. (The OAH recently offered all parks an opportunity to subscribe to The Journal of American History at a greatly reduced rate.) Subscription to journals is the most inexpensive way of keeping current with ever-changing historical scholarship.

Professionalism means that all historical research should be reviewed not only within the NPS, but outside by scholars knowledgeable in the field. More NPS research should be submitted for publication in historical journals. Publication and a consistent peer-review process not only demonstrates that the research has met the standards of the profession, but also—and more important—results in higher-quality products. My office is currently exploring ways that would permit NPS research to be published by academic presses at less expense to the agency.

As the National Park Service rethinks its role as an educational institution, it should also reassess the responsibilities of various offices in contributing to a more sophisticated educational program at specific parks and throughout the National Park System. In this, the last decade of the twentieth century, American historiography is a most exciting and ever-changing field of inquiry. Western history, in particular, has completely transformed itself within the last decade. Likewise, scholarship over the past twenty-five years in the areas of women’s history and ethnic history has greatly influenced the manner in which we view the historical development of contemporary society. If the National Park Service is going to contribute to the public discussion about the past, its interpretive planning and design functions must in-
clude a recognition that 1) evolving historical ideas and debates are relevant to the NPS, and 2) engaging those discussions responsibly is fundamental to the NPS’s role in public education.

In the future, interpretive materials will tend to be less omniscient in their approach—offering only one view of the past—and will suggest a greater sense of the complexity of the past. Plantations, for example, of which the NPS has more than a few, will be interpreted from at least two perspectives: the owner’s, and the slaves’. History does not possess only one truth, but rather many truths—and we contribute to the public’s knowledge about history, and the special places we manage, by presenting a past with multiple voices, multiple views, and differing, even conflicting, interpretations. In addition, just as historical research should undergo rigorous peer review, so should interpretive programs and products. With the availability of new scholarship and exciting ways of presenting it, it is no longer acceptable to be satisfied with merely “getting the facts right.”

Some of the elements of this refined approach to our work have already been implemented. On June 28, 1996, six National Park Service employees completed a four-week seminar on the history of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Envisioned as the first of five seminars that will be held annually in coming years, the gathering joined academic scholars, American Indian historians, and NPS historians, ethnographers, and interpreters in an intensive period of study. A successful request to the Cultural Resource Training Initiative (CRTI) fund resulted in all travel, per diem, and tuition expenses being paid through a grant. With the intent of further joining NPS employees with scholars outside the NPS, my office sponsored a one-day workshop during the Western History Association meeting last October to explore new directions in Western history. Spin-off workshops were subsequently held at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, and Fort Laramie National Historic Site. A similar workshop was held last month during the Berkshire Conference on Women’s History in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Through an agreement with the Organization of American Historians, we sponsored a major conference on U.S. Grant at Columbia, and Antietam National Battlefield convened a three-day interpretive workshop involving three nationally recognized historians and museum specialists. The 1996 National History Day contest was partly sponsored by the National Park Service, and each award winner received a medal embossed with “Sponsored by the National Park Service” on the reverse side. Also beginning this year, the National Park Service will join other sponsors of Colonial Williamsburg’s Seminar for Historical Administration, which has trained historic site managers for over thirty years.
These and other projects and initiatives are designed to expand the opportunities for NPS personnel to gather with historians of all kinds to pursue common goals. Scholars have recognized for some time that the search for historical truth is not a solitary pursuit. It is best conducted in forums that allow continual discussion about and questioning of historical presumptions, and reassessment of presumed truths. Through its education mandate, anchored in the 1935 Historic Sites Act, the National Park Service has an obligation to present to the American public a history that promotes an understanding of the complexity of historical causation, the perils of historical stereotypes, and the relationship between past events and contemporary conditions. By recognizing its appropriate role within the historical and educational professions, the National Park Service can promote a better public understanding of this country’s past within the context of a national education program.

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