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Inside the Resource: Interpreting is Pointing at Things

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Abstract

We preserve the places of the past for a very specific reason: they are places. They are physical manifestations of the past, either landscapes where that past was played out or the remnants of the people who made that past happen.

That was clear to me last week as I watched David Fox, one of Harpers Ferry's premier interpreters, twiddle a shaving mirror in the sunlight and shine a twinkling beam on the gravestone of Rev. Alexander Morrell in the cemetery at the end of Fillmore Street. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2013

We preserve the places of the past for a very specific reason: they are places. They are physical manifestations of the past, either landscapes where that past was played out or the remnants of the people who made that past happen.

That was clear to me last week as I watched David Fox, one of Harpers Ferry's premier interpreters, twiddle a shaving mirror in the sunlight and shine a twinkling beam on the gravestone of Rev. Alexander Morrell in the cemetery at the end of Fillmore Street.

We preserve places because of their place-ness, their raw physicality. And in that cemetery, David was conjuring Alexander Morrell for us from beyond the grave, using his tombstone as a stand-in for the reverend and teacher who died in 1885. Without that tombstone warmed by a beam of sunlight, Morrell would have remained dead for us as we stood in the cemetery.

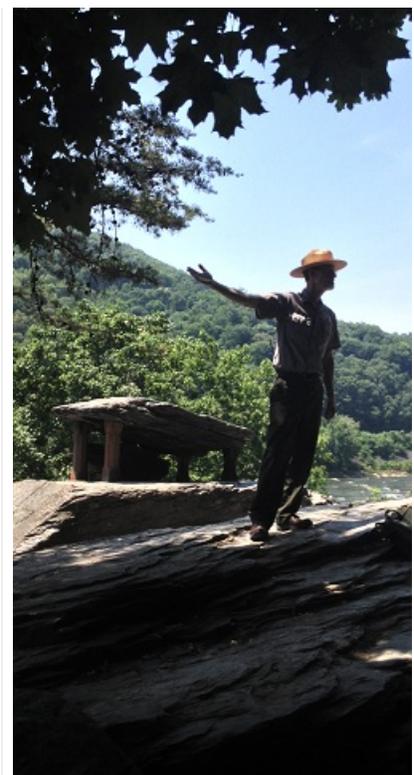
This all swims into mind because it's getting to be that time of year, when interpreters head out into special landscapes and talk history with the public. It also means I've been soaking up some interpretive programs over the past few weeks and they've started my gears turning.

I've seen a few programs that used some decent techniques, but lacked the magic of David's tour through the cemetery. Many of the interpreters were telling what *could have been* compelling stories. They were *really* trying to show that their landscapes are relevant.

But something wasn't working quite right. I started recognizing it because when I'm excited or "on a roll" I fall into the same trap. The story was drifting away from the resource.

I have to stop myself sometimes and ask that crucial question every interpreter should ask themselves every single moment they are helping people move through a resource: "Why did I choose to stop here? Why am I standing *right here*?"

Everything in an interpretive program is a choice. And choices are supposed to be deliberate. It's not



Ranger Fox pointing at things...

enough to stand in front of a landscape and lecture. It's not enough to stand in front of a house and talk about the man who lived there. It's not enough to be proximal to the resource while talking history.

We have resources so that we can be immersed in the past. We preserve places so we can visualize the past recreated on those landscapes.

In short, interpreters and rangers need to point at things.

It's not a joke. If the presentation I choose to give in front of the President's House at Gettysburg College or atop the crest of Camp Hill in Harpers Ferry doesn't reference that landscape, use it as my primary tangible to help the people I'm speaking with connect with the past in a visceral manner, I'm not doing my job.



Doesn't that landscape just *beg* to be pointed at and interpreted?

So I point when I speak. I move. When I'm in front of the President's House, I intentionally gesture toward the door as I tell the tale of Robert E. Lee's July 2nd visit, touch the doorknob when I mention that a letter arrived at that door in 1862 warning that a beloved son was dying in far-off Illinois, I gaze in the windows as I'm recounting the tale of a College President and his student *cum* rebel soldier sitting down to a cordial meal in spite of their hatred for the beliefs of the other.

I bend in the National Cemetery and touch the stone of an unknown soldier as I talk about the black men who found opportunity in digging those graves. I grasp the pipe railing of the Rostrum as I tell my students about LBJ's radical 1963 speech advocating a new birth of freedom in a divided nation. I point and use the landscape I'm standing in nearly every sentence of every stop of every tour I conduct.

We have resources for a reason: we should explore them, point at them, imagine inside of them and touch them when we can to *feel* the past.

Sometimes you touch that landscape with your hands. Sometimes with your mind's eye. And sometimes, it just takes a simple pocket mirror to help illuminate these special places.