



*Letter from Woodstock*  
Rolf Diamant

## Virtues of Good Government

THERE IS A 13TH-CENTURY BRICK TOWN HALL in the Italian city of Siena known as the *Palazzo Pubblico*. When it was built, the artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti was commissioned to paint a series of interior frescos depicting the “virtues of good government.” An expert on the frescos, the art historian Randolph Starn, has written that the pictures convey “the impression of people acting as good citizens should—freely, on their own, but also for the community’s needs.”<sup>1</sup> The wall-sized fresco named *Virtues of Good Government* is anchored by one titled the *Court of the Common Good* with allegorical representations of *Peace*, *Fortitude*, *Magnanimity*, and *Justice*. On the wall opposite Lorenzetti’s *Virtues* fresco the artist painted another, darker one, an alternative universe ruled by *Avarice*, *Pride*, and *Vainglory*—a reminder of what happens when the virtues of good government are abandoned.

I was reminded of these frescos on a recent blustery April day when I joined a small group of US and Canadian parks people on a field trip to Fort Monroe National Monument in Virginia. We were all attending the 2017 George Wright Society (GWS) Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites in nearby Norfolk. A few years ago I had written an essay about Fort Monroe for the Vermont Humanities Council’s *Civil War Book of Days*.<sup>2</sup> In the essay I recounted the story of Frank Baker, Sheppard Mallory, and James Townsend,

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*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 6–11 (2017).

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**Above:** *Palazzo Pubblico*, Siena (author's photograph). **Right:** Details of Lorenzetti's fresco *Virtues of Good Government*. (Top) Justice is sovereign over a healthy and bountiful landscape of civic virtue. (Bottom) In the countryside of fear, desolation, and destruction, Fear holds aloft a banner that begins: "Because each seeks only his own good...." Reproduced with permission from Starn 1994.

a trio of enslaved men who, on May 23, 1861, made a nighttime crossing of the James River in a small rowboat headed for the presumed sanctuary of Fort Monroe—still flying the flag of the United States. At the beginning of the Civil War, army garrisons were refusing refuge to fugitive slaves, or worse, arresting them and returning them to bondage under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act (which in 1861 was still on the books). After Virginia ratified an ordinance of secession, Baker, Mallory, and Townsend, who had been put to work digging rebel artillery emplacements across the James River facing the fort, planned their escape. When the three fugitives made landfall near the walls of Fort Monroe, to their good fortune they were met by a sentry from the 1st Vermont Regiment, commanded by an abolitionist, Colonel John Wolcott Phelps. Rather than being turned back, the men were escorted to the fort's commander, Major General Benjamin Butler.



CONTRABAND OF WAR.

*Contraband of War*, an illustration from Major General Benjamin F. Butler's autobiography, depicts his 1861 decision to declare fugitive slaves contraband, which led to their freedom (Library of Congress).

Butler pronounced Baker, Mallory, and Townsend to be “contraband of war” and on the following day turned down an appeal from a Confederate officer pressing for their return to slavery. Butler pointed out to the rebel officer that he could not make war on the United States and still seek redress under its laws. Word of Butler’s policy (soon to be backed up by Congress with the passage of the Confiscation Acts) rapidly spread through Tidewater Virginia and beyond, and within weeks a steady stream of fugitive slaves were arriving at the gates of Fort Monroe—thereafter known as “Freedom’s Fortress.”

When our GWS group arrived at the fort’s impressive moat, we were met by a sentry of the National Park Service (NPS), park ranger Aaron Firth. Firth guided us through the complex of buildings, casements, and landscapes now jointly managed by NPS and the Commonwealth of Virginia. The centrality of this national monument to the story of American freedom, Ranger Firth explained, cannot be understated. The actions taken at Fort Monroe on that spring day in 1861 transformed the fort into the symbolic keystone for a succession of anti-slavery measures that would eventually culminate in President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment.

Fort Monroe, like many of the other recently established national monuments, such as Birmingham Civil Rights, Stonewall, and Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality, enrich the national park system in ways that make it more representative and meaningful for all people, not just Americans. A member of our GWS tour group, Kevin McNamee, director of protected areas establishment for Parks Canada, observed that the US park system, unlike his own, has this larger purpose.

Trying to achieve this has been, of course, a long, often controversial road. An example is Reconstruction Era National Monument in Beaufort County, South Carolina, one of President Obama's last proclamations under the Antiquities Act. I was never sure I'd see the day when an NPS site would be dedicated to interpreting the history of this popularly maligned and broadly misunderstood period. Greg Downs, a historian at the University of California at Davis and co-author (with Northwestern University historian Kate Masur) of the recently published NPS Reconstruction Era handbook,<sup>3</sup> declared the monument proclamation to be "a long overdue moment, and one of the most significant expansions of the National Park Service since its founding."<sup>4</sup> Described by Downs "as America's first great experiment in bi-racial democracy," the era of Reconstruction, long a political "third rail" for NPS, will finally receive the recognition it merits.<sup>5</sup>

