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The Future of Civil War History

Abstract

In March 2013, hundreds of academics, preservationists, consultants, historical interpreters, museum professionals, living historians, students, K-12 teachers, and new media specialists gathered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to assess the state and potential future of the study of the American Civil War. The essays in this special issue build on the themes of that conference: embracing the democratic and civic potential of historical thinking; reaffirming the power of place and the importance of specific, focused stories; integrating military, political, social, cultural, and gender history; and encouraging collaboration among historians working in different settings. Our three guest editors offer their own thoughts about the state and potential future of Civil War history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

gettysburg, civil war sesquicentennial, public history, american civil war

Disciplines

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The Future of Civil War History

James J. Broomall, Peter S. Carmichael, and Jill Ogline Titus

In March 2013, the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College partnered with Gettysburg National Military Park and the Gettysburg Foundation to host a special 150th anniversary conference, “The Future of Civil War History: Looking beyond the 150th.” The program drew approximately 450 attendees from all corners of the historical profession, as well as students and members of the general public. Making use of a highly conversational format, the conference devoted itself to exploring new ways the historical community can make the Civil War past more engaging, more accessible, and more usable to public audiences as we look beyond the 150th commemorations and to the future of Civil War history. Built around a wide variety of panels, presentations, working groups, and field experiences, “The Future of Civil War History” included small-group conversations on topics such as internationalizing our understanding of the Civil War; exploring the veteran experience; interpreting slavery and contraband history at Civil War sites; teaching the Civil War; battle tactics; sensory history; and gaming the war. Lively conversations also emerged over social media outlets, as attendees invited those following the proceedings in cyberspace to join the discussion.

The program featured more than 150 speakers (including academics, preservationists, consultants, historical interpreters, museum professionals, living historians, students, K-12 teachers, and new media specialists) and was designed to be as interactive, open, and nonhierarchical as possible. The vast majority of conference sessions were panels and roundtables, each of which featured a range of speakers working in diverse settings. The organizers tried to ensure that panels were not conceived of as strictly “public history” or

“academic” in focus, but rather that each session reflected the diversity of the field and the range of perspectives that practicing professionals may bring to the topic being explored. Thanks in part to funds earmarked for travel grants, the conference was able to ensure the participation of speakers and attendees, such as government employees, graduate students, and museum professionals, who lacked the institutional financial support necessary to regularly attend professional gatherings.

Despite that March weather in Pennsylvania does not lend itself to outdoor activities, the program also included a number of unique field experiences on the Gettysburg battlefield. Teams of park rangers and scholars asked participants to look at the traditional battlefield tour from new interpretive angles. They imagined ways of using the historical landscape to discuss cowardice, the Lost Cause, the motivations of Union and Confederate soldiers, military discipline, medical care, and the experience of Confederate slaves without diminishing important tactical movements and command decisions. The content of the battlefield story became more expansive and more layered, and in thinking broadly about what happened on the field, dynamic conversations about interpretive methodologies ensued. One program explored strategies for more fully integrating the commemorative landscape into battlefield interpretation, another focused on rethinking the staff ride model, and a third examined the interpretive and natural resource implications of battlefield rehabilitation. Participants were encouraged to push themselves outside their own professional settings and consider how variations in audience and methodology pose different challenges for historians working in other contexts.

The essays in this special issue of *Civil War History* build on several of the key themes that emerged from the conference: embracing the democratic and civic potential of historical thinking; reaffirming the power of place and the importance of specific, focused stories;

integrating military, political, social, cultural, and gender history; and encouraging collaboration among historians working in different settings without minimizing differences in outlook, mission, and audience. Together, the essays gathered here point to a powerful and positive conclusion about the future of the field. Classrooms, battlefields, and historic sites—not to mention cyberspace—have all become dynamic places of study and interpretation where visitors, students, and professionals are forging historical narratives of greater intellectual depth and wider accessibility.

