

# THE STATE OF HISTORY IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE: A CONVERSATION AND REFLECTIONS

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## ***Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service—Opening the Discussion***

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### **Introduction (Anne Whisnant)**

WE ARE PLEASED TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT A DISCUSSION OF OUR REPORT, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (2011), to readers of *The George Wright Forum*. As an organization that integrates research, preservation, and education about parks, the George Wright Society and its publication seem an ideal place for discussion of this landmark study.

*Imperiled Promise* grows from a collaboration between the National Park Service (NPS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) that began in 1994, when the two organizations signed a cooperative agreement that has since facilitated dozens of joint historical projects. Former NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley and his staff secured funding for this study in the mid-2000s, but the project languished during the transition from Pitcaithley to his successor, Robert Sutton, who became chief historian in 2007.

In March 2008, the OAH's public history manager, Susan Ferentinos, invited me to join a team of four scholars to work for two years to "evaluate the quality of historical research undertaken and presented in parks . . . and the current impact of historical research on park resource management, interpretation, education, and planning." After conducting a survey and interviews, we were to present "recommendations and best practices for strengthening performance, effectiveness, and program relevance in the area of historical research."

How could I say no?

Before long the team was assembled: Marla Miller, professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Gary Nash, professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Los Angeles; and David Thelen, professor emeritus of history at Indiana University. At some point, the team asked me to chair the project. We distributed a survey to over

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*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 246–263 (2012).

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1,500 NPS employees in 2010. More details about our process and findings are included below in *Imperiled Promise's* executive summary and in the full study online at [www.oah.org/programs/nps/imperiled\\_promise.html](http://www.oah.org/programs/nps/imperiled_promise.html).

Finishing the analysis took three years, not two. Had I understood what a complex task evaluating the “state of history” in this sprawling agency would be, I am not sure I would have signed on. But as complicated as NPS is, one of the greatest challenges for me, as chair, was crafting a coherent report that reflected the insights of four scholars with different areas of expertise, circles of contacts, types of NPS experience, and ideas about what was most important. This was more difficult than writing the single-authored book I published in 2006.

Spread across time zones from California to South Africa, we were not often able to meet, or even to talk, in order to hammer out ideas and prose, and our comfort levels with the technological tools available for collaborative work varied. At one point, I was faced with melding 18 disparate pieces of text into a single draft we could all work on. Hard as this was, I am confident that my colleagues' thoughtful contributions shaped *every page*. We saved each other from errors of fact, tone, and emphasis, and the final document represents the best possible blending of our insights about the research we conducted.

But, to honor our recommendation that NPS place greater emphasis on respecting *multiple perspectives*, we have decided here to allow our *individual* voices to be heard as we reflect upon the report and the road ahead. To create the conversation that follows the executive summary, *Forum* co-editor Rebecca Conard worked with Dwight Pitcaithley to develop a set of questions probing the difficulties as well as the rewards of our investigation and nudging the team to sharpen our recommendations. In so doing, we hope to stimulate an extended conversation. Toward that end, two other historians, Lisa Mighetto, executive director of the American Society for Environmental History, and Timothy Good, superintendent of Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, were invited to contribute comments on the report. Ultimately, we recognize that improving the state of history practice in NPS will be a product of many discussions and a project of many hands. Let the conversation begin.

### **Executive summary: *Imperiled Promise***

The National Park Service (NPS) stewards some of the most powerful and instructive historic places in the nation. Millions of Americans each year cultivate a deeper appreciation of the nation's past through encounters with historic buildings, landscapes, and narratives preserved through the NPS and its myriad agencies and programs. At two-thirds of the nearly 400 national parks, history is at the heart of the visitor experience, and human activity has profoundly shaped them all. History is central to the work of the Park Service.

In 2008, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) agreed, at the behest of the NPS chief historian's office, to undertake a study of the “State of History in the National Park Service.” Four historians—Anne Mitchell Whisnant (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Marla Miller (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Gary Nash (University of California, Los Angeles), and David Thelen (Indiana University)—were charged with completing this assessment.

Although only about 182 of the NPS's employees carry the job title of "historian" (0170 series), many more are engaged in the agency's vast history-related preservation, research, compliance, and interpretive work. Therefore, this study focuses both on what historians do within NPS, and the larger question of who does history in and for the Park Service.

The centerpiece of our work was an electronic questionnaire sent to over 1,500 members of NPS's permanent staff who have some responsibility for history. We received 544 responses, generating more than 800 single-spaced pages of discursive replies. We also solicited perspectives and advice from numerous retired and current NPS historians and administrators, including key leaders at the regional and Washington, D.C., levels. We consulted a set of external stakeholders—historians generally based in colleges and universities who have worked closely with the agency. Team members visited dozens of parks and conducted seven large-group listening sessions at annual meetings of the OAH, National Council on Public History (NCPH), and National Association for Interpretation (NAI). Finally, we combed through OAH-sponsored site-visit reports, NPS administrative histories, and reams of previous studies. These strategies yielded a full view of the fortunes of NPS history practice in recent decades.

We found that much is going well. Our study identified nearly 150 examples of historical projects and programs that NPS personnel regard as effective, inspiring models. We ourselves observed many instances of high-quality scholarship and creative interpretation. More than a dozen of these successes are profiled herein, as lamps lighting the path ahead.

