

Crossing Boundaries: Interpreting Resource-Related Issues

National Park Service (NPS) interpretation of resource-related issues has made a necessary and notable expansion at Richmond National Battlefield Park in the twenty-first century, as we strive for better understanding of the Civil War by a diverse audience.

During the American Civil War, from the first battle of Manassas until the guns fell silent four years later, the cry of the Union armies was “On to Richmond.” Richmond’s battlefields and related resources have a myriad of deep and abiding stories to tell visitors.

NPS involvement in the history of the preservation and interpretation of Richmond’s Civil War battlefields began in 1936 when battlefield land that had been saved privately was given to the Commonwealth of Virginia, which in turn gave it to the federal government. Congressional legislation authorized a huge boundary for donation of land to commemorate the more than 30 battles in the vicinity of Richmond. Only about 500 acres constituted the land that was actually preserved at that time, however, in a still-rural landscape.

The first visitor center was built in the 1940s on an 1864 battlefield, in a small building, with sons of veterans offering their interpretations of the military actions and soldier valor. In 1959, the main visitor center was moved to the city of Richmond in anticipation of the centennial anniversary of the Civil War. The emphasis of the interpretation was still on the military tactics and strategy and the well-known names of the war.

From 1992-1996, the park struggled with formulating a new general

management plan (GMP). A central concept in the new GMP was that at Richmond National Battlefield Park, there is an opportunity and an *obligation* to convey to visitors at least an introduction to the full and deep meaning of the Civil War. Not only are there strategic explanations for the battles at Richmond, but also the battlefield stories merge with the Confederate capital’s industrial, economic, political, and social fabric. The concentration of diverse Civil War resources in the Richmond area is unparalleled. Understanding why the battles occurred at Richmond and who was involved contributes to a visitor’s grasp of the complexity of the American past and provides a means to appreciate strengths and shortcomings in our collective heritage. Richmond National Battlefield Park is a prime place for helping visitors to understand specific earthworks and tactics as well as individual tragedies. Richmond National Battlefield Park is also a prime place for helping visitors to understand why the Civil War happened, and so why more than 620,000



Figure 1. Tredegar Visitor Center, Richmond National Battlefield Park. (*National Park Service photo.*)

men died, and what the legacy of the war means to us today. The interpretation was planned to be expanded not to substitute social history for military history but to relate each to the other when possible.

Richmond's identity as the former capital of the Confederacy has over time variously been celebrated, excoriated, and ignored by its residents. The same has been true for many battlefields around Richmond. In planning the twenty-first-century visitor center, we wanted all people to be invited in, to be able to find something of relevance to them in this facility and also in the battlefield resources. Key to the success of the project are: (1) its location on the James River waterfront, which is part of a multi-million-dollar renovation project with an emphasis on history, and (2) its location in the famous Tredegar Iron Works, the "iron maker" to the Confederacy, with a rich legacy itself of industrial, social, labor, and political history.

In 2000, our planning and our

partnership with the private sector came to fruition with the dedication of the new Richmond National Battlefield Park visitor center at Tredegar Iron Works. We had spent \$3 million and two years on the exhibits. We had started with formulating interpretive themes and objectives. First, we wanted to have visitors begin to acknowledge or affirm in their minds the watershed nature of the legacy of the Civil War. Also, we wanted them to register that Richmond was at the heart of the Civil War and that the related resources are overwhelming. We didn't want visitors actually overwhelmed, so we crafted an orientation to be seen soon after they enter the building.

A visitor has a variety of options for orientation and introduction to resources in the map room. He or she can engage a ranger or volunteer in discussion or can immerse him- or herself in the two large wall maps that identify separately the 1862 and 1864 battles. The 1862 Seven Days Battle

and the 1864 battles occurred on much of the same acreage; each has a number of complex stories and are easily confused by the first-time visitor. Individual battles and troop movements are illustrated by a digital, moving map that has proven to be a favorite of visitors young and not-so-young. Significantly, there are six more large wall maps that orient a visitor to the political sites of the capital of the Confederacy, wartime homes and neighborhoods, churches and cemeteries, hospitals and prisons, monuments and other sites, and Civil War-related museums and collections. Our hope is that by this point, we have achieved the orientation and motivation objectives for the visitor, particularly for Richmond's battlefields but including a wide range of related interests.

A motivated visitor may explore the rest of the Tredegar visitor center, moving to the lower level, dubbed the "War Room." A 27-minute film there in an open auditorium offers more orientation and specifics on Richmond's battlefields and their context, although by means of media different from those of the middle level. The auditorium also contains somewhat unusual museum objects displayed to provoke different ways of thinking about the inventions and horrors of war. For instance, a case of shells and bullets, some embedded in pieces of trees, are captioned with a *video label*: "While some men made their living making artillery, guns, and ammunition, those same products cost other men their lives." There are dice, cards, a drum, and a Bible displayed together, the celebratory, profane, and the sacred, uti-

lized as necessary on the battlefield. Soldiers had lots of down-time on their hands as well as moments of crisis and action. Unusual artifacts are displayed here to give visitors a clue about instruments of war and the genius of their invention. For instance, pontoon boats were lashed together to create the base of floating bridges across the many rivers in Virginia, and were used extensively by Union and Confederate forces. Another display case that intrigues visitors contains flag staffs, without the flags, captured at Appomattox Courthouse. Flags were extremely important to armies and regiments: medals of honor were earned for their rescue and capture, and their symbolism took many forms in the Civil War as in other wars. Tredegar made over 1,100 cannon for the Confederacy, and the park displays eight of them, including one of the largest and the smallest, a rare bronze tube, displayed side-by-side. When the movie is not showing, casualty statistics run on the film screen to remind visitors of the cost of war. Grim images reinforce the tragic drama that played out on the battlefields.

