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Complicating History: An Interview with Emmanuel Dabney in Three Parts, Part One

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Abstract

Emmanuel Dabney, one of the Civil War Institute Summer Conference speakers, is a park ranger at Petersburg National Battlefield. At the Summer Conference, “The War in 1864,” he will give a lecture titled, “Catching Us Like Sheep in a Slaughter Pen”: The United States Colored Troops at the Battle of the Crater. In anticipation of the Institute, Emmanuel Dabney answered questions on interpretation, Petersburg, and the future of the Civil War. His responses will be posted in a three-part series. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Petersburg, United States Colored Troops, USCT, Battle of the Crater

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Complicating History: An Interview with Emmanuel Dabney in Three Parts, Part One

April 21, 2014

By: Val Merlina, '14

Emmanuel Dabney, one of the Civil War Institute Summer Conference speakers, is a park ranger at Petersburg National Battlefield. At the Summer Conference, “The War in 1864,” he will give a lecture titled, “Catching Us Like Sheep in a Slaughter Pen”: The United States Colored Troops at the Battle of the Crater. In anticipation of the Institute, Emmanuel Dabney answered questions on interpretation, Petersburg, and the future of the Civil War. His responses will be posted in a three-part series.



What are the challenges of interpreting the site, history, and memory of a place like Petersburg? Of interpreting the story of the USCT?

Our park has many challenges (not that it is a bad thing). Regrettably, the memory of the Civil War goes something like this:

The war began with shots fired upon Fort Sumter. The next major battle was at First Manassas in July 1861. The bloodiest day of the war was the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, and the following January, Abraham Lincoln released the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all the slaves. In July 1863, the Battle of Gettysburg was the peak of the Confederate military in the Eastern Theater while in the Deep South the Confederacy lost Vicksburg. The South pretty much was destined to lose the war after Gettysburg and the war ended at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865.

Sadly, we know these lists of facts are interwoven with the spirit of the reconciliationist view of the war. Furthermore, there are some errors within that narrative, like the Emancipation Proclamation did not free *all* enslaved people in North America and that the South was not destined to lose the war or that the war ended at Appomattox Court House.

So one of the challenges we have at Petersburg is to catch people up with where the opposing armies and politicians are in 1864-1865. This brings into light our less understood campaign when examined beyond the generic version of the American Civil War.

A big challenge for us is to facilitate methods to get people to understand the magnitude of this campaign. Most people who know about Petersburg have heard of the July 30, 1864, Battle of the Crater. However, we tell people that the Crater is only one day in 292 days! Another way of looking at the Battle of the Crater is that it was approximately 11 hours out of over 7,000 hours that the troops spent along the Richmond-Petersburg front.

To help visitors with this we updated the park's Unigrid map by adding two additional panels. This is the hallmark takeaway during visits to National Park sites. The additional panels extend visitors' ability to see the earthworks running from the southwest of Petersburg to the eastern side of the city and then going north and outside the boundaries of the Unigrid. It also allows for us to include the Reams' Station battlefield south of Petersburg which is outside the elaborate earthwork system. The map includes Fort Harrison, a part of the outer Confederate defenses of Richmond, managed by our colleagues at Richmond National Battlefield. Visitors can see that our two parks are united by the events taking place in 1864-1865.

In many ways the Petersburg Campaign is defined by the earthworks, the distance, the space, and the length of time it went on. Our driving tour is spread out across two counties and two cities and is 32 miles in length. We keep three visitor contact stations staffed year round: The Grant's Headquarters at City Point unit, the Eastern Front Visitor Center, and the Five Forks Battlefield Contact Station. Each of the areas of the park has something different. The Eastern Front encompasses the battlefields associated with the Initial Assaults in June 1864, the Crater, and the Battle of Fort Stedman in March 1865. The Western Front illustrates the extension of the Union lines south and southwest of Petersburg by the Federal forces as well as the Fort Gregg battlefield fought over on April 2, 1865. The Five Forks Battlefield unit highlights the April 1, 1865, battle which enabled Ulysses Grant to feel confident that he could breakthrough Lee's thin line the following morning.

The Grant's Headquarters unit is certainly the most complex interpretive site within the battlefield boundaries. For more than three centuries, the Eppes family owned land that the NPS now preserves as a part of this unit. This included their establishment of a large plantation compound, most of which is now lost to twentieth century development, but the NPS preserves the Eppes' home "Appomattox," four pre-1850 outbuildings, an early 20th century garage, a 19th century brick house, and two early 20th century homes in this section of the park. In addition, we have the reconstructed cabin of Lt. General Grant on the property which features some original elements of the Civil War cabin which was moved to Philadelphia in the summer of 1865 and remained there until the early 1980s. The NPS moved the original material of the cabin back to its original site and reconstructed and refurnished the cabin.

At this site, we have to facilitate a means for visitors to explore what I refer to as the arc of the American South's history. Archaeological evidence finds that Native people were at this location for thousands of years before European contact. Europeans arrived in the early 1600s and the Native population through disease and military actions was decimated. More tangible and visible is the Eppes' house "Appomattox." This building's initial construction date is 1763 which is also the period of both the peak of British-American ties as well as the beginning of the hostility that led to the American Revolution. The house's expansion in the 1840s and 1850s represented the Eppes' dominance on their land in the antebellum period. Through maps and the papers of the Eppes family we also can share that the enslaved community had elaborate family units that existed through multiple generations. The papers contain the names, occupations, and relationships that were present between different enslaved people, white overseers, and the Eppes family. Furthermore, we can tell visitors about both resistance to the institution of slavery and the punishments they withstood while in bondage.

This exists alongside the war's tumult which turned the Eppes family into wartime refugees, saw the plantation complex fall apart as enslaved people escaped and my research into those who escaped found that several of the people who had been in bondage became veterans of the war from their U.S. Navy and US Colored infantry service.

And of course, the story of the Federal supply depot in 1864-1865 is told at the site. Logistics, supply, and transportation has not captivated the minds of Civil War buffs in the same way that the grand charges of the war have; but, visitors are fascinated by the might of the Federal government in waging the war. My latest research has been heavily focused on the role of Northern civilian relief agencies, namely the U.S. Sanitary Commission, U.S. Christian Commission, and state appointed relief agents. Their donations to the troops in the field have largely gone ignored since about 1870 when most of their wartime histories were already published and the agencies had stopped their work.

Then the war ends, how does this plantation come back? Reconstruction is a terribly messy period in American history. I think it may be more misunderstood than the war itself. At our site we can point to the Eppes' return, the return of only a few former slaves (so far I've only gotten to about 18), the new black laborers, etc. We can easily move forward into the era of Redemption and the beginning of the turning back the clock on what was imagined by freed people when slavery ended.

This year's Institute will take place from June 20-25, 2014. Registration can be done by following this link: <http://www.gettysburg.edu/cwi/conference/> See you there!