

Our History's History

Any reconstruction of the past is a cultural artifact, reflecting its own time and intervening in the world in which it is produced. The ideological and social functions of any reconstruction of the past should interest the historian.

— Edward Countryman, *“John Ford’s Drums Along the Mohawk”*

Introduction

My historical research with the National Park Service (NPS) has led me to some pretty interesting places, from Washington family deeds to the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps. As I have studied various reports, historical studies, and site histories, I began to acutely perceive changes evident in historiography today. It is important to periodically stop, look around, and see where we are going. The study and application of history and its applied concepts is constantly changing as society evolves, and recent NPS initiatives reflect these trends. Common themes emerging in historiography and resource preservation include broadening research bases, enlarging our focus to examine large trends and cultural exchange among peoples, as well as a new emphasis on cultural resource management. In some respects, NPS is returning to its roots while at the same time embracing new philosophical changes. I will first cover official policies and regulations that reflect these changes, and follow with specific examples from park sites and research projects.

Where We've Been

It is important to continually analyze the interpretation that NPS gives to the public, and the facts which we base our understandings on. Anyone studying American history today owes a great debt of gratitude to the historians of the 1960s and 1970s. The patriotic decades of the Civil War Centennial, national Bicentennial, and the Cold War sparked a massive interest in local, regional, and national history. While communities and cities across the nation produced their own historic studies, NPS historians churned out dozens of site histories, historic resource studies, and base histories. The research and interpretations

gleaned in this period forms the basis for much of our current understanding at many national parks, as well as the basis for interpretive programming at many sites.

While these are excellent resources, they often have not been updated since publication; many sites in the National Park System are using historic studies that are twenty or thirty years old. Such documents were straightforward studies that often did not probe deeply into the political or social realms of their respective topics. Nor did they explore important themes for interpretation, but instead simply provided factual information. These reports outlined the major

events associated with their sites, provided base maps, and were often the first attempt to assemble a bibliography or highlight the location of primary sources for these resources. These studies are good, solid foundations, now being built upon by new, more in-depth research.

Thematic Framework for History

Larger trends and themes are the focus of the 1996 NPS thematic framework for history. Developed at the request of Congress, the thematic framework guides historical scholarship and interpretation at park sites as well as the application of historical research throughout the agency. The new framework emphasizes processes of cultural change, landscapes, and people, rather than categorizing and breaking down research into strict areas. This document also recommends that historical scholarship be solidly grounded in new and ongoing research.

Whereas earlier historians categorized and divided events by topic or presented events in a manner that implied progress, we are now encouraged to see a broad view of history and the flow of events and trends. The thematic framework is also receptive to the growing social and cultural focus of history. This way of thinking encourages a holistic approach to historical study that focuses on cultural values and seeks to integrate social, political, economic, and technological factors. The framework seeks to bring NPS historical research into line with current scholarship: emphasizing social and cultural history.

The thematic framework is applica-

ble not only at historical sites in interpretive planning, but also in National Register and National Historic Landmark (NHL) selection. The National Register of Historic Places is an honorary list of significant historic properties, conveying no official protection but making the site eligible for preservation grants. NHLs are a select group of the most significant sites with high integrity; there are over 75,000 sites on the National Register, but only 2,000 NHLs.

The mill complex at Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, was initially placed on the National Register for its architectural features and role in industrial development. Currently, however, the park also emphasizes its social history, primarily the impact of factory work on young women. The recent National Register nomination for Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina focuses not only on the Revolutionary War battle fought there, but also on the monuments and subsequent commemoration of the site.

The new thematic framework also affects Section 106 compliance work under the National Historic Preservation Act. All federally funded projects use the Section 106 process to review proposals to ensure historic resources are not threatened or adversely affected. Numerous highway projects and construction plans have been altered when research showed a negative impact on historic features that might otherwise have been missed. Furthermore, the thematic framework also serves to “guide the NPS, working independently, and with its partners.” It sets the standards by which history

will be conducted, historic data collected, and historical information will be interpreted.

Evidence of this new historical research can also be found in recent issues of the magazine *Cultural Resource Management*, a publication of the NPS. Recent articles have focused on ethnographic studies of various ethnic groups, the development of new park areas such as Manzanar National Historic Site (a World War II Japanese-American internment camp), and restoration of traditional cultural landscapes. Other recent articles have focused on aspects of cultural preservation among ethnic groups such as Creole and Alaskan peoples.

