



8-18-2011

## Realistic Goals for Civil War Interpretation: What Are They Supposed to Walk Away With?

John M. Rudy  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Rudy, John M., "Realistic Goals for Civil War Interpretation: What Are They Supposed to Walk Away With?" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 184.  
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/184>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Realistic Goals for Civil War Interpretation: What Are They Supposed to Walk Away With?

## Abstract

Before you can begin any task, to some extent, you need to have some target in mind. Even if that target is hazy and indistinct, you need to aim that arrow somewhere before you let the bowstring fly.

So, what is the target that Civil War interpretation aims for? I go on programs and walks with interpreters when I'm out visiting Civil War sites. I love tours.*[excerpt]*

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Beyond the Battle, Interp Theory, Knowledge of the Spoon

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

## Comments

*Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

## Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

[www.civilwarconnect.com](http://www.civilwarconnect.com)



## Realistic Goals for Civil War Interpretation: What Are They Supposed to Walk Away With?

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 18, 2011**

I was tempted to title this post, "Are we not men? We are DEVO!" but I wasn't sure the reference would read right off the bat...



What exactly did these visitors walk away remembering?

Before you can begin any task, to some extent, you need to have some target in mind. Even if that target is hazy and indistinct, you need to aim that arrow somewhere before you let the bowstring fly.

So, what is the target that Civil War interpretation aims for? I go on programs and walks with interpreters when I'm out visiting Civil War sites. I love tours.

When I'm on a battlefield, I often witness a deep passion from the interpreter that the detailed actions of the battle are paramount. Their voices usually perk up at the nuts and bolts of battle movements and intricacies of where regiments stood, how many volleys they fired and the mechanics of war. You can't fault this personal passion, but passion alone does not simply catch like a virus. Meanings need to be facilitated, not donated to the visitor.

I went on a personal tour of a western battlefield one time with a deeply dedicated and knowledgeable historian. For two hours, he scrutinized the field as the sun waned, showing me places and describing every intricate detail of the battle occurred. I can't, for the life of me, remember a single bit of the battle action he described as he argued with the air. He held a discussion with every leading historian *in absentia* on the failures of their understanding of the battle. Still, I can't remember a detail of it. Not a one. I was very appreciative of the time he spent, but it was a wet towel to my appreciation of the battle landscape. That field means nothing more to me now than it did before that tour. I was never given an opportunity to explore what that place might mean to me. The goal seemed, regardless of the visitor's interests, to be imparting knowledge of tactics.

When I've visited house museums, the interpreter's passion usually rises at the mention of spoons or double-hung window sashes. And here, too, you cannot fault someone for what they personally care about. The intricacies of Victorian table manners, the strictures of 19th-century lifeways and the complexities of ornamental decoration over a fireplace often become the most talked about subject on a tour of a home. Jacob has a great story of a house museum which bucks this trend coming up soon, but in general it's all been about spoons when I've walked into a dining room of an historic home, and little about the conversations that happened over that table. The goal seems, regardless of the visitor's interests, to be imparting knowledge of the spoon.

All of this begs the question: what is history? I think every historian at some point in their career needs to wrestle with this one. If you've never done so, then you risk wandering through the profession with no bearings. So, what is it?

To me, history's definition is short and sweet:

History is **ideas** put into **action** by **men** on a **landscape**.

These four key elements all are present in any historical event. Take Seneca Falls in 1848: a Declaration of Sentiments for **equality** was **signed** by 68 **women** and 32 **men** in the **Wesleyan Chapel**. Or take Utah Beach in 1944: an **assault** on **Fortress Europe** by **average men** to topple the oppressive Nazi regime and ensure **freedom** in Europe. Whether the action is a grand military expedition or the flick of a pen on paper, mankind acting out ideas and ideals on a landscape encapsulates history in my mind.

But the passion for tactics or the passion for the spoon fails this test quite handily. Spoons or molding or curtains alone have no people and no ideas, and thereby little relevance. Tactics taken alone have no ideas and only faceless, shapeless groups of bodies, and thereby little relevance.

So what is our goal in a Civil War era landscape? Is it to impart a raw fact dump? If so, then tactics and spoons are fine. But ask a visitor after a tour of Antietam what happened and they'll give you broad tactical strokes where you gave them minute detail. Ask them what they remember most after a program and I'll guarantee 9 times out of 10 that it's not the intricacies of tactics. People don't care about the 20th Maine at Gettysburg because they swung like a gate, with a pivot off of the colors at the regiment's center (a textbook military maneuver).

No. They care about that spot because **an academic, an aloof professor of rhetoric**, against what we might expect from a college professor, **ordered his men to charge** down the **slope of Little Round Top**, helping to ensure United States victory at Gettysburg and thereby **a nation preserved** and **freedom for 4 million in bondage**.

The tactic is only the context. The story and route to broad relevance lives within the man and the ideas / ideals his actions embodied.



Who marched across this landscape?  
Men or Armies?

In the end the question is simple: do we want the American public to know about these places or understand them? Knowing is being able to repeat rote fact. It is memorization of faceless facts and figures, the recitation of lists of dead white men in specific orders, the rattling off of cold and motionless dates. In short, knowing is the reason why every student in high school who hates history hates it.

Understanding is feeling and processing the place, the ground and the men who acted there, then caring about that place for your own personal reason. Certainly, tactical discussion is important, but its primary function is as a framework inside of which the men of a battlefield lived. The experiences of those men are what resonate with a modern visitor. Don't believe me? Just ask a fellow visitor what moved them most after you attend a program.

We often hear admonitions to sprinkle in human interest stories into programs and interpretive

products. But this is, IMHO, the wrong impulse. Tactics are what should be sprinkled in; the core is human interest, where the personal relevance of the American audience is to be found.

[Jake quoted](#) a great piece of Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* recently, which works as an excellent coda here:

The battlefield of our great fratricidal American war is not merely a place of strategy and tactics: not a place where regiments moved this way and that like checkers on a board; not merely a spot where something was decided that would lead to another decision. It is a place of the thoughts and acts of men, of their ideals and memories... a place of people, not armies.