As this 16th *Letter from Woodstock* is being written, an executive order was issued that directs the Department of the Interior to review twenty-one years of national monument designations and suggest legislative changes or modifications (likely reductions) to their boundaries. With similar intent, a bill (S. 437) has been introduced into Congress by Senator Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, with 26 co-sponsors, disingenuously called the "Improved National Monument Designation Process Act." The proposed legislation would, in effect, drive a stake through the heart of the 1906 Antiquities Act. Had the various "improvements" in S. 437 been in effect in earlier times, they would impeded or blocked many national parks that began as monuments, including Grand Canyon, Zion, Olympic, and Grand Teton, as well as more than 100 other national monuments, from being added to the national park system. In an op-ed published in the *New York Times*, law school professors John D. Lesly and Mark Squillace argue that the Antiquities Act has done "more than any other to shape our nation's conservation legacy" and that Congress should not change "a single word of what has been, by practically every measure, one of the most fruitful and farsighted laws it has ever put on the books."<sup>6</sup>

It turned out that our guide around Fort Monroe, Ranger Firth, represented exactly one-half of the national monument's staff—that's right, *two* people are overseeing a growing national park toured by more than 100,000 visitors last year. The superintendent's position was vacant due to a hiring freeze and on that day Ranger Firth was acting superintendent and everything else on down. All of the recent additions to the national park system are understaffed and underfunded; and, for that matter, nearly all national parks and NPS programs are confronting a steady attrition of employees and resources.

One consequence has been a growing trend in consolidation, particularly the merging of smaller parks' staff with those of larger parks. This trend has received little attention or comment, but the impact of consolidation is becoming clearer with time. Increasingly, parks are losing staff dedicated to their unique missions and resources. No one would argue about the efficacy and efficiency of sharing certain specialists; after all, that is what a "system" should be able to do. However, there will come a time, if it is not here already, when this consolidation stretches an ever-shrinking workforce to the point where staff can no longer sustain the key personal relationships and local knowledge necessary to be effective stewards and advocates for all they are responsible for.



This growing detachment is being further exacerbated as travel budgets are slashed and participation in scholarly and scientific conferences suppressed. Almost 80% of the park professionals on the original NPS attendance list for the 2017 George Wright Society Conference were ultimately prevented from attending. If this enforced isolation is sanctioned and promulgated, it will inevitably diminish NPS's ability to deliver a world-class park system and remain a leader in park management practices, scholarship, and science.

Staffing shortfalls have no end in sight. An Office of Management and Budget (OMB) directive lays out workforce reductions and cost savings that extend far into the future. At some point there is an obvious ironic futility in telling dedicated people like Ranger Firth to “do more with less.” As *New York Times* columnist Eduardo Porter warned, proposed cuts to domestic, discretionary spending will leave our government as “little more than a heavily armed pension plan with a health insurer on the side.” The OMB directive also calls for a massive reorganization exercise, intended to off-load or privatize a broad array of public services — a potential recipe for paralysis, dysfunction, and demoralization. If this comes to pass, the outlook will be bleak, not only for good government, but really, for any kind of government.

And yet, despite everything, as we walked through Fort Monroe there were indications of progress, like the irrepressible emergence of spring. Signs are going up, a fine interpretive brochure is available, there are excellent new exhibit panels installed in a shared museum space, and several significant historic preservation projects are underway. I have often written about the power of a functional park system and its partners. Fort Monroe has received support and assistance from NPS's Northeast Regional Office; Denver Service Center; Chesapeake Bay Program Office; Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation; the Historic Architecture, Conservation & Engineering Center; and sister parks. Similarly, at Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in Maine, the new park's principal partner, Ellitsville Plantation, Inc., has stepped in to provide critical support, enabling an extraordinarily quick start-up. However, the determination, professionalism, and resiliency of the system and its partners can only be only stretched so far.

At the conclusion of our Fort Monroe tour we strolled the periphery of the parade ground under a marvelous canopy of live oak trees. Most of the trees are hundreds of years

Sign explaining historic preservation work, Fort Monroe National Monument (author's photograph).





A “witness tree” at Fort Monroe National Monument (photograph courtesy of Nora Mitchell).

old. Ranger Firth refers to them as “witness trees”—they were standing when Baker, Mallory, and Townsend first walked through the gates of the fort. I expect these old oaks may yet bear witness to a better future for the national parks and the government service charged with their care, and that eventually the *virtues of good government* envisioned by Ambrogio Lorenzetti many centuries ago may prevail once again in our time.

*Rolf Diamant*

## Endnotes

1. Randolph Starn, *Ambrogio Lorenzetti, The Palazzo Pubblico, Siena* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).
2. Vermont Humanities Council, “‘Only a Question of Time’—The First Confiscation Act,” *Civil War Book of Days* 2:33 (August 5, 2011). Online at <https://civilwarbookof-days.org/2011/08/05/only-a-question-of-time-the-first-confiscation-act/>.
3. National Park Service, *The Reconstruction Era: Official National Park Service Handbook*, Robert K. Sutton and John A. Latschar, eds. (Washington, DC: NPS, 2016).
4. Jennifer Schuessler, “President Obama Designates First National Monument Dedicated to Reconstruction,” *The New York Times* (January 12, 2017). Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/12/arts/president-obama-designates-national-monuments-to-civil-rights-history.html>.
5. See Dwight Pitcaithley and Rolf Diamant, “Civil War to Civil Rights,” in *A Thinking Person’s Guide to America’s National Parks*, Robert Manning, Rolf Diamant, Nora Mitchell, and David Harmon, eds. (New York: George Braziller, 2016).
6. John D. Leshy and Mark Squillace, “The Endangered Antiquities Act,” *The New York Times* (March 31, 2017). Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-endangered-antiquities-act.html>.