As Katherine Stevenson, formerly the NPS associate director for cultural resources, stated, NPS has taken “important steps in protecting vernacular rural and urban resources.... Greater inclusiveness would draw attention to the fuller spectrum of heritage resources that includes natural features as well as the constructed, and places of work as well as birthplaces of the famous.”

Rethinking National Parks for the 21st Century

The National Park System Advisory Board recently stressed many of the same points. The board, a congressionally appointed group of citizens charged with providing advice and direction for the agency, produced a plan outlining goals for NPS for the next twenty-five years. *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* recommends that NPS redouble its efforts to focus on education, preser-

vation of resources, and building partnerships with outside agencies.

NPS has been directed to examine the effectiveness of its interpretation in light of recent scholarship, and ensure that historical events are presented within “the larger human context.” Education is to become a major priority of NPS sites and interpretive efforts, and they must be grounded in current scholarship.

Examples of effective partnerships may be found at Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico, which preserves an area of prehistoric rock art. The park works with the city of Albuquerque to manage and inventory the fragile petroglyphs. Lowell National Historical Park’s Tsongas Industrial History Center is a model partnership between the park and the University of Massachusetts–Lowell Graduate School of Education. The center uses hands-on activities and unique learning programs to explore nineteenth-century industrial history and the lives of workers.

Strategic Plan

The 1997 *National Park Service Strategic Plan* also focuses on these same issues. It clearly states that “the ultimate success of the National Park Service in protecting and preserving the nation’s parks may depend on the availability of credible scientific and scholarly information on which to make informed management decisions.” Furthermore, the plan also declares that “the National Park Service must strive to further protect and preserve our nation’s natural and cultural resources.” Resource protection is a major goal outlined in the plan,

along with educating the public to appreciate these resources.

This document also emphasizes creating partnerships, reaching out to private institutions to increase knowledge of park resources and explore ways of improving their preservation, and focusing more on education and research. Interpretation must be grounded in solid research, and parks must be committed to education.

As with the other documents, the *Strategic Plan* emphasizes the inventory and preservation of structures and resources. NPS is directed to place special emphasis on protecting historic and archeological resources and improving cultural inventories. Cultural landscapes, archeological sites, historic structures, and collections are receiving more appreciation for their values within the thematic framework.

The concepts outlined in the thematic framework for history, the Advisory Board's *Rethinking National Parks in the 21st Century*, and the *Strategic Plan* also lend themselves to the potential creation of new NPS sites. Evaluating a site's significance, its current representation in the National Park System, and its integrity help determine if inclusion is appropriate and feasible. Examples of new NPS sites include Minute Man Missile National Historic Site in South Dakota (a Cold War missile site), First Ladies National Historic Site in Ohio (honoring the often-neglected presidential wives), and Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Alabama (commemorating the role of African Americans in World War II). These new sites represent themes in

American history currently under-represented within the National Park System.

Interpretation

Park planning also feels the influence of these trends as historians and planners formulate general management plans (GMPs), which guide park themes, and comprehensive interpretive plans (CIPs), which outline specific interpretive goals and themes within a long-range vision for a park site. CIPs are updated periodically to reflect current scholarship and incorporate emerging sources. Interpretive planning has become a highly developed procedure that includes working with partners to tackle research needs, establishing an interpretive database of sources, laying out objectives, and designing programs. The CIP process reflects the current trends we see elsewhere: working with partners, broadening themes, and updating research databases.

NPS is also frequently called upon to conduct research projects and assist local and state governments with assessing and preserving historic resources. Some recent projects also reflect the new trends in historiography. Examples include the Underground Railroad preservation project and the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area. These programs focus on local history, ethnic groups, class, race, and religion, examining how local areas were impacted by larger events and trends in American history. More importantly, they are partnerships which connect Park Service historians and planners with outside counterparts to achieve goals.

Management Policies

The current NPS *Management Policies*, which outlines servicewide standards, clearly articulates these ideas. For example, interpretation and visitor services “will be developed and operated in accordance with the NPS Organic Act,” meaning preservation is at the forefront of planning and park activities. The policy document goes on to state that “interpretive and educational programs will be based on current scholarship and research.”

