Fulfilling the Promise: Improving Collaboration between Cultural Resources and Interpretation and Education in the U.S. National Park Service

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In 2011, the Organization of American Historians' report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, made a compelling argument that history is vital to the identity and function of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), but divisions between the work of cultural resources and interpretation diminish its power and reach (Whisnant et al. 2011). Every uniformed park ranger becomes a public historian regardless of background, yet scholars who produce research on the parks rarely interact with those who are the public face of the agency.

Seeking to apply the insights of *Imperiled Promise*, the workshop leaders sought insight into best practices, needs, and suggestions for bridging the divide. Herrin and Button Kambic met with chiefs of interpretation and cultural resource program managers at twelve parks in the National Capital Region. Crawford-Lackey worked on pilot projects in the national Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education, which aims to promote relevance, diversity and inclusion in interpretation and education about cultural resources. At the George Wright Society workshop, she demonstrated an interdisciplinary approach to place-based exploration and interpretation from a workbook in development called "Discovery journal: Giving voice to America's places." All three authors facilitated discussion during the workshop, and Acting Associate Director of Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers Tom Medema joined as a guest discussant. Participants

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ranged from graduate students and seasonal employees to national park and program leaders from the United States to Australia.

The challenge

Cultural resources are at the core of the visitor experience at most national parks. Approximately two-thirds of today's 417 national park units were established to recognize places of cultural and historical significance to the USA (Whisnant et al. 2011, 5). Interpretive rangers, educators, and volunteers are the NPS's ambassadors to the past, while anthropologists, archeologists, archivists, architects, historians, landscape architects, and museum curators work to document and preserve cultural resources according to federal and state historic preservation law. The shared responsibility of stewardship shapes all of their work.

Despite this common mission, 544 NPS employees who responded to a survey for *Imperiled Promise* said that today "history is generally practiced in NPS as an adjunct to administration," while "interpreters are left to do much of the research for interpretive programs." Over 52% of survey respondents recognized a divide between resource management and interpretation that has a negative effect on the practice of history in the parks. Only 3% answered that the divide has had a positive effect, and 26% responded that it has had no effect, or there is no divide (Whisnant et al. 2011, 54–55).

The functional division between cultural resources and interpretation in the NPS has historical and organizational roots. At the park, federal and regional levels, cultural resources have been within a separate directorate from interpretation since 1965. The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 fostered the growth of today's extensive private-public network of historic preservation practitioners. The act's mandates to identify, recognize, and preserve cultural resources helped create the professional field of cultural resource management, but it also shifted the purpose and audience of National Park Service research from public consumption to professional preservation. Rather than exhibits and waysides, cultural resource professionals today primarily focus on section 106/110 compliance, National Register of Historic Places nominations, and other planning and management responsibilities (Whisnant et al. 2011, 22–24). They produce numerous baseline management documents such as archeological overviews and assessments, administrative histories, cultural landscape inventories and reports, historic resource studies, special history studies, cultural landscape inventories and reports, and ethnographic assessments (NPS 1998).

Collaboration between interpretation and resource management exists at all levels of the service, but it is often voluntary, decentralized, and dependent on staff initiative and park creativity. Workshop participants and National Capital Region discussants identified two major barriers to collaboration: a lack of organizational structures and processes to support communication across divisions, and limitations on staff time that make it difficult to develop these processes anew. This means that when cultural resource professionals produce research on park resources, there is no standard method for communicating results to interpreters, educators, and volunteers. Similarly, there are no common processes for making sure that front-line staff who talk to the public about cultural resources know about and have access to their park's resources, or have opportunities to share their site-based knowledge with researchers.

Why collaborate?

Workshop discussions centered on how and why cultural resource knowledge and interpreta-

tion are mutually dependent, and how greater collaboration can strengthen agency efforts in both stewardship and civic engagement. Collaboration is vital to the service's preservation mission because interpreters serve as the voice of resource management, transmitting information about park resources to visitors, students, volunteers, and online audiences. They have the platform to share important messages from and about resource management issues and foster the ethic of stewardship. On a day-to-day level, interpreters with a strong understanding of cultural resources can integrate the history and management of the park into the park's larger story, helping make connections between the park's founding resources and values, the importance of continued stewardship, and the NPS's role in shaping park histories. Close communication with cultural resource managers can help to ensure that interpretive programs align with research goals and reflect the latest scholarship. In turn, interpreters are uniquely positioned to address and deconstruct negative stereotypes and common misconceptions using accurate historical information.

