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Making the Most of Interpretative Tours at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park

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Making the Most of Interpretative Tours at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park

Abstract

Freeman Tilden argues that the purpose of good interpretation is to inspire people to want to discover and learn for themselves in order to gain an understanding and appreciation for what they see. After having experienced the challenges of interpreting the battlefields at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, I agree that provocation is important to good interpretation.

Keywords

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Interpretation, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Making the Most of Interpretative Tours at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park

By Julia Deros '17

Freeman Tilden argues that the purpose of good interpretation is to inspire people to want to discover and learn for themselves in order to gain an understanding and appreciation for what they see. After having experienced the challenges of interpreting the battlefields at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, I agree that provocation is important to good interpretation.



The greatest challenge to provoking visitors is finding a way to connect what they see and learn at the battlefield to a wide variety of people in a short amount of time. At the Fredericksburg Battlefield, I do one or two 35-minute tours a day. This is a short

amount of time to share what I know about the Battle of Fredericksburg and why it is significant. Every visitor who comes to Fredericksburg has their own personal interest in some aspect of the battlefield. Often, the 35-minute tour is how they first try to connect to these interests.

When I first started giving the Sunken Road Walking tour, I found this time limit to be very restrictive. I noticed that I would try to give a lot of different types of information to the visitors and try to appeal to everyone. I would give details on the terrain and ground they currently stood on, detailed quotes from the men who fought there, and try to incorporate more tactical details. I quickly noticed that in trying to appeal to everyone's interest at once, I tended to lose visitors in the slew of information. So I stopped trying to appeal to what I believed they wanted to know. I started interpreting the battle how I came to understand it and be passionate about it myself. I started to ask them to question themselves and what they understood about the battlefield.

Many visitors did begin to question what they learned about the battle. For example, one family asked how the soldiers could march across the fields before Marye's Heights on December 13, 1862, while facing staggering casualties. That one question led to a discussion where we questioned why soldiers fought in the Civil War in general and reasons the war was fought to begin with. This one discussion shows how despite the challenge of having a limited time to interact with visitors, provocation creates the opportunity to overcome that. Provoking a visitor to seek out answers encourages them to welcome further interaction with the interpreters and the park itself. It provides more reasons for visitors to engage other materials such as our interpretive films, exhibits, or research materials available to them. An example of this occurred after my first tour at the Wilderness Battlefield. I had only two visitors on my tour which allowed me to personally interact with them during the tour, answering their questions as I explained the fighting at Saunders' Field. After the tour, they were excited enough about what I had explained that they wanted to know more. They stayed afterwards to go through maps of the battlefield and to learn more about the regiments I had talked about as well as start personal research on their ancestry.



Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park focuses on interpersonal interpretation. They focus on the ability of their historians to personally connect the visitors to the battlefields using their own passions and connections. My experiences have shown that this is a great way to provoke visitors because it shows how good interpretation does not stop with the park interpreters. Good interpretation provokes visitors to become interpreters themselves.