Anticipating future changes, NPS planners are directed to “monitor new or changing patterns of use or trends in recreational activities, and assess their potential impacts on park resources.” Keeping up with not only historical research, but the use of park resources, is a never-ending part of the game.

Again the issue of partnerships emerges, as the *Management Policies* direct NPS to “establish mutually beneficial agreements with interested groups to facilitate collaborative research, consultation, park planning, training, and cooperative management approaches with respect to park cultural resources and culturally important natural resources.”

Cultural Resource Management

While NPS is forging ahead to update its historical database, freshen its interpretive themes, and improve its collection and archeological information, the agency is also returning to its roots. At the very heart of NPS philosophy is the 1916 Organic Act, which created the National Park Service and instructed it to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historical

objects and wild life therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same, in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

In areas of park planning, use, and resource management, we are seeing a return to preservation over enjoyment. Not that recreation is discouraged, but planners are now emphasizing the protection of a resource over its use by the public. In recent years, for example, Gettysburg National Military Park has closed off areas of the battlefield damaged by heavy visitation, allowing them to recover. Protection of the resource took priority over visitor access. Valley Forge National Historical Park is developing a new General Management Plan to assess appropriate areas of recreation within the historic encampment site. The trend extends into other areas as well, such as the use of jet skis and snowmobiles in some NPS units.

Jamestown

Archeological Assessment

Launched in the mid-1990s, the Jamestown Archeological Assessment is looking at the site of England’s first permanent colony in a new light. Using new technology and recently found sources, historians and archeologists are looking at the island’s history to form a more complete picture of the site. Building on fundamental knowledge assembled in the 1930s and 1950s, the assessment is focusing on the town’s growth after the demise of the celebrated fort (which was the traditional focus of Jamestown scholarship), assessing the island’s climate, and analyzing emerging social trends

through artifacts and archeology. Using state-of-the-art archeological surveys and recently discovered primary sources, the assessment combines the expertise of social historians, curators, military historians, anthropologists, and archeologists. Similar projects are underway nationwide. Not only is new information surfacing, our approach to history today is fundamentally different from what it was thirty years ago.

Broadening the Focus at Battlefield Sites

This new historical approach is also reflected in a recent congressional mandate for NPS Civil War parks to broaden their interpretive focus beyond specific battles. Presenting the causes of the war, its effect on civilians, and its legacy will put this event into its proper context within nineteenth-century American culture. Visitors to battlefields will still learn about weapons, tactics, and battle movements, but will also be exposed to a broader range of information, which will give the sites more relevance.

Battlefield Surveys

Finally, we see applied historical thought and new perspectives in preservation in programs such as the 1990 Civil War Sites Survey and the current Revolutionary War/War of 1812 Battlefield Survey. These ambitious projects identified battle sites and worked with landowners to seek ways to preserve them. Rather than focus on just battlefields, planners also identified other places of strategic importance, such as camp sites and river crossings. From the start it was a

partnership-based project, with Park Service historians working closely with state historic preservation staff and local historians in identifying and evaluating sites.

NPS planners held training sessions with private researchers to discuss methodology and application of National Register criteria. The Civil War Sites Survey applied a standard format to evaluating the condition and integrity of battlefields and, thus, potential threats and ways to preserve them. The Revolutionary War/War of 1812 Battlefield Survey does not intend to create new parks or even to preserve every site identified, but to create a database of information that local governments can use in future planning and zoning. Here is another example of NPS providing assistance at the state and local levels.

Conclusion

In our interpretive programs, historical research, park planning and programming, creating new parks, and National Register, NHL, and Section 106 work, these revised historical themes offer new and exciting ways for historians to reach out to other disciplines. The agency is focusing more on education, on interpretation based on sound research, and on establishing partnerships to achieve its goals.

With this current direction in historical thought, NPS is also returning to its roots by re-asserting fundamental values of preservation and resource management. Perhaps the NPS mission statement says it best:

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoy-

ment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

In the future we will see new and more

comprehensive interpretive plans in place at historic sites, updated historical reports on which to construct our interpretations, and new parks representative of all aspects of American history.

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Robert M. Dunkerly, 211 East Jefferson Street #2, York, South Carolina 29745;
rmdunk@attglobal.net