Interpreters can directly contribute to resource management goals because of their direct role in community engagement. Their knowledge of communities and audiences can inform resource managers about which groups have connections to parks that could inform ethnographic studies, how audience interests relate to research projects, and what their success stories for transferring knowledge look like. They may have insights on culturally appropriate outreach techniques to share these stories with more diverse audiences. They can also bring their experience with interpretive techniques and relationships with communities to help frame messaging around highly charged topics or controversial management decisions.

In turn, interpreters need accurate, up-to-date knowledge to tell their parks' stories effectively and maintain public trust, and resource managers can and should help provide that. NPS research has the advantage of drawing explicit connections between park lands and their broader historical and cultural contexts, providing content that can be easily tailored to a park's resources and stories.

First, baseline documentation for cultural resources can help compile and verify anecdotal evidence about the origins and history of a park, creating reliable sources of information to share with the public. For instance, interpreters should be aware of their park's management history, as documented in administrative histories, and why it is worthy of being preserved as a national park, as noted in founding legislation and National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmark nomination forms. Second, strong lines of communication about research and compliance activities ensure that park staff are well informed about park operations, projects, and important questions in scholarship.

This communication can also help interpreters understand and share how knowledge is produced and used, presenting history as an unfinished process that visitors can help create. Tom Medema discussed the important role cultural resources can play in the turn toward "audience-centered experiences," which draws on ideas and techniques from *The Participatory Museum* (Simon 2010), museum hack, and research on how and why audiences engage with content (see NPS 2017). Medema explained that for audiences to connect, they need to participate in dialogue and co-creation. Cultural resources can be at the heart of those experiences in places where people expect to be challenged and talk about difficult topics, such as slavery, segregation, and war. Workshop participants noted that strong interpretation and education requires high levels of both content knowledge and skill in interpersonal and emotional engagement, especially in a participatory model. Research is one tool that equips interpreters to do this in a culturally sensitive and

historically informed way. Cultural resource managers can support interpreters by connecting the information they can provide with the day-to-day challenges of interpreting difficult topics.

Finally, collaboration between interpretation, resource management, and other divisions contributes to the "One NPS" goal of the Urban Agenda (NPS 2015, 14). Partners in the workshop noted that divisions of responsibility are not transparent to those outside the agency, and ensuring that staff across divisions are knowledgeable about each other's work can make it easier for partners to navigate communications.

Action items for parks and programs

Drawing on the expertise of workshop participants, National Capital Region chiefs of interpretation and cultural resources, and *Imperiled Promise* we identify five major areas in which parks and programs could work toward greater collaboration.

Communication as process: the simplest step is to expand and add cross-divisional communication to routine processes and distribution lists, which already happens in some parks. Suggestions include the following:

- Invite a park or program's chief of interpretation to kick off meetings for cultural resource projects, or invite a cultural resource manager to major interpretive meetings.
- Create, share, and update spreadsheets of current projects so staff in different divisions can identify overlapping topics and share their knowledge.
- Include interpretive supervisors or staff on email lists for announcements of public comment periods, new reports, or cultural resource related accomplishments, with clear guidance about what information is appropriate to share with visitors.
- Inform interpretive supervisors of site visits for research or technical assistance so that interpreters can learn about cultural resource projects through brown bag lunches, shadowing, or participation.
- Plan outreach and cross-training for interpreters with their schedules in mind, for example, by scheduling at least two weeks ahead, avoiding the busiest times in the park, or planning for after work events.

