

Engaging Visitors in a Landscape's Stories

Lisa Hayes, President and CEO, Accokeek Foundation, 3400 Bryan Point Road, Accokeek, MD 20607; lhayes@accokeek.org

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE VISITORS IN THE MULTIPLE STORIES EMBEDDED IN A LANDSCAPE? And how do you tell these stories in a way that honors the landscape and the communities whose stories are told? A day-capper session at the 2015 George Wright Society Conference explored these questions, using, as a springboard for discussion, a reader's theater performance of "We Have A Story To Tell." This 20-minute play (see below) examines the Accokeek Foundation's efforts to highlight the history and culture of the Piscataway people at Piscataway Park, a national park located on the Maryland shore of the Potomac River, directly across from George Washington's Mount Vernon.

For the Accokeek Foundation, the challenge of interpreting the multiple layers of Piscataway Park's story is rooted in many factors, including the organization's founding, preserving the view from Mount Vernon, interpreting colonial history in a predominately African American county with an important slavery story to tell, and its relationship with the Piscataway people who finally gained state recognition in 2012. Written by Lisa Hayes, the play is based on transcripts of conferences, meetings, and interviews, as well as planning documents and conversations that she has been a part of since 2007.

Lisa Hayes is currently President and CEO of the Accokeek Foundation, a non-profit organization that stewards 200 acres of Piscataway Park through a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service. She describes herself as an actress and playwright who went back to school, got a PhD in American Studies, and now finds herself on a new kind of storytelling journey—engaging people in the stories of the special landscape that makes up Piscataway Park.

We have a story to tell

Actor A

Not everybody gets to be born in the land that owns them.

Actor B

Not everybody gets to be born in the land that owns them. Sometimes you end up there.

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*.

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2016 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.

Actor C

You're really blessed if you end up in a place and realize...

Actor D

This is my place.

Actor A

This is not where I was born, but it is my homeland.

Actor B

Then you become responsible for it.

Actor C

And it becomes responsible for you.

Actor D

And then you understand.

All

We have a story to tell you.

Actor A

The Accokeek Foundation at Piscataway Park...

Actor B

It's a complicated story.

Actor A

Connects people to history, agriculture, and nature.

Actor C

That we need to tell.

Actor D

But how do we tell it?

All

How do we tell the story of a landscape?

Actor A

Congresswoman Frances Bolton of Ohio buys a 500 acre Maryland farm to protect it from development and preserve the view from George Washington's Mount Vernon directly across the Potomac River.

Actor B

She donates the land for the creation of the Accokeek Foundation in 1957, a non profit incorporated to...

Actor C

“Preserve, protect and foster, for scientific, educational or charitable use and study for the benefit of the people of the nation,”

Actor D

“The historic sites and relics, trees, plants and wild life rapidly disappearing from an area of great natural beauty along the Maryland shore of the historic Potomac River.”

Actor A

The Foundation donates the first parcel of land for the creation of a national park. Dedicated in 1968, Piscataway Park is the product of a public private partnership still held up as a model for land conservation. Through easements, deeds, and cooperative agreements, the park totals nearly 5000 acres, of which the Accokeek Foundation stewards 200.

Actor B

This landscape tells the story of land conservation and preservation.

Actor A

This land was part of the tobacco culture of the region, a culture that began in colonial Maryland and that is demonstrated at the Foundation’s National Colonial Farm.

Actor C

This landscape tells the story of colonial agriculture.

Actor A

The Foundation establishes an eight-acre organic vegetable farm in the park, the Ecosystem Farm, to demonstrate modern sustainable agriculture.

Actor D

This landscape tells the story of sustainable agriculture.

Actor C

The Foundation was telling all of these stories, but one really important story was not being told...

Actor B

The significance of this landscape to the Piscataway people.

