

A Sobering Report—Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service

Lisa Mighetto

READING *IMPERILED PROMISE* IS A SOBERING EXPERIENCE. As its title suggests, this report warns that history, which is central to the National Park Service’s mission and to visitor experience, is languishing. While some park units have demonstrated initiative, innovation, and intellectual rigor in their historical interpretation—engaging the public and local communities in meaningful ways—this report concludes that overall the agency’s history program faces serious challenges, ranging from lack of funding and adequate training to bureaucratic inertia. History, according to the authors, “is not flowering on the whole” (53). The substantial section devoted to “Lamps along the Path: What’s Going Well with History in the National Park Service” does little to offset the report’s concern about the agency’s lack “of investment in history work” and its failure “to capitalize on the many exemplary programs and fruitful approaches to the practice of history at individual sites” (118).

Much of the documentation for this study is derived from surveys sent to agency staff with some responsibility for history. The response rate seems high: 544 surveys completed out of approximately 1,500 distributed, yielding an impressive 800 single-spaced pages of text. Clearly these respondents wanted to be heard—and the use of survey excerpts throughout the study, allowing those on the front lines to speak in their own words, is very effective. As author Gary Nash explained, the survey responses “were of fundamental importance to writing the report.”

The authors also interviewed NPS personnel and consulted various reports. What is largely missing is the perspective of visitors—the primary audience for historical analysis at the parks—although gathering information from this sector likely was beyond the scope of the project and would have been difficult to document in a cohesive manner. As it is, the authors have done an admirable job coordinating responses from NPS historians and other personnel from disparate units, which include national parks as well as battlefields, historic trails, seashores, riverways, recreation areas, and more. The various types of units and the different positions of the staff responding to the survey complicated the compilation and analysis of results. It is interesting to consider whether the complaining tone of some of the

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respondents resulted in part from the survey format itself. Would scientists in the NPS voice similar complaints if sent a similar survey on the state of science in the agency?

Some of the study's conclusions, such as the need for additional funding, are predictable, while others are surprising and revealing. I had not realized the extent of the division between interpretation and history, for example, or the consequences of moving the History Division from the Branch of Research and Education to Cultural Resources Management. The explanations of what is holding the NPS back are numerous and include the structure of the agency, fear of controversy, lack of leadership, legal constraints, preoccupation with regulatory compliance, isolation within the NPS and from larger communities, and more.

One alarming finding was the misperception that history is static—that once a narrative is completed it need not be revisited. Although the pervasiveness of this view within the agency is unclear, the authors report a lack of understanding among some NPS employees that history is a dynamic process that must be considered in light of ongoing research framed by new questions and multiple viewpoints. This is what makes history such an exciting field of study, vital to understanding the world—and it is that perspective that will engage visitors. As one respondent observes, the NPS ““needs historian/researchers who are willing and able to dig for the deep, personal stories that are associated with each park, and who can then work with interpreters who can bring those stories to life . . . and show their relevance to our society (and the individual visitor) of today”” (73).

Another, related issue is the undervaluing of professionally trained historians and what they can contribute to research, interpretation, and dialogue with the public. “This important work should not be relegated to the self-trained or avocational historian,” the authors note (68). Graduate school prepares historians to examine primary sources, synthesize materials, assess validity of documentation, ask thoughtful questions, and provide context. Despite an abundance of trained and credentialed historians looking for work, the NPS, like other government agencies, does not always employ rigorous standards in its history work.

Also noteworthy is the concern that parks are sometimes constrained by their enabling legislation, which can confine the presentation of historical themes to the era specified in park creation and to the area within its boundaries, ignoring connections to larger stories outside the unit. Yet the interests and perspectives of visitors develop over time—as does historical scholarship—and history programs need the flexibility to respond as well as to provoke new insights and ongoing dialogue.