But we also found that the agency's ability to manage its sites "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations"—let alone achieve its highest aspirations to become the nation's largest outdoor history classroom—has been imperiled by the agency's weak support for its history workforce, by agency structures that confine history in isolated silos, by longstanding funding deficiencies, by often narrow and static conceptions of history's scope, and by timid interpretation. As a consequence, one of our survey respondents wrote, history in the NPS is "sporadic, interrupted, superbly excellent in some instances and vacant in others" (Respondent 10273). Our findings describe many specific aspects of the state of history practice today—an uneven landscape of inspiration and success amid policies and practices all but designed to inhibit high-quality work.

### **Promises to keep:**

#### **Our vision for an expansive, integrated, and vital practice of NPS history**

This report urges NPS to recommit to history as one of its core purposes and invest in building a top-flight program of historical research and interpretation that will foster effective and integrated historic preservation and robust, place-based visitor engagement with history. The more central history can be to NPS's missions and activities, the more relevant and responsive NPS can be to the needs of American society in the twenty-first century.

In the spirit of the 1963 *Leopold Report* as well as the landmark 1966 study *With Heritage So Rich*, and building upon invigorating new directions in the larger profession of history, we recommend at the outset a general philosophy for both agency and park history grounded in these key ideas and principles:

- Expand interpretive frames beyond existing physical resources.
- Emphasize connections of parks with the larger histories beyond their boundaries.
- Highlight the effects of human activity on “natural” areas.
- Acknowledge that history is dynamic and always unfinished.
- Recognize the NPS’s role in shaping every park’s history.
- Attend to the roles of memory and memorialization at historic sites.
- Highlight the open-endedness of the past.
- Forthrightly address conflict and controversy both in and about the past.
- Welcome contested and evolving understandings of American civic heritage.
- Envision “doing history” as a means of skills development for civic participation.
- Share authority with and take knowledge from the public.
- Better connect with the rest of the history profession and embrace interdisciplinary collaboration.

### **Findings and recommendations**

Careful review of the history of history practice in the NPS reveals that many of the challenges history faces in the agency today result from several defining legacies of the way the history program has developed over time. These legacies include:

- An underemphasis and underfunding of historical work as priorities shifted to natural resources, law enforcement, and other concerns;
- An artificial separation of cultural resources management from interpretation;
- An artificial separation of natural resources interpretation from cultural and historical interpretation;
- An overemphasis on mandated preservation compliance activities at the expense of other ways history can be practiced; and
- A misperception that history is a tightly bounded, single and unchanging “accurate” story, with one true significance, rather than an ongoing discovery process in which narratives that change over time as generations develop new questions and concerns, and multiple perspectives are explored.

Findings 1, 2, and 3 [explained in the full report, and summarized here in Table 1] describe how these legacies have left history without strong, consistent sources of leadership, fragmented history practice across the agency, divided what should be the closely linked arenas of history and interpretation, and increasingly isolated the practice of history in NPS from developments in scholarship, museums, and schools. These conditions have created administrative inefficiencies and dampened the agency’s ability to both draw on and contribute to broader scholarly and public conversations.

Findings 4, 5, and 6 address workforce development and funding challenges that have created a severe dearth of professional history expertise and capacity, both for now and the future. Meanwhile, findings 7 and 8 explore the current limitations and unexplored possibilities offered by targeted and thoughtful partnerships and creative uses of technology to

**Table 1.** Summary of findings from *Imperiled Promise*.

**Finding 1: The history/interpretation divide.** The intellectually artificial, yet bureaucratically real, divide between history and interpretation constrains NPS historians, compromises history practice in the agency, and severely hobbles effective history interpretation.

**Finding 2: The importance of leadership for history.** There must be visionary, visible, and respected leadership at the top and managers throughout the agency who understand, value, and systematically advocate for and nurture the professional practice of history.

**Finding 3: The challenge of disconnection.** NPS history is undermined by conditions that isolate both people and knowledge: employees feel sequestered, NPS historians are absent from discussions in the profession, NPS history scholarship is largely invisible to databases and journals the larger field relies on for information and insight, and historians beyond NPS are not in conversation with the strong scholarship and innovative practice the agency conducts and contracts.

**Finding 4. Historical expertise and today's workforce.** NPS support for professional expertise in history is surprisingly weak. Position qualifications for historians do not require advanced training in history, working historians have difficulty accessing the ongoing training they need to stay abreast of developments in the field, and most parks—even historical parks—do without any historian on staff. Historical interpretation is often left to poorly trained seasonal workers.

**Finding 5: A history workforce for the future.** NPS needs to attract the rising generation of historians, but barriers to employment in NPS exacerbate the already-challenging prospect of recruiting and retaining the nation's brightest young historians, especially historians of color.

**Finding 6. Inadequate resources for historical practice.** History in NPS has been under-resourced for decades. Chronic underfunding and understaffing have severely undermined the agency's ability to meet basic responsibilities, let alone take on new and bolder initiatives, nurture and sustain public engagement, foster a culture of research and discovery, and facilitate connectivity and professional growth among NPS staff.

