



Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of Civic Engagement in National Parks

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This paper discusses the past, present, and future of the National Park Service (NPS) Civic Engagement initiative launched in a national workshop in New York City on December 6–8, 2001. What were the origins of the initiative? What has it accomplished in the past 16 years? What might its future be?

Origins of the civic engagement initiative

The Civic Engagement initiative came out of the Northeast region, one of seven NPS regions nationwide. Just as the earliest NPS strategies for resource protection and interpretation were developed in the nature parks of the West, the Civic Engagement initiative reflects its origins in historic sites of the East, and several phenomena not unique to the Northeast region but especially present there.

One phenomenon, perhaps underlying all, is a demographic change over the past 50 years in the ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds of NPS employees. Paralleling the larger historical profession in this same period, as the diversity of NPS employees increased, so too did the histories that they wanted to interpret to the public. One principal organizer of the Civic Engagement workshop in New York City in 2001 was Chief of Cultural Resources for Boston National Historical Park Marty Blatt, born and raised in Brooklyn, who had come to NPS from the Massachusetts Department of Labor. Many who attended the Civic Engagement workshop, including Marty, had previously worked on national historic landmark theme studies on women's history, labor history, and Civil Rights sites designed to expand the range of places that NPS recognizes and interprets.

Of course, the greater diversity of NPS employees and the historic sites they designated and interpreted to the public did not just happen; efforts to broaden the interpretive context at NPS had

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been especially encouraged since 1995 by Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley. Pitcaithley had gained a lot of attention (read “criticism”) for his directive that all Civil War sites must mention slavery as a cause of the war rather than simply stating “both sides fought for what they believed in,” then immersing visitors in the details of army life and battle strategies. Beginning in 1997, he received a lot of support from his new boss, another long-time career NPS employee, Director Robert Stanton (1997–2001), who is African American. Another prominent African American, historian John Hope Franklin, chaired the 12-person NPS Advisory Board in the late 1990s. So the Civic Engagement initiative, as it sought to broaden the interpretation of history at NPS sites, was the culmination of at least two decades of many NPS employees’ efforts to “be more inclusive,” look for the “untold stories,” and not shy away from controversial historical issues.

A second factor influencing the Civic Engagement initiative—also with origins in the particular circumstances of the Northeast region—was the growing presence since the 1970s of heritage areas and other sites “affiliated” with the NPS, where the protection and interpretation of significant natural and cultural resources is achieved not by outright federal purchase, but rather by entering into partnerships with state and local government and private non-profit organizations. In 2001, there were approximately two dozen (today there are four dozen) national heritage areas, each with federal recognition and some level of access to NPS technical assistance and funding; a disproportionate number in 2001 were in the Northeast.¹

Several individuals planning the Civic Engagement workshop had entered NPS through this “external” side when the NPS reincorporated the programs that had been under the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service in 1981. Rolf Diamant had planned Blackstone River Heritage Corridor through central Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and was superintendent at Olmsted NHS in Massachusetts before leading Marsh Billings Rockefeller NHP in Vermont, a park with stewardship conservation as its principal theme. Of necessity, these NPS employees were sensitive to the particular challenges of heritage areas: conserving nature and culture in peopled landscapes that change with time, establishing management goals across multiple jurisdictions, and looking at historical and recreational sites through lens of local as well as natural significance. It was not surprising, then, that the Civic Engagement workshop in 2001 addressed not only issues of historical interpretation, but also park planning and how NPS engages with neighboring land-owners.

A third factor that pushed the NPS toward greater engagement with external constituencies in the 1980s and 1990s was the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990. The NPS relationship with native peoples is central to its history, since the earliest national parks in the West had been carved out of recently conquered native lands, and the structures and artifacts that the federal government sought to protect through the Antiquities Act of 1906 were of native origin. NAGPRA compelled the NPS to consult with tribal entities concerning the ownership and disposition of these artifacts as never before.