De Soto National Memorial, a small unit located in Florida, serves as a striking example. Its enabling legislation in 1948 authorized a memorial to the conquistador celebrating his expedition and landing on Tampa Bay. Park interpretation included a reenactment ceremony featuring conquistadors rowing ashore and planting a flag on the beach. As a child I attended many of these reenactments and can attest they were memorable, sometimes contested, spectacles that engaged a broad spectrum of the community. One year a conquistador fell from the boat, sinking into the water in his cumbersome regalia; on at least one occasion part of the regiment marched off in the wrong direction. The local paper routinely reported these mishaps; de Soto's expedition seemed beside the point. Similarly, my family and friends were attracted by the tradition and the pageantry of the event. For us it was never real-

ly about Hernando de Soto—and I recall protests about the celebratory tone of the reenactment.

By the late 1990s several professional historians and de Soto scholars had expanded the park's interpretation to include the perspective of native peoples and a revisionist interpretation of the conquest of 1539. Although appreciative of the sensitivity to multiple perspectives and to the social consequences of de Soto's expedition, the authors present this example as a missed opportunity to move beyond the focus on the historical figure and the 16th century to present the park itself as a historical artifact of commemoration and a remnant of an outmoded theory about de Soto's route and landing site. As a result, visitors leave without a sense of the changing scholarship regarding de Soto's expedition or "the dynamics of public memory" (102). This example resonated with me, given my personal experiences with this small park unit. The larger point is that historic sites are ideal places to explore the roles of memory and memorialization as well as the dynamic nature of history, and the NPS should encourage flexibility in interpreting them. Also compelling is the authors' suggestion that the NPS recognize its own role in shaping the history of each park and that this self-reflection be incorporated in interpretation.

The report's recommendations are thoughtful and extensive. Some are practical and seem quickly attainable, such as establishing a competitive award recognizing NPS history practice, and creating an advisory board and a leadership council. Others seem lofty and perhaps unrealistic, at least in the short term. The need for additional funding is a recurring theme, for instance, and the authors concede that the prospect of a significant increase in the agency's budget during the next few years is unlikely.

The report further recommends alleviating the isolation of the NPS from broad currents in historical scholarship by additional partnerships with scholarly societies (such as the cooperative agreement that produced this study), and by more direct contact between scholars and NPS historians. Yet the suggestion that NPS employees meet with historians at nearby colleges, museums, and other institutions for monthly conversations over coffee or beer is tempered by the realization that the NPS operates as a "top-down agency," requiring "signals from the top of visible public commitment to change" (Anne Whisnant's comments). Interacting with local scholars and tapping the resources available in scholarly organizations could remedy the intellectual isolation but might not lead to changes in the agency's structure.

Many of the recommendations include forces outside the NPS's control. For example, participation by NPS historians in scholarly conferences might keep agency employees apprised of new trends in scholarship, but, to be truly effective, partnerships with academics and scholarly societies need to work both ways. "The history profession must also examine itself," the authors advise, "and find ways to strengthen, support, engage, and partner with the agency most central in the presentation of its work to the American public. For far too long, academe's own culture and structure have prevented many talented scholars from engaging with history in the national parks," which contributes to the isolation of NPS employees and encourages insularity within the agency (17). Accordingly, the report recommends steps for the Organization of American Historians to continue and strengthen its collaboration with the NPS.

Many of these recommendations, which include site visits, follow-ups, and expansion of project scopes, will require additional funding. As one author points out, in the end “the bottom line is the bottom line” (Marla Miller’s comments). Yet it is unclear how partnerships with academic historians will convince Congress and high-level officials within the NPS of the value of history and its potential to inspire civic engagement, providing the context essential for understanding current issues and provoking thoughtful dialogue. Historians generally have not been as persuasive as scientists in demonstrating the need for their discipline or for credentials and standards. “Until the historical profession actively engages policy makers with the importance of sound scholarship, expecting a government agency (even one entrusted with the historic structures and landscapes of the American public) to adhere to professional historical standards . . . is unrealistic” (17). History, as one of the authors points out “needs articulate advocates” (Anne Whisnant’s comments). *Imperiled Promise* does not provide a clear-cut solution, but it’s a start—and the fact that the NPS continues to participate in this discussion is itself a promising sign.

Lisa Mighetto, University of Washington, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program, 1900 Commerce Street, Tacoma, WA 98402; director@aseh.net