**Finding 7: Productive and enduring partnerships for history.** History in the national parks depends on cooperation and collaboration with others—to obtain funding, to harness expertise, and simply to leverage much-needed labor. But partnerships must be crafted carefully with an eye to how they can contribute to the improvement of history practice.

**Finding 8. Technology and the practice of history.** NPS can do more to harness the power of technologies that offer specific promise to advance historical research, interpretation, and connections between the agency staff and the larger historical profession, as well as public engagement with the past.

**Finding 9. Stewardship and interpretation of agency history.** NPS has traditionally considered its own story (and the story of its parks) to be somehow separate from the history “out there” that it is charged with preserving or telling. Insufficient attention is paid to

the stewardship of the agency's own history, and the consequences both undermine research, interpretation, and management and create inefficiencies.

**Finding 10. The constraints of boundaries, establishing legislation, and founding histories.** The Park Service's own founding histories and boundaries are too often construed as constraining, rather than facilitating, the presenting and interpreting of history. Histories in and of the parks are often trapped in confining, static boxes. The inflexibility of interpretive and management plans has the same effect.

**Finding 11. Fixed and fearful interpretation.** NPS's interpretive approach has tended to focus on fixed and final conclusions or "themes" that are supposed to guide interpretation over the long term. This approach reinforces a tendency toward "defensive history" that seems to stem from a certain timidity in the face of controversy or criticism. These dynamics predispose NPS to underestimate visitors and view them as people to be instructed rather than listened to and engaged.

**Finding 12. Civic engagement, history, and interpretation.** NPS's approach to civic engagement—while laudable in many respects—misses many opportunities developed by other cultural institutions to enrich civic life and discourages more creative civic platforms through which history can connect with interpretation in ways we suggested earlier in this report.

enhance history practice and spread ideas and knowledge. In neither area is NPS presently mobilizing these strategies to best effect for history.

Finding 9 describes the irony that, despite a palpable reverence for longstanding agency practices and traditions, NPS has been surprisingly slow to deeply engage its own history. Findings 10, 11, and 12, meanwhile, discuss specific ways in which historical interpretation is constrained by inflexible conceptualizations and approaches that do not take maximum advantage of emerging ideas and methods that are transforming history practice and history-based civic engagement elsewhere.

This report makes or endorses nearly 100 recommendations to improve history practice in the NPS. In some cases, we seek to underscore recommendations made by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), the National Parks Second Century Commission, and National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), whose thorough and impressive studies yielded many important observations and insights. In many cases, we have adopted and advanced recommendations our NPS informants first proposed.

Among the key recommendations, we join NAPA, Second Century, and NPCA to advocate a concerted effort to invest in adequate staffing and restored funding for history (recommendations 1.1, 2.2, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 6.1). We urge NPS to reopen lines of consistent connection between history and interpretation in every way possible. This might take practical form of scoping cultural resources studies to include interpretive deliverables, and reconfiguring interpretive planning to incorporate the findings of historical resource studies (1.3). We propose formal and informal mechanisms to improve communication and reduce isolation both within and beyond the agency (3.2, 3.3, 3.5). We suggest that NPS revisit position qualifica-

tions (4.5) and essential competencies (1.4), study the agency's historical employment patterns for historians (4.1), distribute historians more widely across the agency (4.1, 4.6), and take other steps to ensure that additions to the staff are adequately trained for their work. We urge that existing staff be supported in pursuing necessary, ongoing professional development (4.2–4.4). We endorse recommendations made by the Second Century Commission to establish conduits for innovation (3.1), and work to cultivate an ever-more-diverse workforce (5.1, 5.2).

We encourage efforts to maximize synergies with an array of external partners, from colleges and universities to local community groups (7.1, 7.2), and to harness the power of technology to facilitate interpretation and conversation, with visitors, peers and partners (8.1). We recommend ways to make NPS scholarship more widely available, to disseminate knowledge cultivated within the agency more broadly (8.2–8.5). We describe ways to engage the agency's unique history and to improve internal documentation (9.1, 9.3).

With greater attention to the agency's own history, we envision ways for parks to adopt a more reflexive posture, interpreting their own pasts and engaging in more challenging and relevant interpretation with visitors (9.2, 10.1, 10.2). And we suggest several ways in which historical interpretation can be better connected with wider aims of civic engagement that is built upon engaging multiple perspectives and listening more closely to visitors (11.1–11.3, 12.1).

We make two cross-cutting recommendations to bring together leadership empowered to implement the best and most useful of the suggestions offered here: a History Leadership Council (recommendation 1.2), comprising the agency's most talented and influential historians and interpreters, and a History Advisory Board (2.1), comprising the nation's leading public history professionals from beyond the agency—the most innovative curators, the most insightful scholars, the most savvy administrators. With these two bodies providing much-needed leadership, other needs (dissolving internal barriers and fostering interconnection, better engaging the agency's own history, and learning of and from some of the most exciting developments both within and beyond the agency) should fall into place.

We conclude by enjoining the OAH and the history profession more broadly to embrace and enlarge their efforts to support history in the NPS, through expansion of the partnership that produced this report and through other creative efforts to make common cause in the interest of rearticulating a reinvigorated public and civic role for national parks-based history for a new era.