A fourth factor that contributed to the development of the Civic Engagement initiative in 2001 was historians outside the NPS examining the politics of public memory and commemoration. In 1991, historian Edward T. Linenthal published a study of NPS management of battlefield sites, and in 1995 Linenthal and other scholars explored the political controversy surrounding the National Air and Space Museum’s exhibit about the dropping of the atomic bomb.² Linenthal attended the Civic Engagement workshop and challenged the NPS not to shy away from interpreting controversial historical events.

In considering techniques for how the NPS might share multiple and often conflicting interpretations of history with the public, NPS Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust found an ally in Ruth Abram, director of the NYC Tenement Museum. In 1999, Abram founded the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, an organization that also included the Gulag Museum in Russia, District Six Museum in South Africa, Terrezin Memorial in the Czech Republic, and the Slave House in Senegal. The immediate impetus for the Northeast Region’s Civic Engagement Workshop in 2001 was to identify NPS “sites of conscience,” where the superintendents of these sites could meet and discuss common issues. These sites would include Manzanar, Little Big Horn, and Wounded Knee, Southern plantations—places that John Hope Franklin, chair of the NPS Advisory Board, had called the nation’s “sites of sorrow.”³

As planning for the workshop proceeded, a major change occurred—from identifying the current or potential “sites of conscience” within the NPS, to an insistence that every NPS unit had the potential to be such a site. By this point the name of the workshop had changed from “sites of conscience” to sites of “civic responsibility,” and would soon change again to sites of “civic dialogue.” Civic dialogue was the name under which the workshop was held on December 6–8, 2001, but those present decided by the end of the three days that “civic engagement” captured more of what they meant the initiative to be. The size of the workshop grew—50 NPS superintendents and other personnel attended in all—and the group was not limited only to superintendents from “controversial” sites. Superintendent Connie Rudd from Shenandoah NP related how the park discussed acid rain with its visitors.

The events of 9/11 affected planning for the workshop, and indirectly were responsible for the workshop being in New York City. Participants met in lower Manhattan, at the Museum of the American Indian, less than one half mile from the World Trade Center site. Regional Director Rust wanted to give the hotels and restaurants in NYC some business, to be sure, but her principal goal for the meeting was to prompt participants to think about the ways that their individual NPS site could affirm American values and be of use to their communities. At the opening session of the workshop, Rust noted the increases in attendance at all NPS sites in the wake of 9/11 (Shenandoah near Washington, DC experienced a 130% increase), and asserted that NPS sites and staff can be there “when visitors ask for help in making sense of their lives.”⁴

The workshop itself opened with a discussion of 9/11, then went on to discuss interpretation, collaboration with partners, and the desirability of new historic sites entering the NPS system—such as Stonewall, in New York City, the site of an early gay rights protest, and Beaufort, South Carolina, a center for Reconstruction-era activities. The workshop sought to introduce “civic dialogue” as a technique for engaging with stakeholders, with the local community, with visitors and school groups, and heard from several professional facilitators with expertise in these methods.

Discussing controversial issues with visitors was clearly unfamiliar territory to most NPS employees, and the conversation soon turned to a key question—should the NPS be in dialogue with visitors and the surrounding community about issues that directly affect the park (like Shenandoah NP and acid rain) or was the NPS role primarily as a facilitator of other groups’ dialogues, offering a safe and secure neutral space for discussion? Participants noted that contemporary political issues provoke a strong emotional response—were park rangers trained to handle this? Judy Hart from Rosie the Riveter/World War II Homefront NHP in California posed an intriguing question: “Is Congress giving sites such as M.L. King and Manzanar to NPS because it is genuinely inter-

ested in civic dialogue and controversy, or because it assumes that NPS will make them, and their interpretation, safe?”⁵

This, then, was the discussion in December 2001, and the principal topics in the final report: Interpreting diverse histories, enabling community collaboration, and fostering civic dialogue about contemporary issues of public concern.⁶ Two years after the workshop, NPS Director Fran Minella issued a Director’s Order making civic engagement part of NPS policy servicewide.⁷ In the interest of time and space, I am skipping over how the Civic Engagement initiative was implemented in its early years, and refer readers to overviews by Edward Linenthal, who led a series of “Preserving Memory” seminars for the NPS between 2002 and 2005, and Barbara Little, who brought Civic Engagement into the NPS archaeology program.⁸

Civic engagement in national parks today: how well is NPS meeting the goals it set for itself in 2001?