As the conference illustrated, those working in Civil War history (broadly defined) share a number of unifying convictions—as well as concerns—about the future of the field. There was a shared sense of excitement surrounding the potential of new media to engage new audiences, facilitate participatory experiences, and encourage the analytical detective work that is foundational to historical thinking. There was pride in the flowering of new methodologies and approaches to understanding the war, and a shared commitment to telling stories from a range of historical perspectives and to opening up new conversations that encourage people to find intellectual substance and contemporary relevance in Civil War history. Participants also shared a gnawing concern about the sustainability of popular interest in the war, declining visitation numbers at Civil War sites, and the long-term viability of current preservation strategies. The timing of the event, which took place just as federal agencies were struggling to absorb the budget cuts and general uncertainty imposed by sequestration, helped to solidify widespread concern about the future of federal history programs, including but not limited to the National Park Service.

Though the vast majority of participants who offered feedback (in the form of e-mails, blog posts, Twitter conversations, and evaluation forms) found the conference an extraordinarily

provocative and useful experience, spirited debate did ensue on whether it brought historians from a wide range of professional contexts closer together or reinforced divisions. Some thought that public historians—particularly those in the NPS—were subjected to intense criticism by speakers who were insufficiently familiar with the unique contexts of their work. Others argued that scholars were subjected to criticism as well and that many of those who reflected on public history practice were not ivory-tower academics (if such a thing truly exists anymore), but rather historians who work with a wide range of audiences, both inside and outside the academy.

Though sharp and bitter divides between “public” and “academic” history are largely a thing of the past, this tension is a reminder that collaborative ventures are most successful when the frameworks for evaluation and reflection are mutually agreed upon. It is not enough to simply encourage reflection; we must spell out our own definitions of and expectations for self-criticism. We also must recognize that the very diversity of backgrounds and perspectives that makes collaboration worthwhile cannot help but contribute to a certain amount of talking past each other. Successful collaboration does not require agreement on all points, nor does it demand a one-size-fits-all approach. It emphasizes areas of common interest, challenges assumptions of how things should be done, but also leaves room for disagreement—at times, intense disagreement.

Differences in audience—those for whom and with who we practice history—lie at the root of many of our disagreements. As Peter Carmichael notes in his essay on interpreting the experiences of Civil War soldiers in ways that ways that resonate with popular audiences while simultaneously pushing them to question their assumptions, “while battlefield interpreters are at the point of the historian phalanx, meeting people at the earliest stage of discovery, academics typically engage more seasoned audiences in the classroom or through publications.” But as

Carmichael continues, “this critical difference in audience should not obscure our common goal in explaining the historical particularities of life in Civil War armies.” The 150th anniversary of the war has been full of examples of successful collaboration on common goals, ranging from the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission’s highly successful “Signature Conferences” to the *New York Times*’s Disunion column to the Tennessee State Library & Archives’ “Looking Back: The Civil War in Tennessee” initiative, which offered state residents the opportunity to have family materials pertaining to the war digitized and receive preservation advice from a professional. The 150th has also witnessed the advent of digital projects such as *Civil War Washington* and *Visualizing Emancipation*, and anniversary programming at Civil War sites on topics such as contraband camps, class tensions on the home front, prisoners of war, the impact of gendered frameworks in shaping interaction between soldiers and civilians, and commemoration and memory of the war.¹

¹ For more on these collaborative projects, see “Signature Conference Series,” *Civil War 150*, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://www.viriniacivilwar.org/conference.php>; Disunion blog entries, The Opinionator, *New York Times*, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/disunion/>; *Civil War Washington*, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://civilwardc.org/>; Scott Nesbit and Edward L. Ayers, *Visualizing Emancipation*, <http://dsl.richmond.edu/emancipation/>, accessed May 28, 2015; and <http://www.tn.gov/tsla/cwtn/>, accessed May 28, 2015. For anniversary programming, see <http://www.nps.gov/shil/planyourvisit/contrabandcamp.htm>, accessed May 28, 2015, Gettysburg 150th Anniversary Commemorative Events Guide, and Ashley Whitehead Luskey and Robert M. Dunkerly’s essay in this issue.