## **A conversation with the authors**

**GWF:** *What was the most challenging part of doing this project?*

**DT:** The greatest challenge was to write survey questions that would invite people who practice history in diverse ways and in isolated places to talk about their experiences and then to listen to those diverse voices and write a report that would convey an approach to history

that both draws on recent practices outside NPS and connects staff across the Service. Such an approach needed to provide a common platform for those who are called *interpreters*, *historians*, *preservationists*, and *educators*. And it needed to grow out of what is unique—and possibly transformative—about experiencing history at the sites where people faced extraordinary challenges and did remarkable things. We ended up offering elements for such an approach on pages 27–29 of the report.

**GN:** I agree with David: devising a survey to be sent to NPS historians and those in history-related positions. As we imagined this survey, it would provide us with the “insiders” views on how well history was practiced in the service, what challenges they encounter on a daily basis, how the system’s culture might be improved, and much more. We needed a survey that was comprehensive yet not so long that it would intimidate the overworked men and women whose views were essential to writing this report. It took far longer than we imagined, and it was far more complicated, to reach a total of 26 questions. The 544 responses we received were of fundamental importance to writing the report.

**MM:** Mastering the complexity of NPS policies and procedures was certainly challenging. Some elements of NPS history work are invisible to the public eye and took a good bit of study to understand, while others (like the division between CRM and Interpretation) seem downright counterintuitive; all along the way I worried that we were missing some essential directive, policy or procedure that would make a given recommendation redundant, moot, or impossible. The sheer size of the NPS and the dispersed nature of the organization was a challenge as well; we seemed always to be learning almost by accident of initiatives or reports that were underway in some corner of the agency. There were just far too many occasions to send a note out to the team with a subject line like “Has anyone seen this?”

**AW:** The central challenge, as I see it, was deciding on appropriate boundaries for our work, both intellectually and practically. What is meant by “history” in a National Park Service context? Who count as “historians”? How could we think about “history” in the NPS without necessarily accepting the bureaucratic boundaries (e.g., the division between Interpretation and Cultural Resources) that so profoundly shape history work in the agency?

At a practical level, we had to answer these questions in order to design a workable survey instrument about “history” to send to said “historians.” But, neat answers were not forthcoming, so our work—from the survey forward—entailed unavoidable compromises.

People doing “history” in NPS work under vastly different conditions with very dissimilar imperatives and work products, depending on whether they work in cultural resources management or interpretation, or within a national park unit, a regional office, Washington, or an “external” program such as the National Register program. Attempting to talk to them all about a vaguely coherent “something” widely thought to constitute NPS “history” proved sometimes too difficult.

In the end, we took a hybrid approach. We surveyed a broad swath of NPS professionals who appeared to be doing history-related work and asked them about a somewhat nar-

rower set of activities more likely relevant to *park-based* history. Containing many open-ended questions, our survey offered those whose work was not primarily park-based to contribute; we supplemented these responses with additional personal narratives solicited from a smaller group of historians. Still, we know that the survey and final report did not fully capture the labors of some historians in regions, at WASO, in various support centers, or in the external programs.

Our difficulty in integrating all of the history work we found was in itself a lesson about how fragmented and disconnected historical work in the NPS has become. It showed us how much “history” needs articulate advocates who can make a case for its value across the agency, and how crucial creating more opportunities for cross-fertilization and collaboration across internal divisions is.

**GWF:** *What was the most startling finding?*

**AW:** For me, the most alarming realization was that a large part of what counts, to most observers, as “history in the National Parks” (historical interpretive work) has only tangential and sporadic connection to history as an arena of professional education and practice, or to the expertise of graduate-trained, credentialed historians either in or outside the agency.

Professional historians across the agency seem not to be routinely invited to review historical publications, exhibits, films, or programs planned and produced by NPS. Indeed, “peer review” by historians of NPS historical output in the interpretive realm seems spotty, at best. Meanwhile, the professionally produced historical research the NPS does sponsor (e.g., administrative histories, historic resource surveys, etc.) is not used, in a regular, predictable way, in historical interpretive activities. The almost willful detachment of NPS history “interpretation” from professional historical expertise is surreal and was hard for us to grasp. “Don’t all historians do interpretation?” one of us asked in a meeting about the report. Not in the National Park Service. And the separation is perpetuated and enforced by agency structures (especially the division between “interpretation” and “cultural resources,” discussed at length in the report) that render what seems to us like a natural collaboration nearly impossible in many cases.

Because of this separation, the agency fails to take advantage of many opportunities for engaging the public in a richer, more vibrant history and exposes itself time and time again to the danger of making glaring, even damaging missteps in its historical presentations and statements. These errors work at cross-purposes with the agency’s stated desire to broaden its relevancy to new audiences in the face of changing American demographics, and to provoke and challenge all visitors to think about a dynamic past in new ways.

**DT:** Yes, I was startled to discover over and over how interpretation was understood and practiced differently by “historians” and “interpreters”—often in isolation from each other—in the NPS. We were so struck by this divide that we made it our first finding in the report. As a partial result of that isolation both disciplines shy away from the mission Freeman Tilden projected for interpretation in the NPS—to “provoke” people to see themselves and experience the world in new ways. The challenge of what it would mean to provoke visitors

will require historians and interpreters (inside and outside NPS) to collaborate as they explore what their respective disciplines have to contribute.