The third floor of the visitor center was designed to be the most museum-like section of the facility as well as the greatest work-horse for carrying the multiple themes and reaching the emotional objectives. Called "Richmond Speaks," the exhibits are divided into the military stories and the home front or civilian stories, but we hope the interrelationship is apparent through the duplicative timelines and the meat of "April Essays" for each side. History is a continuum and its threads are not easily confined to sep-

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arate spools. Military strategy, political leadership, industrial strength, scientific innovation, home front conditions, and individual motivation and personalities all affected what happened on the battlefields.

It was imperative that we set the stage for the exhibits by framing the war in the “why” and the “so what.” So, there are almost literal bookends to the exhibits that explicate the causative issues, the larger war aims, effects, and accomplishments and failures. Other important interpretive objectives were to provide an opportunity to understand political and mili-

tary chronologies as well as the inter-relationship among the political and military victories and defeats and home front struggles and perceptions.

Particularly in light of racial strife and distrust in Richmond and recent history involving media hype over the public display of an image of Robert E. Lee among other historic visages, the prologue was especially difficult to craft. We did not want to pull punches but we did not want to exaggerate or oversimplify the reasons for the war. The prologue as written seems to have hit the mark properly and crosses a necessary boundary in connecting



Figure 2. Dressed in mourning black, two war widows make their way through the devastation that befell Richmond during the Civil War. (*National Park Service photo.*)

resources with greater meaning:

The Civil War (1861-1865) remains the central event in American history. Richmond was at the heart of the conflict. More than seventy years after the adoption of the Constitution, a nation founded on principles of liberty and equality still allowed human enslavement and quarreled over the balance between state and federal powers. These interrelated issues led to Constitutional crises that were merely patched over, satisfying neither North nor South. The growing nation became increasingly divided over the existence and expansion of slavery.

Lincoln's election to the Presidency in 1860 convinced many southern leaders that their slave-based economy and social order would soon be threatened by federal restrictions. Seven states quickly passed articles of secession and created the Confederate States of America. After the new Confederacy fired on a federal fort in Charleston harbor and Lincoln called for troops to preserve the Union, Virginia joined the Confederacy and prepared to resist invasion.

Richmond, the Confederate capital and industrial center of the South, was a major objective of Union strategy for four years. As war began, neither side anticipated the brutal clashes, long sieges, and home front destruction that brought death or injury to more than one million Americans and devastation to a broad landscape, much of it in Virginia.

Within the bookends, we bring the interpretation back to the resources, the battlefields of Richmond, Virginia. And then, we focus closer, on the individual soldiers.

As the visitor approaches the military side of the exhibits adjacent to the

prologue, he or she reads that soldiers joined the armies for a myriad of reasons, often unconnected with the overt racial issues and rather related to the more theoretical reason of either preserving the Union or preserving states' rights. The dense texts, April Essays, timelines, variety of artifacts, and photographs all layer together, but separate with concentration to provide visitors with a smorgasbord and a relatively complete introduction to the Civil War history of the area. The reaction has been tremendously positive. People spend hours in the Tredegar visitor center. We did not have to stretch to have something for everyone; there really is more than plenty for everyone's particular interest in Richmond's Civil War history once you can get past the traditional "Lost Cause" filter for the past. My favorite part of the visitor center is the "voices" component, which reflects the larger themes through individual stories conveyed by a selection of letters, diaries, remembrances, and newspaper correspondence.

The other bookend, the "Epilogue," brings the visitor back out to the overarching theme of "so what," with the help of an enormous photograph of Richmond's turning basin, which was for ocean-going ships that transferred cargo between the canal and the James River. The Epilogue is somber in tone and factual in content but is designed to raise the consciousness of the reader to reflect on the state of the reunited nation in 1865 and today:

Beginning as a war to determine the preservation or the division of the United States, the Civil War ended in emancipation of four

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million Americans as well as preservation of the Union. Three Constitutional amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—promised former slaves freedom and rights as citizens. The war decisively answered the question of whether states might leave the Union and shifted the balance of political power toward the federal level.

But much remained unresolved in Richmond and in the nation. The war did not solve issues of racial prejudices, nor did it establish final meanings for freedom and equality in the United States. These meanings began to evolve in law, practice, and history.

After April 1865, Richmond witnessed both commemorations and celebrations of the Civil War. Many white Richmonders tended graves and erected memorials, while blacks celebrated emancipation with parades and religious services. How well Richmonders, and the rest of America, could overcome their divisions was a challenge for the future.

Civil War battles erupted around Richmond in 1862 and 1864, and the threat of them was ever-present from 1861 to 1865. The memory of them has been seared on the descendants of all involved and all who have heard the stories. How time and history have treated those memories has differed, evolved, been hidden, and been exaggerated depending on the audience as well as the particular era and storyteller. The National Park Service must tell all true stories, as well as provide thorough and honest frameworks and contexts for the history of Richmond's Civil War battles. Equally important, NPS must preserve the actual resources of the battlefields; and most important, we must provide a link between the stories and the resources in order to encourage the most thorough understanding of them, their time, and ourselves today. The more context we can provide for a diverse public to see themselves in the history, the more relevant the resources will be to them.

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