

# Civic Engagement at Sites of Conscience

## Introduction: The National Park Service and Civic Engagement

I am pleased to serve as the guest editor for this special issue of *The George Wright Forum* which focuses on the National Park Service (NPS) and the agency's incipient civic engagement initiative. Although civic engagement is equally relevant to sites based in natural and cultural resources, this issue focuses on cultural resource parks and sites. Civic engagement encompasses both the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and a commitment to act accordingly. In a democracy such as ours, every citizen needs to make moral distinctions in civic life and act upon them. In *Democracy is a Discussion*, Sondra Myers writes that the engagement of citizens "in discussion of public issues for the purposes of making informed decisions, resolving conflicts, seeking common ground, and affirming their rights and responsibilities, is essential to the development and sustenance of democracy."<sup>1</sup>

These notions have real implications for the practice of public history in the National Park Service. In a report published in 2001, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, the National Park System Advisory Board called on the agency to fulfill its promise in the 21st century. The board asserted that, "in many ways, the National Park Service is our nation's Department of Heritage.... Parks should be not just recreational destinations, but springboards, for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment.... [We] must ensure that the American story is told faithfully, completely, and accurately.... Our nation's history is our civic glue."<sup>2</sup>

This report strongly influenced the thinking of NPS Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust, who conceived the agency's civic engage-

ment initiative. In response to a number of critical challenges in National Park Service sites and programs, she asked that superintendents, educational and interpretive specialists, and resource professionals of the Northeast Region organize a workshop focused on civic engagement and the agency. I had the distinct privilege of serving as the coordinator of the workshop, which was held in New York City in December 2001. The meeting brought together park managers, resource specialists, public historians, scholars, and museum professionals to discuss how national parks can become centers for civic engagement. Out of that workshop the agency developed the 2002 report, *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement*, which serves both as a summary of the workshop and an outline for further steps. During the work-

shop sessions, participants sought to pursue the recommendations of the National Park System Advisory Board and to build on similar concepts articulated in NPS policy, as well as on changes in interpretive programming that have been developed during the past decade.

The workshop participants recommended the following preliminary actions:

- Publishing and distributing the report from the workshop.
- Holding additional workshops in other parts of the country.
- Providing professional development opportunities for park managers, interpreters, and resource managers to cultivate a broader context in interpretation, to facilitate work with communities on complex issues, and to embrace civic engagement in day-to-day park operations.
- Convening an NPS-wide working group on civic engagement to advance the initiative.
- Creating an internal website to facilitate communication throughout the NPS and to promote successes in the agency.<sup>3</sup>

There has been progress towards the realization of these preliminary action items. As noted above, the Northeast Region of the NPS published the workshop report in 2002.<sup>4</sup> In December 2002, the NPS Southeast Region convened a civic engagement workshop in Atlanta. (The publication deadline for this introduction precluded a report on this meeting.) In spring 2003, I will report on the civic engagement initiative as part of a

panel at the annual meeting of the National Council on Public History. Also this spring there will be a session on the initiative at the George Wright Society–National Park Service joint conference, “Protecting Our Diverse Heritage.” In addition, the Northeast Regional staff of the National Historic Landmarks (NHL) program has recently developed, in conjunction with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, the Sites of Social Conscience initiative within the NHL program.

How does the present collection of essays fit within the civic engagement initiative? For one thing, most of the authors—Laura Gates, Frank Hays, Sarah Craighead, Liz Sevchenko, and Gay Vietzke—participated in the New York City workshop. All of the essays presented here address issues at the very core of this initiative. The National Park System Advisory Board report stated the matter succinctly: “The study of our nation’s history, formal and informal, is an essential part of our civic education. In a democratic society such as ours, it is important to understand the journey of liberty and justice, together with the economic, social, religious, and other forces that barred or opened the ways for our ancestors, and the distances yet to be covered.”<sup>5</sup> At the NPS Discovery 2000 conference, John Hope Franklin, chair of the National Park System Advisory Board, elaborated upon this idea in his keynote address: “The places that commemorate sad history are not places in which we wallow, or wallow in remorse, but instead places in which we may be moved to a new resolve, to be better citizens....

Explaining history from a variety of angles makes it not only more interesting, but also more true. When it is more true, more people come to feel that they have a part in it. That is where patriotism and loyalty intersect with truth.”<sup>6</sup>

I will now turn to each essay and provide some brief introductory remarks that place each within the framework of the civic engagement initiative.

Fort Sumter National Monument and Cane River Creole National Historical Park both feature slavery in their park stories. With respect to Fort Sumter, Superintendent John Tucker indicates how his park’s treatment of slavery has shifted its focus recently to provide greater context for how slavery was a root cause of the outbreak of the war that is commemorated at the site. Interpreters at Fort Sumter also relate the park’s historical themes to more recent issues by choosing to interpret civil rights at the site. Cane River, as Superintendent Laura Gates relates, is expanding the context for understanding plantations by having visitors enter the cultural landscape of this new park through the working part of the plantation, thus positioning the story of the work lives of the former slaves in the forefront of the narrative.

In both instances, what is demonstrated is the centrality of historical context. Although furnishings of historic houses and troop movements of a specific battle are critically important to a place, the value of a particular site goes far beyond the details of that site. Civil War-era parks that fail to address slavery as being a chief cause of the

war tell a terribly flawed story. They also fail to provide an environment wherein visitors can have a civic engagement experience that teaches the entire truth about the past and allows them to make linkages between that past and contemporary America.