**MM:** One memorably startling moment for me personally was opening an old issue of [the journal] *CRM* in the course of the research and discovering that NPS historians had initiated an almost identical survey some twenty years earlier. Imagine my dismay to find this 1988 initiative, entitled “Shaping the History of the NPS History Program,” posing almost identical questions. This turned up long after the scope of work calling for our survey was drafted, and long after our own questionnaire had been so painstakingly crafted, and yet no one had mentioned this over the couple of years we had at that point been underway, and our effort to turn up replies to or analysis generated from this effort located only a handful of memos. Having spent days holed up in a Bloomington, Indiana, conference room hammering out the subjects and phrasing of our own questionnaire, it was disheartening and sobering to uncover this other survey, and to realize how very possible it was that our own work could be likewise forgotten. From an analytical standpoint, it pointed up the surprising lack of institutional memory that undermines the work of historians in the Park Service, and underscored the challenge that lay ahead if we wanted our own findings to get more traction.

**GN:** I was greatly surprised, and much dismayed, to find how few dedicated historian slots (0170 series) were currently filled in the Park Service and how the number has declined over the last decade, largely through budget starvation, even as the number of park sites has increased. This number is discouragingly small when one considers that almost two-thirds of the park sites are history-centered. A reservoir of well-trained recent PhDs in history remains to be tapped because positions in colleges and universities have been sharply curtailed in recent years and because the number of aspiring professional historians has tilted toward public history positions.

**GWF:** *What is the area of your greatest concern?*

**GN:** The chronic underfunding of “America’s best idea,” as Wallace Stegner phrased it. The Second Century Commission Report put great emphasis on this, arguing that while “the national parks are greatly admired and the NPS is arguably the most popular agency in the federal government . . . the current funding is fundamentally inadequate. . . . For decades, budgets for park operations have fallen far short of basic needs,” and today represent “less than one-tenth of one percent of the federal budget.” To be sure, many of the recommendations our committee has made can be implemented without additional funding, and we know that the prospect of additional funding in the next few years is very unlikely. However, our vision for how history might be practiced throughout the service, which would benefit the millions of visitors each year, cannot be realized under current funding restrictions.

**MM:** I concur with Gary: it’s the chronic underfunding of the history program. NPS cannot continue to ask its hard-working employees to continue to perform above and beyond the call of duty while draining history programs of fundamental resources. The gap between the

size of the investment in natural vs. cultural resources is well documented; the agency simply must restore equity across those two vast and equally imperative enterprises. People always say “this is not the right time” to ask for more money—they’ve been saying that for decades. At some point, the leadership simply must step up before the losses are irreparable.

**DT:** My greatest concern is with the frequent fragmentation of different practices of history into specialized silos and the related isolation of those NPS silos from rich, ongoing debates, experiments, and developments in museums, the academy, and schools outside NPS.

**AW:** Yes, I think NPS unnecessarily hobbles *itself* by clinging to the organizational structures that separate (and privilege) “interpretation” over expertise in history; this, in my view, is the greatest *cultural* and structural challenge the agency should address. But I am even more worried that the ongoing drain of funding from public programs renders it unlikely that NPS will, in the near future, have the resources it needs in *any* area, not just history.

Even in this context of agency underfunding, history in the NPS has suffered disproportionately. The relative investment in natural resources, with its emphasis on science, has been more robust. Overwhelmingly, our survey respondents called for more hands on deck. It is obvious to me that the agency desperately needs more historians with graduate training in *all areas of its historical practice*—from interpretation to preservation and research.

To fully recommit to history, I think NPS needs a service-wide “history initiative” on par with the Natural Resources Challenge that would fund agency-wide hiring of a large cadre of historians who would bring with them the kinds of historical expertise, ways of thinking, connections with larger practice, and insights we have endorsed. In the context of the much-lamented current surplus of well-trained (often PhD-holding) American historians, the agency has a golden opportunity to hire supremely well-educated professionals. I worry that such an initiative is, however, unlikely in the current political and fiscal climate.

**GWF:** *Where did you find the greatest promise?*

**DT:** This is easy. The greatest promise by far comes from the many extraordinarily creative and dedicated people in NPS who explore and create ways of overcoming the challenges described above. They are engaging and presenting history as creatively as it is being practiced anywhere in the world. Their achievements are the more remarkable because their work is sometimes made harder by the structures and larger culture of NPS.

**MM:** Yes, the passion so many employees bring to their work is nothing short of inspiring. My favorite quote in the study is from the observer who said that where NPS is strong, it is just lucky. NPS is fortunate indeed to have men and women in the ranks who undertake extraordinary extra effort to personally close the gap between what is and what could be.