“The Future of Civil War History” afforded participants an opportunity to reflect on the impact and continued relevance of social and cultural history on field interpretation and public programming. As many recounted, the democratizing influence of “the new social history,” accompanied by a drive to assist citizens in recovering their own pasts prompted public historians to create more “inclusive” narratives at their sites and implement new programs, exhibits, and media components devoted to sharing the experiences and perspectives of non-elites, such as women, children, the poor, and ethnic and racial minorities.² This transition, which reached a high point in the late 1980s, proved neither seamless nor easy. Conservative intellectuals pitted the “old history” against the “new history,” characterizing the clash in interpretation as a culture war.³ Symbolic politics (or representations of the past) increasingly replaced realpolitik as different parties struggled for their models of historical interpretation to

² On the rise and impact of the new social history on the academy, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (1988; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 440–45. On the later influence of anthropology and cultural history, see the same work, 551–55. On the importance of local history, community empowerment, and the continued relevance of social history, see Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 2d ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003), 1–5.

³ Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 7. See also Gary B. Nash, Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

win out.⁴ The stakes were especially high at Civil War–era battlefields and historic sites, which for decades propounded narratives generally devoid of the war’s causes and consequences.⁵

In 1998, National Park Service Civil War battlefield superintendents met in Nashville, Tennessee, to discuss how they could expand the scope of battlefield interpretation beyond tactics, strategy, and mutual heroism and provide visitors “the opportunity to explore the fundamental contexts and meanings” of battlefield resources.⁶ As Robert K. Sutton later observed, the theme of reconciliation had cast a long shadow over the interpretation of Civil War battlefields.⁷ Looking to the future, superintendents proposed that battlefield sites establish their place in the war’s broader historical context; incorporate social, economic, and cultural issues into narratives; more fully consider the war’s causes and consequences; and look to the Civil War’s continued relevance. As Dwight T. Pitcaithley recounts, once news of the “1998 gathering and Congress’s direction spread, heritage groups with particular interest in Civil War battlefields and the Lost Cause interpretation of the war began responding.”⁸ A stream of at times vitriolic

⁴ Steven C. Dubin, *Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum from the Enola Gay to Sensation* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999), 2.

⁵ Dwight T. Pitcaithley, “‘A Cosmic Threat’: The National Park Service Addresses the Causes of the American Civil War,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 171.

⁶ Robert K. Sutton, “Holding the High Ground: Interpreting the Civil War in National Parks,” *George Wright Forum* 25, no. 3 (2008): 47. See also Pitcaithley, “Cosmic Threat,” 173.

⁷ Robert K. Sutton, introduction to *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001).

⁸ Pitcaithley, “Cosmic Threat,” 173–74.

letters flowed into Park offices. Many letter-writers were especially opposed to the new emphasis on slavery, thereby demonstrating just how contested the past had become; as Emmanuel Dabney, Beth Parnicza, and Kevin M. Levin observe in their essay, some of these old tensions continue to play out in response to current-day programs exploring slavery and emancipation.⁹ Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the 1998 meeting and an important symposium in 2000, the National Park Service issued two documents, *Holding the High Ground* and *Rally on the High Ground*, both of which became foundational in guiding the broad-scale incorporation of social and cultural history into Park programming.¹⁰

The eve of the sesquicentennial provided an opportunity for sustained reflection. Despite the extensive and far-reaching changes ushered in by the *Holding the High Ground* report, many high-ranking NPS officials argued in 2008 that the agency had not “sufficiently used its sites to convey the true significance and breadth of America’s Civil War experience.”¹¹ Many conference participants picked up on this theme, offering case study examples of successful interpretive strategies and highlighting areas of opportunity for growth. As the articles herein

⁹ For samplings of these letters, see *ibid.*, 174–75.

¹⁰ See National Park Service, “Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes,” unpublished proceedings, 1998 conference of National Park Symposium on the Civil War; and Robert K. Sutton, ed. *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War, Ford's Theatre, May 8 and 9, 2000* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Eastern National, 2001).

¹¹ National Park Service, *Holding the High Ground: A National Park Service Plan for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War* (May 2008), 3, accessed May 28, 2015, <https://hst409509.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/holding-the-high-ground.pdf>.

attest, great strides have been made and continue to be made in fashioning public representations of history that are broader, more nuanced, and more inclusive. Ashley Whitehead Luskey and Robert M. Dunkerly's essay on programming at Richmond National Battlefield Park, for example, highlights the ways gender and cultural history are effectively incorporated into interpretive programs that draw on an array of primary source materials and material culture sources, as well as the framework of sensory history. Through a layering of interpretations, Luskey and Dunkerly invite audiences to see the dynamic ways ideas about being a man or a woman actively shaped perceptions and influenced actions both on the battlefield and on the home front.

