



Letter from Woodstock

Rolf Diamant

Keeping on the Path

THIS ISSUE OF THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM FEATURES A CONVERSATION with the authors of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*. I have chosen to make this conversation the subject of this second *Letter from Woodstock*. While the report is focused on the practice of history, its findings and recommendations are relevant to most people involved in national parks and protected areas work. I've recently spoken with several park superintendents and a senior National Park Service (NPS) leader who had not seen the OAH report, which was released in late 2011. Perhaps not so surprising given this geographically dispersed agency's difficulties with sharing ideas, information, and innovation—a problem cited prominently in the report.

First of all—please take a look at the report. (*Imperiled Promise's* executive summary, available in this issue, and the full study online at www.oah.org/programs/nps/imperiled_promise.html). The authors—Anne Whisnant, Marla Miller, Gary Nash, and David Thelen—cover a lot of ground but I'm going to first focus on what they refer to as a “great divide”: the organizational and cultural distance between park subject-matter professionals and interpretive staff. According to the report authors, this divide is exacerbated in part by the agency's “weak support for its history workforce” and “structures that confine history in isolated silos.” In certain parks this situation has the unintended consequence of making their interpretive programs more insular and disposed to settling into safe, familiar, and comfortable narratives—stories that, once established, are rarely diverged from. In these unfortunate instances, park interpretation can become “narrow,” “static,” and “timid,” and “less the product of training and expertise and more the expression of conventional wisdom.”

As a counterpoint, the authors highlight a growing number of exemplary park history and interpretive programs that have been enriched by a mix of inquisitiveness, creativity, and

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public engagement—setting a higher standard more in line with the objectives of the Second Century Commission, the National Park System Advisory Board, and Director Jon Jarvis’s *Call to Action*. Among other things, these vanguard parks are collaborating with historians in colleges and universities, creating interdisciplinary partnerships, using new media for broader public engagement, and becoming aware of the importance of their own conservation histories. They also seem to share one or more of these desirable attributes: continuing use of current research and scholarship, openness to new or changing contexts, respect for local knowledge, and strong community relationships.

The OAH report refers to these exemplar parks as “lamps along the path” and makes a series of recommendations on how the agency can better share lessons learned from these experiences and effect change from within. As public historians, the authors also step back and look contextually at the NPS’s last decade, tracing the evolution of these “lamps along the path” and the “path” itself—starting from the foundational vision laid out by John Hope Franklin and his colleagues on the National Park System Advisory Board, in their landmark *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2001), to Director Jarvis’s pragmatic reforms advanced in his *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement* (2011). Along the way this vision has been powerfully reinforced and expanded by initiatives such as the *Rally on the High Ground* (2001)—a reinterpretation of slavery’s role as the primary cause of the Civil War that was championed by Civil War park superintendents and former Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley; the *Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection* (2006); the *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* (2006); and more recently by the National Park Second Century Commission’s *Advancing the National Park Idea* (2009) and the extensive follow-up work by the present-day National Park System Advisory Board.

The report makes it clear, however, that much remains to be accomplished and acknowledges that the obstacles still to be overcome are mounting every day. These obstacles include current and additional anticipated reductions in funding, the continuing attrition of park historian positions, the growing inflexibility of bureaucracy, the challenge of maintaining leadership’s focus among constantly shifting priorities and political pressures, and the intimidating fear of controversy.

And potential controversy is always close at hand. For example, legislation is moving through Congress, as this letter is being written, that would establish a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. The proposed park, with units in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Hanford, Washington, would preserve and interpret various historic structures associated with the World War II Manhattan Project and interpret the atomic bomb’s development and legacy. The park would be administered by NPS through an agreement with the Department of Energy, which would remain responsible for protecting public safety, national security, hazard remediation, and continuity of operations at various nuclear facilities.

The bill has sparked a public discussion ironically mirroring some of some of the same issues and concerns raised in the OAH report. The debate, played out in the press and on the Internet, has in large part revolved around the question of whether NPS will be up to the task of interpreting such a potentially controversial subject. In his June 15, 2012, article

“Manhattan Project sites expected to become new national park,” *Los Angeles Times* reporter Richard Simon described very different assessments:

... one anti-nuclear activist expressed concern that ‘such a park, if done in a historically inaccurate and biased way, could end up presenting a false picture of the development of nuclear weapons and the monumental costs and ongoing environmental impacts of the Cold War.’ ‘Given their political influence, those that have profited off nuclear weapons would likely have a disproportionate say in the park’s development and could turn it into some kind of nuclear Disneyland,’ said Tom Clements, nonproliferation policy director of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability. Scott Miller, senior counsel at the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, responded: ‘Anyone who has visited Little Bighorn, Manzanar, Andersonville or Little Rock Central High School, for example, understands that these National Park Service sites aren’t about cotton candy and thrill rides.

‘The National Park Service’s mission there is to preserve and objectively interpret what is often complex and contentious history, so current and future Americans have a real opportunity for a deeper understanding of these important events,’ he added.

Dr. Stephen Andersen, author of *Protecting the Ozone Layer: The United Nations History* (2002), played a key role in the implementation and historical documentation of the ozone-protecting global treaty known as the Montreal Protocol. I recently asked him what he thought of the idea of a Manhattan Project national park and whether he thought NPS could do a credible job of interpretation given the highly charged emotional and ideological environment. “This particular opportunity for a national park shouldn’t be passed up,” he answered after some thought, “as it may never come around again. As you’ve done with other park projects, start it slowly and build trust. You guys eventually seem to get it right, you care enough, know how to make use of good people and ultimately time will be on your side.”

Nice compliment and thoughtful advice, but no organization can live off its reputation for “getting it right”—or at least, not for long. If NPS is to continue to successfully tackle “complex and contentious” subjects—as it should—then the recommendations made in *Imperiled Promise* need to receive focused attention, and most importantly, they need to be acted upon.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ray Dammant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.