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Commemoration, Past and Present: An Interview with Emmanuel Dabney in Three Parts, Part Three

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Abstract

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Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Petersburg, United States Colored Troops, USCT, Battle of the Crater

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Commemoration, Past and Present: An Interview with Emmanuel Dabney in Three Parts, Part Three

April 23, 2014

By: Val Merlina, '14

Emmanuel Dabney, one of the Civil War Institute Summer Conference speakers, is a park ranger at Petersburg National Battlefield. At the Summer Conference, "The War in 1864," he will give a lecture titled, "Catching Us Like Sheep in a Slaughter Pen": The United States Colored Troops at the Battle of the Crater. In anticipation of the Institute, Emmanuel Dabney answered questions on interpretation, Petersburg, and the future of the Civil War. This is the final installment in a three part series.



What NPS events is Petersburg planning for the 150th Anniversary of the Siege?

Petersburg National Battlefield is planning for a series of events and unlike other battlefield sites, we had the troops deployed for 9 1/2 months instead of just a few days. With our friends at Richmond National Battlefield and Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park we will commemorate the 1864 Overland Campaign and for Petersburg the 1864-1865 campaign to capture this city. The programming will involve each park adopting "sister communities," North and South, and send park staff to those communities to link their history to that of our battlefields. The programs will occur on Memorial Day weekend with community outreach programs. Our park will send staff to a Native American community in Wisconsin; Wilmington, North Carolina; Bangor, Maine; and Camp Nelson, Kentucky.

In addition to the traveling park staff, additional staff will remain behind at Petersburg to partner with the City of Petersburg in an evening program at Blandford Cemetery, the location of approximately 30,000 Confederate soldiers and three Confederate generals. We will partner with the Department of Veteran Affairs at the City Point National Cemetery, where there are approximately 6,800 soldiers, most of whom died in one of the four military

hospitals at City Point in 1864-1865. Finally, we will organize a program at Poplar Grove National Cemetery, which Petersburg National Battlefield administers and is the resting place of over 6,100 soldiers who died on battlefields around the Petersburg region as well as during the retreat to Appomattox and even Federal prisoners of war who died in Lynchburg some 125 miles west of Petersburg.

The park is also extremely busy planning commemorative events for the battles. For 2014, these will include June 14 -15 and June 18 to commemorate the initial assaults. A series of living history programs, ranger guided walks, artillery demonstrations and a bus tour all covering the opening actions of the Siege of Petersburg. July 30 is the 150th anniversary of the battle of the Crater and we are having a commemorative program take place at the time of the explosion and ranger tours will be conducted in the morning and afternoon. On August 1 we will have a one day symposium to take place in the morning from 10-12 pm at Gillfield Baptist Church, 209 Perry Street, Petersburg. The morning panel will feature presentations about the Battle of the Crater and our speakers are Hari Jones of the [African American Civil War Memorial & Museum](#) in Washington, D.C., Ranger Tracy Chernault, and Dr. Christopher Stowe, an associate professor of history, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. The afternoon panel will take place from 1:00-3:00 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church and will feature Heidi Campbell-Shoaf, Museum Director/Chief Curator at National Society Daughters of the American Revolution who will speak about the lives of Petersburg residents with special attention to how they coped with the Petersburg Campaign in 1864-1865 and I will give a presentation about how Petersburg's large black population, free and enslaved, coped with the Civil War.

August will be a busy month as we continue our Crater commemorative event on August 2 back on the battlefield with living historians representing the soldiers, artillery firings, and ranger guided tours. The weekend of August 8-10 we will have a program to highlight the role of the Union supply depot at City Point as well as General Grant's position as general-in-chief. We will have a lecture on Friday evening, living historians representing Union soldiers, Confederate prisoners, and civilian relief agencies and individuals on Saturday and Sunday. In addition, visitors will be able to join tours related to military justice, the 150th anniversary of the Wharf Explosion on August 9, and the Eppes family's plantation which allows people to see how a large scale plantation began, reached its peak, slavery collapsed, and how the post-war changes impacted people on a micro level. Our final August program will be on the weekend of the 23rd-24th when we examine the battles of Weldon Railroad & Reams Station with rangers and living historians. Stops along these two battlefields will provide insight to Gen. Grant's Fourth Offensive of the siege and the impact it had on the struggle over Petersburg's fate.

Our last battle commemorative event will happen on the weekend of September 27-28, 2014 for the 150th anniversary of the battle of Peebles' Farm. We will have rangers and living

historians at stops for formal tours and demonstrations on the Grant's Fifth offensive of the siege. We will be partnering with our colleagues at Richmond National Battlefield for this event as historically, events were occurring outside Richmond nearly simultaneously to the Peebles' Farm battle.

Then there is 2015! In March we will be commemorating the Battle of Fort Stedman and the Picket Line Assault (which took place March 25, 1865), Abraham Lincoln's 1865 visit to the front, the battles of Five Forks (which happened on April 1, 1865), the final battles on April 2, including the Battle of Fort Gregg (which the NPS owns) and the Federal occupation of Petersburg which happened on April 3. Planning for these events are still developing as we first face the 1864 events.

This does not account for all the other programs going on that are not directly tied to battles. Anyone interested in the event calendar for the park should look [here](#). People can also refer to the park's [Twitter](#) account and the park's [Facebook](#) page. There is still also the good, old fashioned telephone and the park's number is 804-732-3531 ext. 200.

What does historical interpretation mean to you?

Since I have explained so much ahead, I will simply say: Historical interpretation is an art form used to open doors for visitors, interpreters, and authors so they can investigate the past using a variety of techniques to create bridges between the past and present.

Where is the future of historical interpretation, and how do we make it relevant and inclusive for diverse groups, and the next generation?

It is difficult to say what the future of historical interpretation will be. Technological changes are so rapid that the research I saved on my USB drive in 2009 may be inaccessible through that medium by 2020. I hope I am at least warned before so I can transfer files to whatever the new medium of saving information is by then.

I think one of the challenges for the present and indeed for the future is that theories about interpretation, while useful, do not substitute for DOING it. Historical research is a critical element of putting together a program. New media (whatever it will be in the future) will not satisfy experience. I am definitely a product of the college students who lived for and still use Facebook; though, I only view some of the other new media instead of participating in it. Still, visitors to historic sites come for many reasons. For many, that reason is to understand a past that did look different than our present (and I'm using present here even as someone who may live in 2084). Can you substitute Abraham Lincoln's sofa at the Abraham Lincoln National Historic Site with a holographic image of one? Yes; but, why? Can you discuss the assault on the Slaughter Pen at Fredericksburg on YouTube? Yes; but when you are there in person you will be able to walk that land and feel the rises and depressions that cannot be seen other than through your individual experience. In short, media (old or new) should be

used to enhance experiences not substitute for tactile interactions with the places where events happened and with other people.

Thank you to Emmanuel Dabney for answering student questions in anticipation of the 2014 Civil War Institute Summer Conference. We look forward to his participation in this year's Summer CWI Conference, "The War in 1864."

This year's Institute will take place from June 20-25, 2014. Registration can be done by following this link: <http://www.gettysburg.edu/cwi/conference/> See you there!