The gloomy prediction that Civil War battlefield parks would take a nosedive into irrelevance because of a blinding commitment to traditional military history has never come to fruition. Thanks to the *Holding the High Ground* initiative, and the subsequent surge in collaboration between academics and public historians, today's Civil War parks do much more than feed the buff's insatiable appetite for guns and bugles stories. Every Civil War site managed by the NPS positions its unique story within the social and political context of the war. Many parks carry their narrative forward into the period of Reconstruction and beyond. The move toward a more expansive interpretation has in no way diminished the decisive role that military forces played in the struggle for Union and emancipation. By stressing military history, as Christian Keller and Ethan Rafuse remind us in their essay, historians and visitors can reflect on the political and social imperatives of war and how they shaped command decisions on the ground. A model staff ride, they argue, should never be an exercise in what-ifs—the favorite pastime of armchair generals—but rather an investigation that fully accounts for the political, cultural, and social dimensions of warfare. Only then can audiences explore the “ways and

means” of state-sanctioned killing. Keller and Rafuse’s blueprint for staff rides demonstrates how Civil War history can engage contemporary issues without giving audiences the “impression that lessons from history are interchangeable” with the current strategic and military challenges facing the United States.

Keller and Rafuse, like the rest of the contributors to this volume, employ a war-and-society approach to military history that keeps the interpretive lens centered on the battlefield. They also affirm the importance of telling site-specific stories so that audiences may encounter a range of historical people who occupied the same historical space at the same historical moment but made meaning of their experiences in radically different ways. Jonathan Noyalas, for instance, shows how Union and Confederate veterans returned to the battlefields under the auspice of reconciliation, but through their monuments and commemorative ceremonies revealed diverging and conflicting goals. Ex-Confederates sought political redemption through the vindication of their Confederate pasts while Northern veterans wanted their sacrifices for Union to be remembered without the “taint” of the hard-war tactics they had unleashed on the Shenandoah Valley’s civilians. Noyalas is hardly alone among the increasing numbers of battlefield historians who strive to broaden the historical gaze of their visitors by using monuments to discuss veteran experiences and the politics of commemoration.

Petersburg National Battlefield’s Emmanuel Dabney takes a slightly different tack on the war-and-society approach, pushing audiences to understand how racial perceptions overthrew established codes of civilized warfare at the battle of the Crater, unleashing a frenzy of murderous killing in which Lee’s veterans shot down black soldiers in cold blood. The sanctioning of this massacre by southern military and political officials helps visitors recognize the preeminence of slavery as a Confederate political aim, and the army’s role as the violent

instrument in preserving human bondage. Ashley Whitehead Luskey and Robert Dunkerly's thoughtful strategies for guiding visitors to look behind the battle lines to consider the reactions of survivors offer a blueprint for introducing visitors to other behind-the-lines stories, such as the physical task and emotional toll of burying the dead and the presence of the thousands of African Americans, mostly slave but some free, who toiled as laborers and servants in southern armies. They were not, as some delusional people like to believe, wearing the Confederate gray and shooting at the very armies that were crucial to their own liberation. Discussing the role of the Confederate slave on the battlefield is of immense importance in helping audiences puzzle through the contemporary uses of the Lost Cause and the chasm between historical reality and Lost Cause memory.

The mixing of military history with issues of race, gender, class, and culture has not gone down well with all audiences nor will it. Some visitors are primarily interested in following in the footsteps of their ancestors or knowing who shot whom and where, and recoil from attempts to discuss causation and context. Some park guides readily concede this ground, essentially offering a bedtime story of war that does not convey the political stakes of the conflict or demonstrate the suffering and tragedy of war. Fortunately, the vast majority of NPS historians, as well as others who conduct battlefield programs, gently push their audiences to ponder new questions and think historically in critical and expansive ways. Most visitors respond to this approach with interest. The diversity of NPS interpretive programs in the wake of the *Holding the High Ground* initiative has played no small role in casting the Civil War 150th as the antithesis of the Centennial's lily white celebration of American unity. Any suggestion that the Civil War 150th was no different from the centennial or generated a tepid response from our collective audiences is a specious one. In the ivy towers, historians have been reluctant to uncork

the champagne. All rightly want the commemorations to continue through the Reconstruction years, and in the summer of 2015, the National Park Service undertook a National Historic Landmark theme study designed to identify buildings and sites associated with the period.¹² There has been some sparring over the relationship between military and cultural history. This can only be described as academic shadowboxing, and it creates artificial divisions that keep us from appreciating the amazing integration of social, cultural, and military history that has taken place in Civil War historiography over the last thirty years.