**GN:** I agree: the inspired work at many NPS sites. One hefty part of our report—we titled it “Lamps along the Path: What’s Going Well with History in the National Park Service”—points to a dozen challenges at history-related sites where the superintendent and talented

staffers have found a way, usually with pinched budgets, to experiment, innovate, build engaging programs that draw visitors who in earlier days would not have found much that touched their lives, draw upon today's burgeoning technology, reach out to K-12 children with excellent curricular materials, form partnerships with local colleges and universities, negotiate the boisterous waters of civic engagement, and more. We were at pains to throw light on the many examples of exemplary work accomplished at specific sites because they are models of what can be done, if effectively disseminated, at other sites. "Best practices" is a commonly used phrase in museums and other places where the public comes to learn and engage in what makes an active citizenry invaluable in a democracy. We wanted our report to tip our hats to some of the Park Service's best practices.

**AW:** The parks themselves (as well as the NPS's archives and museum collections) represent an incredibly rich resource. Great promise also lies in the dedication of NPS employees to the mission of the National Park Service. Especially notable is the commitment of the agency's small contingent of professional historians who, if empowered and better connected and supported, could begin to lead significant change.

As Gary notes, our report highlights "Lamps on the Path" where creative historical thinking *is* flourishing, and where good models are already in place for park historical programs to build on. Much of the historical research that NPS sponsors, too, is of very high quality. Projects and programs that have built durable networks and ongoing partnerships among historians inside and outside the agency (such as the NPS-OAH agreement and various NPS-university collaborations) offer exciting examples of how to leverage scarce resources.

**GWf:** *Of all the recommendations found in Imperiled Promise, what one or two measures can and should be implemented to effect substantive change across the system within the next three to five years in order to generate steam for organizational change within the NPS?*

**GN:** First, Recommendation 1.2: create an internal History Leadership Council composed of historians, interpreters, curators, and other NPS staff in key history-related positions. Such a council can address many other recommendations, foremost among them to "develop strategies to bridge the structural divide between cultural resources and interpretation and engage historians more fully in interpretive planning." The council can also play a key role in spreading the word of model programs at particular parks and playing midwife to promising programs still in an incipient form. The council could easily help implement such recommendations as 1.8, 3.2, 3.3, 3.6, 4.3, 4.8, 5.3, 5.7, 7.1, 9.2, and others. Second, Recommendation 2.1: create an external History Advisory Board that would work closely with the internal History Leadership Council while providing clout in dealing with congressionally mandated budget shortfalls, thinking broadly about long-range planning issues, helping to facilitate partnerships with relevant national organizations, and "articulating and pursuing a coherent vision and concrete plans for enhancing historical work across the agency."

**MM:** There is no reason that the OAH cannot immediately begin to require some of the changes we propose to the contract work it facilitates in its cooperative agreement with the agency, particularly those that work to better integrate CRM and interpretation. I personally would like to see the chief historian's office, again perhaps working with OAH, embrace the recommendations related to the dissemination of NPS scholarship, and look for ways to place the best of this work in vehicles (like JSTOR or GoogleBooks) that historians based in colleges and universities encounter in the everyday course of their research.

But the two core recommendations, concerning the creation of a History Leadership Council (composed of leading lights within the agency) and the History Advisory Board (to engage the insights of the nation's most innovative history practitioners) have the greatest potential for meaningful change. These should be developed right away, and should have direct ties to the NPS leadership at the national level, including the NPS National Leadership Council and the National Park System Advisory Council.

**AW:** To prevent *Imperiled Promise* from joining the "stream of reports" we described in Part 1, I think it is imperative that some specific entities be charged with working to implement the changes we recommend. *Imperiled Promise* suggests, and I concur, that the ongoing work be taken up by a new external History Advisory Board and an internal NPS History Leadership Council. These groups can help historians in and outside the agency to continue to advocate for, and build a community of support for, top-flight history practice in the agency. The History Leadership Council, if designed to bring together historians from both cultural resources and interpretation, could begin work on bridging the chasm between those groups. That project should be their top priority.

Identifying the right participants for both bodies and organizing their work will require committed leadership and hours of time. To that end, restoring full staffing at the chief historian's office at WASO and charging the staff with facilitating the work of these bodies seems to me essential. Additionally, the chief historian's office, in concert with both of the above groups, needs to visibly advocate for history (and this report) to NPS top leadership (the National Park System Advisory Board and NPS National Leadership Council), and to regions and superintendents. Because NPS operates as such a top-down agency, signals from the top of visible public commitment to change will be critical.

**DT:** Meaningful organizational change will need to come both from the bottom up and the top down. The real need in either case is to engage creative practices outside NPS and adapt the most relevant ones to everyday life within NPS. From the top down, the creation of a History Advisory Board (2.1) composed of creative practitioners from academic and museum worlds outside NPS, and a History Leadership Council (1.2) composed of creative practitioners within NPS, offer unlimited potential, if composed of the most creative people, to lead a servicewide rethinking of how history is practiced within NPS. One focus for such an initiative could be to task a "cross-silo task force" to develop new methods for training interpreters (Recommendation 1.4).

From the bottom up, I would promote informal processes that encourage NPS staff to engage innovation within and beyond NPS. This could begin with a strong push to imple-

ment Recommendation 7.2, to encourage sister cities-like informal and ongoing collaborations—monthly conversations over coffee or beer—between individuals within NPS and those at nearby colleges, museums, or other institutions. I would likewise initiate a second category of initiatives (Recommendations 11.2, 11.6, 12.1) through which staff members would establish groups regularly to discuss proposals in books with huge cross-silo implications for NPS practice (such as Simon’s *Participatory Museum* or *Letting Go: Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, edited by Adair, Filene, and Koloski) or to converse with practitioners outside NPS or to visit pioneering museums. They could modify such ideas and practices to meet needs at their parks or distill them into servicewide recommendations for change. A modest investment in such initiatives could bear great fruit.