Actor A

When Captain John Smith explored the Chesapeake region in the early 1600s, the Piscataway nation stretched from modern-day DC through what became Southern Maryland. The center of its government was a Piscataway town called Moyaone, which sat on land now encompassed by Piscataway Park. Agriculture was an important part of Piscataway life, with fields devoted to the three sister crops of corn, squash, and beans.

Actor B

Within a few decades, the Piscataway people were gone from this particular land on the Potomac River. Warring tribes from the north, and British colonists with the destructive forces of their

livestock and diseases, contributed to this exodus. Piscataway Indians moved on to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York. And many settled in communities in Southern Maryland, where their descendants still live today.

Actor C

In 2008 the Foundation convened a colloquium that brought together representatives of the three bands of Piscataway Indians, scholars of indigenous history in the Chesapeake region, and interpretive staff from area museums to grapple with how the Accokeek Foundation might interpret Piscataway history and culture at Piscataway Park.

Actor A

Welcome to Heart of the Piscataway World, a scholarly colloquium. Four hundred years ago marked the beginning of extremely dire changes on this landscape for all people, and particularly the native people of this land. I think we are at the beginning of another cycle. We are here to develop a deeper understanding of what this ancient and modern land is about, the way it has changed, the survival that's happened here. With my grandfather being buried just down the road, and our ancestors being there, it's not just a scholarly conversation.

Actor B

Our history has us moving from place to place, searching for a place to settle in peace. I am proud to say that my great grandfather was able to procure some land that was directly across the street from what is now known as Cedarville State Park. Many of my ancestors actually lived in what is now Cedarville State Park.

Actor C

My dear grandfather was born in 1875, and at the age of fifteen he was a sharecropper about a quarter mile from St. Ignatius Church in Chapel Point. He farmed that land for a long time. I grew up in Washington but every summer I would go to one family farm or another. Shucking the corn, hanging tobacco, spearing tobacco.

Actor D

My question is—what period of time do we interpret? Do we focus on the past? What part of the past? Or the present?

Actor A

I would just point out that there were four hundred generations of history here before John Smith ever sailed up this river. If we look at the face of a clock as 12,000 years, then John Smith arrived at 11:30 pm. A lot of history preceded him.

Actor B

I find we're stuck in the 1600s. We have an annual festival and one year we tried to discuss contemporary Native issues. People weren't interested. They said, "We're here to have fun and watch the Indians dance." I look around this room and say, "Can you see us, outside of a leather dress with fringe? Can you see us, outside of wearing feathers? Do you see us as humans going through regular day-to-day struggles?"

Actor D

There is a very strong tendency, to put it bluntly, of white people having history and Native people

having culture. You see it all the time, in books, on museum walls: “Native culture on the eve of contact.”

Actor C

All of the brochures about historical sites on the East coast talk about history beginning when Europeans arrived. There’s no acknowledgement of Indians. There is a beautiful history here of native people who had crops and lands and religions and societies. But these stories aren’t told.

Actor B

Every Indian in this room has been approached by people and asked, “Are you real? Are you a real Indian?” We are stuck in the ethnographic moment of contact, sometime between 1607 and 1700 and it’s very difficult to get out of that diorama.

Actor A

How much weight do we give the past versus the present? Does it get equal airtime? Do you talk about what was here 10,000 years ago, then 400 years ago, and then—bam! Here we are today. Those last 400 years were really difficult.

Actor B

Piscataway people survived and that’s worth celebrating. There were a lot of neighboring tribes that didn’t survive. There is no longer a Choptank tribe, no Patuxent.

Actor C

I heard that it wasn’t until 1917 that the Native American birth rate caught up with the death rate.

Actor B

That ties right into this land. The need to respect that soil and the ancestors.

Actor D

The tribes that are supposedly extinct, all it really means is that their tribal entities are extinct as tribal entities. They no longer exist as a defined people, they don’t have a descendant community that’s identified as such. But that doesn’t mean that the people are gone, or that the bloodlines are gone. They aren’t. Tribes grouped together and one name was kept. Among the Piscataway there are probably bloodlines that are Wicomoco and Patuxent and all the other groups that were in this immediate vicinity as well. That’s an important thing to say.

