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"And preachin' from my chair": The Historian and the Interpreter

Jacob Dinkelaker
National Park Service

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Abstract

I've been thinking lately of titles. The new blog *Emerging Civil War's* inaugural post touched off a powder-keg of thought for me. Looking down [the list of contributors](#) yields name after name listed as "historian at...." But most of those folks appear to have the [official job title](#) of "park ranger," "interpreter," or "visitor use assistant," and not "historian." This got the wheels in my head turning. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory

Disciplines

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

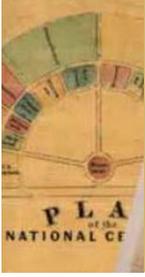
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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical 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."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



"And preachin' from my chair": The Historian and the Interpreter

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2011

I've been thinking lately of titles. The new blog *Emerging Civil War's* inaugural post touched off a powder-keg of thought for me. Looking down [the list of contributors](#) yields name after name listed as "historian at..." But most of those folks appear to have the [official job title](#) of "park ranger," "interpreter," or "visitor use assistant," and not "historian." This got the wheels in my head turning.

What we choose to call ourselves is sometimes as important as the work we do. For those who 'do history' on Civil War battlefields, we have two distinct options. The best place to find how someone views themselves is right in their e-mail signature, but sometimes it's in the bio they put on their blog.

Some fashion themselves as historians first and foremost, imparting the historical truth to their audience. They persuade and argue a thesis for their audiences, acting as the professor in walking lectures with distinct points to prove.

Others see themselves as interpreters first and foremost, offering opportunities for visitors to connect with a site's meanings, to find meanings that the member of the audience find personally relevant. They offer multiple perspectives and a variety of viewpoints, acting as a facilitator, orchestrating a conversation between the resource and the visitor with no thesis to argue.



A historian emeritus from Princeton on a battlefield...



What does it all mean? Who am I to say?

Historians persuade; Interpreters reveal.

There is nothing inherently wrong with persuasive argument. But often historians on battle landscapes craft grand arguments with very specific theses. The historians dictate the conclusions and demand acquiescence to those conclusion by laying out every point of their argument to support their theses. They argue a point. There is what could be called a dictatorship of thought.

On the flip side of that coin, interpreters leave conclusions to their audience, offering multiple perspectives on an event and moral ambiguity. No one ends up having been right or wrong. This past summer, I've been running discussion-based

experimental programs on John Brown. In the end, when the visitors step out of the engine house, I don't care what they think about John Brown. Some walk out loving him, thinking him a saint. Others walk out thinking him a terrorist and the devil incarnate. There is no right and wrong conclusion, only the visitor's conclusion. If they walk out thinking something, anything about John Brown, I've done my job. Think of it as a democracy of historical thought.

Take a look at the top of the blog. Go on... scroll up there. I'll wait. There's a very distinct reason we chose that title. "Interpreting the Civil War."

Yes, we'll argue historical points vehemently here in our own backyard, because to some extent we're hashing out our own personal meanings of these places. You have to care about something personally before you can help others find why *they* care about it too. But when we head out into the sacred spaces that America has set aside for itself, there is no right and wrong. There is muddy chaos, moral ambiguity and the visitor's conclusion. There are no theses. There are no right answers or acceptable opinions.

There is only the visitor and their personal appreciations of the places we hold dear.