**GW:** *Of all the recommendations found in Imperiled Promise, which one recommendation, long-range or short, would, if implemented, best serve the NPS and the American taxpayers?*

**AW:** Recommendation 4.1, “Undertake systematically to restore and augment the agency’s professional trained history workforce at all levels.” Providing funding for a focused hiring initiative to increase the ranks of historians across the agency is crucial to recommitting the agency to history as one of its core priorities.

While NPS efforts to train existing staff in historical methods, scholarship, analysis, and interpretation should be encouraged, graduate schools are already turning out—in the midst of a major job shortage—hundreds of historians who have this training. If NPS could capture some of this current surplus, the agency and the public would benefit. Attempting to retrofit an agency that lacks a critical mass of historians by trying to bring non-historians to professional levels can be little more than a temporary, emergency response to a deep structural problem. The shortcomings of this latter approach would, it seems, be obvious if we were talking about biologists or other highly trained professionals within NPS.

**GN:** This priority also is expressed in Recommendations 6.1–3: to “seek funding to restore the number of cultural resources FTEs [full-time employees], now at the lowest point in more than a decade, to the pre-2005 level,” to “increase funding levels for the Historic Preservation Fund to support state, local, and tribal governments to guarantee that prehistoric and historical resources are properly preserved,” and to “seek additional funding . . . to replace broken, dilapidated, out-of-date, and inaccurate media.” These related recommendations echo those of the Second Century Commission Report, which warned that “significantly increased revenues are needed simply to meet immediate priorities” and that “additional sources of income and new funding systems must be established if the parks are to surmount the challenges they face, and if the nation is to benefit from the opportunities the parks offer to build a healthier, wiser, more sustainable society.” Taxpayers would be getting a bargain if each American for just one year contributed about \$25 to NPS, which would in a single stroke remove the \$8 billion backlog of deferred maintenance and construction projects. (This is roughly the cost of 17 F-22s, which are not wanted by the Department of Defense and do not fly properly to the point that a number of pilots refuse to take them off the ground.)

**MM:** Here too, I must concur with Gary, and Anne, that, at the end of the day, the most critical recommendations are those urging the agency to “seek funding to restore the number of cultural resources FTEs, now at the lowest point in more than a decade, to the pre-2005 level,” to “increase funding levels for the Historic Preservation Fund to support state, local, and tribal governments to guarantee that prehistoric and historical resources are properly preserved,” and “seek additional funding . . . to replace broken, dilapidated, out-of-date, and inaccurate media.” Though there are many, many budget-neutral recommendations and proposals that would require only modest investment, the bottom line is the bottom line: NPS simply has for too long shorted investment in its cultural resources, and now must attend to what is essentially deferred maintenance of its cultural resources workforce and infrastructure.

**DT:** At a time when citizens are mobilized behind fixed positions, a time of political gridlock, NPS could play a major transformative role by pursuing initiatives suggested as Recommendation 12.1 (and closely related 11.2). By presenting programs and by modeling open-ended interpretation and embracing multiple perspectives on the past, NPS can advance a better civics. The most exciting possibilities for civic transformation occur where staffers and visitors encounter difference—from their own worlds, their own times, their own experiences, people whose understandings of history and civics differ from their own. Good initiatives can facilitate people in developing new civic skills: to uncover assumptions, to suspend judgment, to practice empathy toward others, and to embrace multiple perspectives. At the end of his life, David Larsen [training manager for interpretation at NPS’s Mather Training Center] believed that the greatest need for creativity in NPS lay at the intersection between visitor experience and civic engagement so as to advance more transformative possibilities in each. The focus on visitor experience is too much on teaching lessons and telling stories to visitors. The focus on civic engagement is too often on recruiting partners to complete tasks a park had identified on its own. Fears of controversy and a loss of control frequently retard the transformative potential of NPS civic initiatives for sharing authority and co-creation.

**GWF:** *Finding #1 in Imperiled Promise deals with the History/Interpretation Divide. Would you elaborate on Additional Recommendations 1.5 and 1.8, which seem designed to bridge the Great Divide? Specifically, how should the regional offices be restructured to facilitate an enhanced collaborative process regarding interpretive efforts, AND what kinds of “opportunities” would lead to “formal collaboration on planning processes and informal conversation”?*

**MM:** Any restructuring of the regional offices is probably too technical an issue for us to speak to. But I’d like to see the regional historians have a higher profile. At UMass Amherst, we were pleased to enjoy warm relationships with both Louis Hutchins and Paul Weinbaum—there are no better representatives of what scholarship in the agency can and should mean than those two outstanding historians, and it was greatly beneficial to our program to get to know them. I would encourage the regional historians to make the effort to get to the campuses of any universities and colleges that might make good partners on NPS projects.

Perhaps OAH could facilitate the visits of regional historians to campuses just as they do academics to parks.

