



8-18-2017

Choosing Your Battles: Provoking the Public at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park

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Currier, Abby M., "Choosing Your Battles: Provoking the Public at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park" (2017).
The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History. 216.
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Abstract

During training to be an intern at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, our instructors continuously stressed the importance of reading our audience. Whether we were greeting visitors at the front desk or leading walking tours, our job was to always watch the visitors and gauge what they are interested in. For me, this was initially very frustrating. I prefer to deal with concrete things instead of making judgement calls. It all sounded pretty wishy washy and that I would somehow 'know' what the visitor wanted just by looking at them. Needless to say, I was not convinced.

Keywords

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Interpretation, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Choosing Your Battles: Provoking the Public at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park

By Abby Currier '17

During training to be an intern at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, our instructors continuously stressed the importance of reading our audience. Whether we were greeting visitors at the front desk or leading walking tours, our job was to always watch the visitors and gauge what they are interested in. For me, this was initially very frustrating. I prefer to deal with concrete things instead of making judgement calls. It all sounded pretty wishy washy and that I would somehow 'know' what the visitor wanted just by looking at them. Needless to say, I was not convinced.



However, after a couple of days working out at Chancellorsville, I started to see subtle differences in the visitors that came through our front doors. Some visitors walked right in, confident of themselves and knowing exactly what kind of information they needed. Others walked in kind of sheepishly, just wanting to know what services we offered. And still others came in and tried to slide past the front desk, not really interested in talking

with us. Each of these visitors wanted a certain type of experience and it was up to me to figure out what they needed and then to do my best to fulfill those needs. This was the intuition that we had been told of during training and I was surprised at how quickly I was able to grasp it.

Part of the intuition that we were supposed to develop was also to determine how to handle controversial topics. The Civil War is still a contentious issue and it is heavily debated even to this day. For that reason, our trainers wanted to make sure that we were prepared to hear and experience different viewpoints and to know how and when to disagree with them. All Pohanka interns are familiar with the 'Lost Cause' and are aware that when we put on our uniforms and go to our various sites, we will undoubtedly interact with some people who embrace it. There was one visitor that walked into our visitor center and proudly proclaimed that he did not believe that the American Civil War should go by the name Civil War. Instead, he had a different name for it and called it the war between the 'true Americans' and the 'Yankees'. Clearly, he was referring to the South, which deliberately seceded to remove itself from United States of America, as being 'true Americans'. Given how proudly and boldly he stated this 'fact', I determined that it was not worth engaging with him. This visitor was not interested in learning or debating his viewpoints. Instead, he was only looking for an audience to whom he could give his speech. This is one of the main problems with provocation; you cannot always provoke people to see something different. And, any attempts to do so when the visitor clearly does not want to discuss their ideas usually ends in failure. As representatives of the federal government, we are not supposed to outwardly argue with the visitor or share our personal opinions. We are allowed to have debates but they should always remain professional. When a visitor clearly does not want to engage, then it is often best to just let them be.

However, they are the minority of the cases that we see and there are plenty of times where we can appropriately provoke our visitors. I had another woman that came into the visitor center and we started chatting about the Civil War. She was doing familial research and had an ancestor that fought for the Confederacy. During the course of our discussion, she mentioned to me that she had been told that the war was more about the economics of buying and selling goods, and really had nothing to do with slavery. Internally, my initial reaction was that the war was about the buying and owning of human beings, but I knew that that was not an appropriate response. After my interaction with the 'true Americans' man, I was hesitant to push any other visitors and offer alternative view points, but this woman seemed open to discussion and so we discussed it briefly. I told her that there were a number of causes for the war but that plenty of historians argued that one of the main reasons was slavery and the future that it would hold in the republic. She accepted my response and we continued our discussion. When people are willing to listen and hear other viewpoints, even if they are not going to agree with them, that is when provocation can be used effectively. In cases where people are already set in their beliefs and are uninterested in other views, those visitors are looking to be challenged and to get into a fight rather than engage in an exchange of ideas. As an intern at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, one of the main challenges that I have seen is reading visitors when they come in and knowing when and

how provocation can be used most effectively. At our park, we want every single visitor that comes in to be able to learn something and engage with us. However, in order to teach and exchange ideas, that visitor has to be willing to participate in the exchange and there are a few who are just not willing to do that.