

From Civil War to Civil Rights

Marty Blatt

“FROM CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS” IS THE DESIGNATED SLOGAN for the National Park Service’s Civil War sesquicentennial commemorations, which coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights movement. The slogan, which only came about after intense internal debate within the Park Service, attempts to convey the idea that the war was not a self-contained event in history, i.e., that it was “won” and then the country moves on. By intentionally connecting events of 150 years ago to the Civil Rights movement of 50 years ago and to ongoing civil rights struggles, the Park Service (NPS) is trying to demonstrate how events in history are connected and how history is relevant to our lives today. These are important, commendable goals. However worthwhile, this approach, if not fully realized, can lead to moving quickly from 1865 to 1965. To do so would be to omit the complex stories and terrible violence of Reconstruction and Jim Crow.

The National Park Service has a Civil War to Civil Rights (CW2CR) initiative. Under this umbrella, there have been a wide range of excellent programs. However, close examination of a thirty-second video produced by the CW2CR initiative reveals the significant downside of this approach. I recognize that this video is one brief program among a whole host of undertakings but still it is important to consider. We see images related to the Civil War and then the Civil Rights struggles, culminating in an image of the new Martin Luther King, Jr., memorial. Here is the script in its entirety:

One hundred fifty years ago America was torn apart by a *bloody* Civil War.
Hundreds of thousands died.
Four million enslaved people were freed and the Union was preserved.

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But the struggle for civil rights, equality, and human dignity continues.
America's national parks tell the story of the Civil War and the Civil Rights
Movement.
The dream endures.
To learn more, visit the NPS website.

The website address is provided as the video fades to black.

So, you might ask, what's wrong with this script? First, use of the passive voice allows for agency to be avoided. Slavery was the principal cause of the war, virtually all scholars agree, but here the nation "was torn apart." By what? By whom? How? Why? Again, the producers employ the passive voice telling us the enslaved "were freed and the Union was preserved." Who was responsible? A benevolent Lincoln? A combination of social forces? And then we skip straight to the Civil Rights movement, so the question could be raised—what exactly is this "struggle" that continues? Even staying within the length of thirty seconds, the producers could have framed this quite differently.

Now when we visit the NPS website focused on the Civil War, there is virtually nothing that addresses Reconstruction. This is a serious omission because the abandonment of Reconstruction, argues the distinguished scholar Eric Foner of Columbia University, was "a disaster not only for black America but also for the national commitment to democracy." This is a crucial moment in American history that NPS should not elide by skipping so quickly from the Civil War to Civil Rights. Further, Foner laments the abysmal state of Reconstruction in public history. Of the National Park Service's hundreds of historical sites, "only the Andrew Johnson Homestead in Tennessee deals centrally with Reconstruction (in what can charitably be called a dated manner)."¹

Foner has been a true friend of public history in general and NPS in particular. After taking Gettysburg National Military Park to task in a *New York Times* op-ed several years ago for not foregrounding slavery as the cause of the war, the superintendent, John Latschar, invited Foner to work with NPS to help get the story right and he agreed to do so. Along with historians Nina Silber and James McPherson, Foner actively worked with NPS staff at Gettysburg in the development of the park's new visitor center where slavery is a prominent part of the narrative. Foner has worked with other NPS sites, including collaboration on projects this author has developed in Boston.

A decade and a half ago, Foner collaborated with NPS Director Bob Stanton (the first and only African American director) and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to seek to create an NPS park dedicated to Reconstruction. Foner recommended at that time and still advocates today for the Sea Islands of South Carolina. In a May 18, 2000, letter to Secretary Babbitt (which he shared with this author), Foner outlined why the islands are an ideal venue. The Sea Islands, Foner maintains, offer numerous advantages for a Reconstruction national park site, starting with their historical importance. Reconstruction began on the islands when Union forces took control at the end of 1861. There followed the Port Royal Experiment in which northern missionaries, army officers, Treasury officials, and the former slaves sought to shape the transition to freedom. The islands are already home to a number of national historic landmarks connected with Reconstruction. Among these is the Robert Smalls house in Beaufort, home of one of the most prominent black leaders of the Reconstruction era.

His life exemplifies many of the broad historical issues connected with emancipation and the politics of Reconstruction. (LuAnn Jones, NPS staff historian, and Bob Sutton, chief historian, recently published *The Life and Legacy of Robert Smalls of South Carolina's Sea Islands*, Eastern National, 2012). There is also the Penn Center Historic District, centered on the Penn School, founded in 1862 by northern missionaries who came to South Carolina to educate the former slaves. There are other significant sites as well. On the Sea Islands, some of the earliest black soldiers were recruited, and the first efforts to distribute land to former slaves were made. During Radical Reconstruction, the Sea Islands became a center of black political power, home to many prominent black politicians. In summary, Foner argues, Reconstruction on the Sea Islands involves all the crucial issues of the era—land, labor, education, politics, and in general the ways Americans white and black alike responded to the destruction of slavery. It is an area, Foner maintains, of pivotal significance in that turbulent era. Further, he asserts, the course of events in the Sea Islands would enable NPS to portray the period as one of considerable immediate and long-term success, not the abject failure so often depicted.