**AW:** While each regional office is structured differently, it appears that most have divisions of Interpretation and Cultural Resources and that, in most cases, the credentialed historians they employ (particularly in the 0170 series) work in Cultural Resources and have little systematic connection to Interpretation. These regional historians are, in that regard, an underutilized resource. Re-envisioning the regional historians' role as more expansive and inclusive of consultation and review on interpretive projects would help build bridges between interpretation and historical research. A modest expansion of the staffs of regional historians' offices (accomplished by hiring new, well-credentialed historians from outside the agency) could turn those offices into resources that could assist both preservation and historical interpretive efforts across many parks that are unlikely to hire their own historians in the near term.

With regard to Recommendation 1.8, creating more opportunities for crossover between interpretation and cultural resources at all levels, this is an area where NPS staff should be encouraged to innovate. I could imagine that this crossover might be both formal and informal. Some ideas could include: encouraging horizontal conversations across division lines (even at the level of informal lunches and coffees); using social media or the proposed "Commons" within NPS Training and Development's just-being-developed "Cultural Resources Academy" to foster cross-division conversations; scoping cultural resource studies to be responsive to interpretive needs; planning follow-up meetings to discuss the interpretive implications of cultural resource studies; convening interdisciplinary teams around themes, anniversaries, moments in park planning or research life cycles, or at other moments where history's unfinished business impinges on visitor interaction or site management; identifying key leaders in interpretation who could be sponsored to attend and present work at pertinent professional history conferences; requiring that credentialed historians with subject-area expertise be included on every planning team for NPS interpretive products or public initiatives in which history is a major component; and maintaining a more dynamic, flexible "historians directory" in NPS that is as inclusive as possible of both historians in the 0170 series and credentialed historians in other series who would be encouraged to think of themselves as a community and to communicate via the Commons, conference attendance, and social media.

**GN:** The solution, I think, is not so much the restructuring of regional offices but rather a clear-eyed recognition of advantages of internal conversation and collaboration at particular parks and quarterly or semi-annual interpark gatherings for exchanges of ideas and progress reports on new initiatives. Something as simple as brown bag lunches at individual parks can begin to bridge the history/interpretation divide with hardly any expense. Regarding interpark get-togethers, at the OAH-NCPH 2012 joint conference in Milwaukee we heard, at a session of park historians, that in the New England part of the Northeast Region, meetings are held quarterly among historians and cultural resource personnel. The meetings migrate

from one park to another so the driving to these gatherings is spread out among the participants. This seems like a low-cost, high-value way to proceed and certainly apropos our recommendation.

**DT:** I agree with Gary's broad approach to this question. Extending his point, it would be great if some regions were restructured geographically so that historians are not in Boston, interpreters in Philadelphia, or offices are far apart even when they are in the same city—or park. Collaboration will most naturally begin with a shared embrace of an interpretive approach (open-endedness, multiple perspectives) or to solve a shared task (to develop interpretation at a park or to train interpreters or develop a new civic approach).

**GWf:** *What is the greatest challenge to implementing the recommendations contained in the report: mobilizing political support, funding, agency culture, or something else?*

**GN:** It is possible that greater political support is forthcoming but only if President Obama is re-elected and has a Democratic Congress with which to work. This is unlikely, and so is the prospect for any significant increase in the NPS budget in the next few years or even more. This being the case, the agency will have to look inward to bring about the cultural changes that our committee has recommended. In this situation, inspired leadership is at a premium—at the very top with NPS Director Jarvis, at the next level with regional directors, and, one level down, with the superintendents at the 397 parks.

**DT:** The fragmented and hierarchical structures, the isolation of NPS from broader currents, and the undercurrent of fear that discourages innovation are equally challenging. It would make a major difference if the leaders—secretary, director, regional directors—make clear that they will support innovators who encounter public criticism.

**AW:** The two greatest challenges are, I think, (1) finding the new funding needed to bulk up the history workforce, and (2) addressing the deep-seated tendencies in agency culture that privilege interpretation over historical expertise and that actively resist the infusion of historical expertise and scholarly perspectives into interpretative efforts. It is long past time to leave behind the notion that professional historians cannot relate to the public. Creating a culture in which regular, sustained, and ongoing collaboration between skilled historians (as well as other cultural resource professionals) and able interpreters is the norm, rather than the exception, will significantly improve the agency's educational practices and products.

**MM:** Given the number of previous reports that have made similar observations and recommendations, one significant challenge is a tangible pessimism that things can be any different this time around. At the OAH session at which the study was launched, Seth Bruggeman asked us what will make our report any different from those that went before; Anne replied, simply, "You." And that's right—we're depending on energy from below, above, and beyond to create this change. I recall a moment during one of our meetings with NPS historians when a voice on the phone (I'm afraid I don't recall whose) at the end of the conversation

told us that some of her colleagues had received our survey but chose not to fill it out, figuring it was a waste of time—just another study that would sit unread somewhere. After hearing us quote constantly from the survey responses as we reported our preliminary findings, she was eager to assure them that we really were listening. And that’s what I hope makes this time around different: that the voices of 544 NPS employees are front and center, articulating their own hopes, fears, aspirations, and disappointments from the agency’s front lines.

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