Public historians' critical engagement with public audiences is a perennial challenge, which is especially pressing as the humanities come under increased scrutiny and attack. Yet, in fundamental ways public history is particularly well suited to civic engagement and overtly demonstrates history's continued relevance to people's lives. As an early observer of the field, Ronald J. Grele, noted in 1981, public history "promises us a society in which a broad public participates in the construction of its own history," which echoes Carl L. Becker's famous remarks in "Everyman His Own Historian."¹³ Within the past several decades, especially, museums and historic sites have become increasingly invested in creating relationships with

¹² Robert Behre, "Park Service Looking for Reconstruction Landmarks," *Post and Courier*, June 2, 2015.

¹³ Ronald J. Grele, "Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of a Public Historian?" *Public Historian* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 48. See also Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932).

diverse audiences, resulting in a multitude of exciting programs.¹⁴ In the most successful instances, history, its interpretation and remembrance, becomes a shared enterprise in which communities and institutions connect in meaningful ways that promote collaborative dialogue. At the conference, participants discussed public/university partnerships, different models of community programs, and strategies for overcoming barriers standing in the way of equal access to historic sites and cultural resources. Such programming can be truly transformative. As Emmanuel Dabney, Beth Parnicza, and Kevin M. Levin note in their contribution to this volume, for example, Civil War sites must engage African American communities and their diverse perspectives when creating commemorations and programs. Such partnerships “lend relevance to modern programming” and demonstrate “that the story of the Civil War is a continuous one that belongs to all Americans.” The continued emphasis on civic engagement has served as a corrective to a dearth of community history projects, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁵

In looking toward the future of public engagement, challenges remain. As Peter Carmichael observes in his essay, “the challenge ahead is how to make Civil War battlefields places of relevance without losing the emotional resonance that people crave from historic sites.” Many conference participants voiced concerns over whether public interest in Civil War-era sites will prove self-sustaining after the close of the sesquicentennial. Others shared problematic examples of how the emphasis on stressing the past’s connection to the present can result in

¹⁴ Jennifer Amdur Spitz and Margaret Thom, introduction to *Urban Networks: Museums Embracing Communities*, ed. Jennifer Amdur Spitz and Margaret Thom (Chicago, IL: The Field Museum, 2003), 3–7.

¹⁵ Grele, “Whose Public?” 45–46.

oversimplification and reductionism. As Carmichael notes, inquiries about the plight of veterans across time has resulted in at times flaccid comparisons, which decontextualize the unique historical and emotional experiences of both groups. Nevertheless, it is imperative that museums, historic sites, academics, and public historians continue to engage diverse audiences and create vibrant discourses, for history cannot be individually owned and it is our collective responsibility to make meaningful connections among different interest groups.¹⁶

Of course, new challenges will always lie ahead for Civil War historians, both those in and outside the academy. The current academic trend to internationalize the study of the Civil War will offer new opportunities to share ideas and teaching techniques. Accessible approaches are desperately needed if general audiences are to grasp how the preservation of the United States as a liberal democracy during the Civil War era was part of a global movement of national consolidation of republican governments in the late nineteenth century. Those who teach behind a classroom podium will need to remember that keeping the student or visitor's "boots on the ground" is a cardinal principle to discovering the power of place. Globalizing the Civil War at public history sites without losing the power of place will be a formidable interpretive challenge;

¹⁶ Indeed, as the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences recently charged, "as we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common." Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2013), 9.

yet we should draw confidence from our recent success in opening new interpretive vistas on the battlefield through which our audiences can clearly see how military operations encompass an immensely complex and contradictory revolutionary story of state-sanctioned violence that continued long after 1865.