In this author's view, it is an embarrassment that NPS today does not have a single site dedicated to the history of Reconstruction. The Sea Islands initiative was unsuccessful in the early 2000s for a variety of reasons. This would still be the best option but is not the only possibility. It should be possible to take advantage of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, which will run through 2015, and also the sesquicentennial of Reconstruction, ongoing now and which will run through 2027. With the nation's first African American president in his second term, surely this might be a time for the administration to advance this particular agenda. With success, we could be assured that the public history of this nation as embodied in the roster of our national parks is much more complete, however difficult the history of Reconstruction may be for many.

One promising development regarding NPS inclusion of the history of Reconstruction is the work of historians Kate Masur, of Northwestern University, and Greg Downs of City College of New York. They have compiled a list of currently existing NPS sites with potential Reconstruction relevance. The list grew out of a meeting they had with Sutton and Jim Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association. Masur and Downs may advise parks on how they might include and/or enhance their treatment of Reconstruction. There is also the possibility of networking parks with other Reconstruction scholars. In a recent email to this author, Sutton indicated that NPS has just received approval and funds to produce a Reconstruction handbook with Masur and Downs providing assistance regarding topics and authors. Sutton is exploring the possibility of working with these scholars to do webinars related to Reconstruction. Sutton hopes, he related, that a Reconstruction park can be developed.

Can NPS overcome a tendency towards timidity in the face of controversy, a characterization found in the recent excellent report on the state of history in NPS, *Imperiled Promise*? One remarkable example of great courage was the decision by Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in the early 2000s to provide a venue for the wrenchingly powerful exhibition, "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America." According to the historian Ed Linenthal of Indiana University, after curators failed to find a home among any of Atlanta's cultural sites, the superintendent of the King site agreed to host the exhibition, which attract-

ed more than 150,000 visitors. Linenthal has suggested at different times that NPS might explore the addition to the national park system of a site where a lynching took place. This would require extraordinary institutional courage and, even if NPS were willing, locating such a site with sufficient integrity to convey a meaningful story might be difficult. Another avenue NPS could explore involves the identification, preservation, and interpretation of the material legacy of Jim Crow segregation and even that of white groups that practiced violence. In his extensive essay, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation,” historian Robert Weyeneth examines what has been done and the possibilities as well as evaluating problems such as the disappearance of much of this material culture or its invisibility, given that it can be difficult to recognize even when it is still extant.²

Of course, the hosting of “Without Sanctuary” is not the only example of a willingness in NPS to challenge timidity. There have been many excellent programs both inside NPS and outside during the marking of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Kevin Levin and Megan Kate Nelson write in their introduction to an online collection of essays, “The Civil War at 150—Memory and Meaning”: “As Americans have marked the Civil War’s sesquicentennial over the past few years, the cultural impact of the civil rights movement on the dominant narrative has been clear. The anniversary’s events have emphasized the story of slavery, emancipation, the service of black Union soldiers to the war effort, and to the cause of freedom.”³ This stands in sharp contrast to the centennial commemoration of the Civil War fifty years ago, marked by battle reenactments and exhibits presenting a narrative of a gallant struggle

Figure 1. Danny Glover and Fedna Jacquet in the historical pageant “Roots of Liberty: The Haitian Revolution and the American Civil War,” presented in Boston on May 4, 2013. Photo by A.R. Sinclair Photography. The pageant, which was co-organized by NPS, traced the influence of the Haitian Revolution on black and white abolitionists and black Union troops in the Civil War.



fought by two equally determined and legitimate armies. Robert Cook's recently published book, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965*, addresses this issue in depth.

However, the arc of public history, like that of history in general, does not move in a positive, progressive direction only. At any moment in time, public history can be contested and, without vigilance, the gains of one generation can be lost. At the start of NPS efforts to commemorate the Civil War sesquicentennial, there was a very contentious process to produce a vision statement. Initially, the NPS vision statement omitted any mention of slavery. If that had remained the case, once this would have become widely known it would have set NPS back decades. This is documented by Timothy Good in the pages of *The George Wright Forum*.⁴ Good employs this case study convincingly to make a case for some of the recommendations included in the report *Imperiled Promise*. A thorough examination of this controversy by someone outside NPS would be a welcome addition to the literature of public history. There is much that Good did not examine in his brief account.

So, we need to be extremely careful when employing the slogan “From Civil War to Civil Rights.” And we need to ensure that the crucial historical period of Reconstruction is foregrounded within NPS. We can only hope that this omission from the national park system can be addressed, perhaps in 2016 to help mark the centennial of the agency, but certainly long before another generation of public historians prepares for the bicentennial of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Endnotes

1. Eric Foner, review of Douglas Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction—The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 2, 2014.
2. Ed Linenthal, “The National Park Service and Civic Engagement,” *The George Wright Forum*, volume 25, number 1, 2008, pp. 5–11; Robert Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian*, volume 27, number 4, fall 2005, pp. 11–44.
3. Online at www.common-place.org, volume 14, number 2, winter 2014.
4. Timothy Good, “The Need for Intellectual Courage, the History Leadership Council, and the History Advisory Board,” *The George Wright Forum*, volume 29, number 2, 2012, pp. 268–271.

Marty Blatt is chief of cultural resources/historian at Boston National Historical Park and Boston African American National Historic Site. He was the principal organizer for NPS of the 2013 historical pageant in Boston, “Roots of Liberty—The Haitian Revolution and the American Civil War,” which commemorated the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. For the video, go to www.freedomrising2013.com/Videos.html. He is co-editor of *Hope & Glory—Essays on the Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment*.