The greatest success of the Civic Engagement initiative has been the NPS steadily increasing its commitment to diverse and inclusive histories. Last year the NPS produced theme studies identifying sites of significance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender history, Asian American Pacific Islander history, Latino history. New historic sites like Stonewall and Reconstruction, envisioned in 2001, have joined the NPS system as national monuments.⁹

The NPS can also count partnering with academic institutions among the initiative’s successes. Many of the new theme studies were carried out by academic historians, and the Organization of American Historians’ “Imperiled Promise” Report points to specific ways that the NPS history program can take advantage of academic scholarship.¹⁰

NPS efforts to partner with state and local government and private landowners has been less successful. On the one hand, the number of national heritage areas has doubled since 2001, and many more NPS sites follow Lowell NHP’s example by developing cooperative management agreements with neighboring entities. The NPS Conservation Study Institute, which played a central role in planning the 2001 Civic Engagement workshop, is now called Stewardship Institute and is focusing on partnerships in urban areas under a new NPS Urban Initiative.¹¹ On the other hand, the concept of federal cooperative land management has met with considerable political resistance in Congress, which has not passed general heritage area legislation and threatens to zero out federal money for heritage areas in its FY2018 budget.¹²

NPS efforts to introduce more facilitated dialogue have also met with mixed success. More park superintendents are sending staff to specialized training in facilitated dialogue techniques for interpretation by organizations such as International Sites of Conscience. However, staff reductions, coupled with increased visitation, have made it more difficult for the NPS to employ this labor intensive way of communicating with the public. Social media allows the NPS a different kind of dialogue and engagement, but also requires staff time for moderating on-line discussions.

The future of civic engagement in national parks: the promises and pitfalls of the new federalism

The Civic Engagement initiative builds on more than a century of NPS efforts to become more than “islands of protection” for natural and cultural resources. In the nineteenth century, the NPS protected scenic western lands from commercial exploitation by private developers while developing heavily regulated tourist facilities of its own. In the 1930s, the NPS brought historic sites into the system and, through New Deal programs, provided technical assistance and additional

labor to state and local government recreation and historic preservation efforts. The system expanded dramatically after World War II, along with the reach of other federal government agencies. This expansion of federal programs peaked domestically during the 1960s and 1970s, but then, during an economic downturn, met a well-funded political counter-reaction.

Since the 1980s, bi-partisan political support for expansion or even maintenance of federal domestic programs, especially environmental regulation, civil rights laws, public arts and humanities agencies, and even the NPS, has broken down. The NPS developed national heritage areas and other partnership strategies since the 1980s as a creative and sustainable way to maintain influence as its budgets fell.

Most of the long-term trends that led to civic engagement initiative in 2001—demographic change in NPS and audiences, reaching out to academics and state and local partners—are likely to continue even with reduced federal funding. But dialogic interpretation by NPS staff about contemporary social, cultural, and environmental issues, because it is so labor-intensive, even on-line, is endangered by budget cuts and by a polarized political environment.

The promise of the New Federalism is it could enable the NPS to engage with the public more fully in areas of the USA where its partners are relatively well funded and supported. The pitfall is that in areas of the USA where its partners have less capacity, NPS units could return to “island” status. In the 1940s, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes desegregated visitor facilities at Shenandoah and other Southern parks, despite his concern that they would become “islands of jurisdiction.” If Shenandoah had been cooperatively managed at the time, and Ickes compelled to rely on local partners, it would not have happened. Will NPS sites in some areas of the USA become “islands of truth” about climate science, history, and tolerance, without the supportive local partnerships necessary to carry out the Civic Engagement vision?

Endnotes

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