Training and documentation: workshop participants ranging from early career interpreters to senior cultural resource managers noted that interpreters need better training resources and program documentation, especially given the high turnover of seasonal interpretive staff at many parks. Ideas for improving training related to cultural resources include the following:

- Create libraries of well-vetted, accurate interpretive programs and baseline cultural resource documents for new employees to learn from.
- Create processes for collecting and organizing documentation, and succession plans for how they will be maintained through staff turnover.
- Provide training opportunities for interpretive staff to learn from resource managers and researchers, such as presentations to staff during seasonal training or at the end of studies, webinars on resource issues that can be stored and archived for future use, or guest lectures and workshops with scholarly experts.
- Frame training around issues interpreters face directly in their jobs, such as how historical knowledge or cultural competency can help with difficult conversations.

Making research accessible: echoing the *Imperiled Promise* call for interpretive deliverables for cultural resource management projects (Whisnant et al. 2011, 57), interpreters called for research products that are more accessible in content, format, and location. Most report types are constrained by the need to answer specific questions necessary to resource management, but there are ways to make them navigable, create supplementary products, and raise awareness of these resources for all staff. These include the following:

- Add summaries, tables of content, and indices to reports.
- Write reports for popular publication, for example, Joan Zenzen's Battling for Manassas (2010), commissioned as an administrative history.
- Require contractors to write a document for the general public as well as a technical document, for example, a public archaeology report that is narrative and omits sensitive information.
- Stay up to date on uploading non-sensitive documents to the integrated research management application (irma.nps.gov).
- Train all staff on where to find cultural resource documents online, on park shared drives, and in physical libraries.
- Create summaries or briefs aimed at interpretive uses, for example, highlight the new sources or discoveries in a report, provide narrative summaries identifying big themes and interesting stories (in contrast to executive summaries that focus on methods and accomplishments), or communicate key points through a fact sheet like the example for the LGBTQ heritage theme study (NPS 2016).
- Work with interpreters to define and include specific interpretive deliverables such as narratives, web content, or brochures in scopes of work for cultural resource projects, as part of the required plan for transfer of knowledge beyond a report.

Improved digital content: every park's website can have a history and culture section, and developing digital content is one area where interpretation and cultural resources should be natural partners. Simple suggestions for improving park websites includes the following:

- Call on cultural resource managers to review history and culture articles written by park web coordinators.
- Partner with park interpreters to create new digital content.
- Include specifications for web content (article text, images, maps, video, or story maps) in scopes of work for cultural resource projects completed by contractors and outside researchers.

Collaborative projects and programs: more ambitious projects can bring together staff from both cultural resources and interpretation to share knowledge and expertise in either research or public programs. There are many innovative examples across the agency, some of which are detailed in *Imperiled Promise*, but a few examples that participants are experimenting with include the following:

- The NPS's pilot edition of the discovery journal workbook, meant to facilitate brainstorming, research, and design for interdisciplinary interpretive projects; core questions included in the workbook can also be found online (www.nps.gov/articles/taas-consider-a-place.htm)
- Designing the transfer of knowledge element of a cultural resource study to provide fund-

ing and opportunity to create public or internal outreach products, such as workshops or symposia bringing interpretive staff together with expert researchers

- Planning public programs that directly involve cultural resource staff, or draw on cultural resource research to help honestly and accurately address big questions with the latest sound science and scholarship

Conclusion

Experienced personnel from both the workshop and the National Capital Region advised that the most important single factor in expanding collaboration is management support. From super-intendents to front-line supervisors in parks, to regional and national leaders, managers have the responsibility of setting priorities and making time for what is important. They have the power to make cross-divisional collaboration part of their staff's regular workflow, and to provide the resources necessary for success.

There are also excellent examples to learn from and build on across the service. These best practices can be as simple and low-cost as interpretive supervisors inviting their parks' cultural resource managers to quarterly meetings, resource managers adding interpreters to their distribution lists for new reports and announcements, and scheduling individual interpreters to shadow researchers visiting their parks. They can be as ambitious and visible as Harpers Ferry National Historical Park's seasonal public programming featuring cultural resource staff, facilitated dialogues about the histories of segregation and conservation at LeConte Memorial Lodge at Yosemite (now Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center), or the development of digital interpretive products for the National Historic Landmark Program's LGBTQ Heritage Theme study (Springate 2016). Rather than starting from scratch, expanding collaboration to better fulfill the NPS mission is a matter of building on the agency's strengths.

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