A 1998 report from the superintendents of Civil War battlefields, *Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes*, provided direction for placing battlefield stories within the social, economic, and political context of the period. In 1999, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., inserted important language into the fiscal year 2000 Department of the Interior appropriation legislation, which concluded, in part, that “Civil War battlefields are often weak or missing vital information about the role that the institution of slavery played in causing the American Civil War.” The Secretary of the Interior was directed to encourage NPS managers at Civil War sites to “recognize and include in all of their public displays and multi-media educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War and its role, if any, at the individual battle sites.” There has been significant change at NPS Civil War sites—and also resistance to broadening the story. NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley has been a national leader in this effort to transform the NPS culture at battlefield sites from places where only the story of the battle is told to a place where the battle is placed within its critical context. Pitcaithley has also written about these developments.<sup>7</sup>

The report *Rethinking the National Parks* argues that NPS should make efforts to connect indigenous peoples with “parks and other areas of special significance to strengthen their living cultures.”<sup>8</sup> Sarah Craighead, formerly superintendent at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, and now superintendent at Saguaro National Park, writes about the Washita site, established in 1996. It marks the place of Custer’s 1868 attack on a sleeping Cheyenne village. The collaboration which she describes between the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, while not without problems, is emblematic of how civic engagement can work to enhance a park’s operation and its relationship with key stakeholder groups.

Superintendent Frank Hays writes about a new park, Manzanar National Historic Site. According to Pitcaithley, a string of congressional acts in the 1990s designated new kinds of historical parks, “parks that require that we understand the past, not simply celebrate it. They require us to think about the past, not merely feel good about the past.” These new parks include Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, Lower East Side Tenement National Historic Site, Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, and Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site.<sup>9</sup> The lessons of civic engagement with respect to Manzanar focus on two important areas: how we manage our cultural resources and how we cooperate with key stakeholders. Today, very little of the cultural

landscape of this prison center for Japanese Americans remains intact and thus it is difficult for visitors to comprehend the harsh conditions that the internees endured. Without that context, however, visitors will also find it a real challenge to understand the story of massive denial of civil liberties and due process, the relevance of this episode to racial profiling in today’s America, and more. So, largely as a result of the active participation of Japanese Americans in the planning process, the park’s general management plan calls for the reconstruction of the camp’s barbed wire fence and entrance sign, which have been completed, the reconstruction of one guard tower, and the attempt to relocate and restore one or more of the camp barracks buildings.

Liz Sevckenko writes about the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, established in 1999. It was founded by nine agencies and organizations from around the world, including the Northeast Region of the National Park Service and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The central purpose of the coalition is the strengthening of connections between the past and the present. Clearly, this aim is central to the successful realization of civic engagement. In order to be active citizens, visitors to international sites need to understand the past and its relationship to the present. The National Park System Advisory Board report states: “Understanding the relevance of past experiences to present conditions allows us to confront today’s issues with a deeper awareness of the alternatives before us.”<sup>10</sup>

Louis Hutchins and Gay Vietzke relate the experiences of the NPS technical assistance team that visited one of the International Coalition members. Established only a few years ago, the Gulag Museum near Perm, Russia, preserves one of the last surviving Stalinist-era labor camps. Like other Coalition members, the Gulag Museum not only preserves and interprets the powerful history of the site but also acts as a stimulus for discussion, debate, and civic engagement in present-day Russia. The mission of the Gulag Museum is “to promote democratic values and civil consciousness in contemporary Russian society through preservation of the last Soviet political camp as a vivid reminder of repression, and an important historical and cultural monument.”

One could easily substitute “national park” for “museum” in the following: “Civic engagement occurs when museum and community intersect—in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural

way of doing business. The museum becomes ... an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change.”<sup>11</sup> The National Park System Advisory Board’s 2001 study concluded: “As a nation, we protect our heritage to ensure a more complete understanding of the forces that shape our lives and future. National parks are key institutions created for that purpose, chapters in the ever expanding story of America.... By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, national parks are implicitly centers of civic engagement. However, as these essays demonstrate, successful civic engagement requires focused and deliberate attention. Fully implemented, civic engagement will enable the National Park Service to realize its mission for the 21st century.

## Endnotes

1. Sondra Myers, *Democracy is a Discussion—Civic Engagement in Old and New Democracies* (New London: Connecticut College, 1996), p. viii.
2. National Park System Advisory Board, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2001), p.14.
3. National Park Service Northeast Region, *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement* (Philadelphia: National Park Service, 2002), p. 14.
4. To obtain a copy, please write to: Northeast Regional Director, NPS, 200 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106-2878.
5. *Rethinking the National Parks*, p.14.
6. Cited in *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement*, p. 6.
7. See Dwight Pitcaithley, “Barbara Kingsolver and the Challenge of Public History;” and James Horton, “Presenting History: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story;” in *The Public Historian*, Fall 1999, Vol. 21, No. 4.
8. *Rethinking the National Parks*, p. 21.
9. Dwight Pitcaithley, “Evolution of the NPS Since 1990,” talk at the Civic Engagement workshop, New York, December 6, 2001.
10. *Rethinking the National Parks*, p. 10.
11. Eileen Hirzy, *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American

Association of Museums, 2002), p. 9.

12. *Rethinking the National Parks*, p. 30.

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