Actor A

Yesterday a group of us visited the burial grounds. Everyone was telling their story and why this place was important to them. Whether you’re a visitor, or a non-Native who lived on the land, or a Native person on that land, the stories really resonated. We celebrated the spirit of this place

Actor C

It seems to me that this whole idea of divorcing man from nature is what creates such a sense of alienation in Western culture and why people come seeking solace in natural places. So we need to talk about the value of Native culture in seeing yourself as a part of the rest of the natural world.

Actor A

If visitors don’t feel something, they’re not really going to want to pay attention, it’s just going to

seem abstract and boring. People need to find personal meaning.

Actor D

The values that are central to Piscataway culture—community, generosity, respect, reciprocity, taking care of the earth—these are universal.

Actor A

Let's get down to specifics. Right now at the Colonial Farm and the Ecosystem farm, you learn through the colonial lens. So what's the Native lens? What beyond the broader concepts make it important to even mention a distinctive experience? What can Piscataway understandings contribute?

Actor B

It's not just taking care of the land that's stewardship; it's that the land is taking care of you. That's the Native understanding. I think it's profoundly different.

Actor C

I think we need to talk about the concept of time. We talk about time in a linear way. The colonial farm is the past, the ecosystem farm is the present. In Native communities we think about time in a circular way. We talk about the seven generations and how we're responsible for what's coming ahead. We don't look at things as past, present, future—we look at them as all of those things at once.

Actor D

How do we convey these different sensibilities? I've always said that two people can walk shoulder by shoulder through exactly the same environment and be passing through entirely different landscapes.

Actor D

What if we simply put a picture frame up outside—the landscape is the picture—and give it different labels, each from a different point of view.

Actor B

Homeland.

Actor C

Landscape.

Actor A

Invasive species.

Actor D

We talk a lot about the idea of “place.” A hundred years ago, that's what the word “environment” meant.

Actor B

Land and place and landscape. This is where I feel that if we hadn't lost our language, we would have better terminology.

Actor C

Some things are beyond words anyway. That's why all peoples have ceremonies and art. You go beyond words. You enact.

Actor A

Maybe we don't need a permanent exhibit. Maybe you just do different things, a different thing every season, or a different thing every year, or a different kind of programming that you can change that will make this place a lot more interesting and give people a reason to come back over and over.

Actor B

Wherever you go in the schools, you look on the walls and you see George, you see Thomas, you see Sojourner. Native kids don't see anything to validate their history. Nothing. Except between those bookends, the first pumpkin and the last piece of turkey. It's embarrassing. Native kids need to have the opportunity to go somewhere and see their culture looking back at them. That would be priceless.

Actor D

This is an amazing site that tells the story of how peoples lived here for thousands of years, and then were dispersed from their homeland. And yet the people survived, this place survived.

Actor C

The stories underscore two of Accokeek's themes: one being the relevance of the past to the present, and two being the need for land stewardship and preservation. What would have happened if this place had been dug up and paved over for a housing development?

Actor A

Stewardship is more than preserving and caring for the land. It's about nurturing a spirit of connectedness.

Actor D

It's about honoring our responsibilities to mother Earth.

Actor B

It's about respect, respect for the cycles of life, for the creators' gifts, and for each other.

Actor C

There's a lot that can be told here and the stories are right before us.

Actor A

Not everybody gets to be born in the land that owns them.

Actor B

Sometimes you end up there.

Actor C

You're really blessed if you end up in a place and realize...

Actor D

This is my place.

Actor A

This is not where I was born, but it is my homeland.

Actor B

Then you become responsible for it.

Actor C

And it becomes responsible for you.

Actor D

And then you understand.

Actor A

How would *you* tell the story?

Curtain