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Interpretation is Evolution: Whose History?

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Abstract

When I try to explain to non-history people what my degree means, I used to hit wall after all. It was so hard explaining exactly what, "Applied History," really means. People understand, "History," but the idea of public history has a certain brand of special sauce added on top.

I used to say something akin to, "doing Park Ranger things," though that never really worked. When I had a group on an historical landscape, I'd often just say, "Public History is this."

It doesn't work. Those definitions aren't clear. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Applied History

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

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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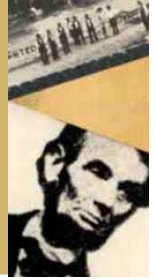
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Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Interpretation is Evolution: Whose History?

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2013

When I try to explain to non-history people what my degree means, I used to hit wall after all. It was so hard explaining exactly what, "Applied History," really means. People understand, "History," but the idea of public history have a certain brand of special sauce added on top.

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It doesn't work. Those definitions aren't clear.

Shippensburg's peculiar name for the department helps a bit. At Shippensburg, the department's name of "Applied History" mimics a ton of other disciplines. Applied Physics and Applied Mathematics spring to mind.

Applied History, in my reading of the field, is just like those two: it concerns itself not with "pure" history, but instead with a study of the past firmly rooted in what it can do in a practical way for the modern world.

We aren't simply presenting "pure" history, fully-formed when we are interpreting. Instead, we are trying to offer a usable past for the present and the future.

And today is inherently different than yesterday. That's the way time's arrow works. This all means every day's interpretation must not only be about the past, but use the past to talk about who we are today, how we can draw inspiration or warning from the events of yesterday to forge better tomorrows.

Which brings us to the sticky situation of the actors of the past. The people of yesterday desperately tried to encode their meanings within the landscape of history as immortal and final. We seem hardwired as humans to seek immortality. *My meaning for this artifact trumps all future meanings* the people of the past seem to scream at us.

They built monuments to ensure mortality. They donated artifacts to museum collections to enshrine themselves in institutions for eternity. They tried to shape the future's perception of their today.

I don't care why they enshrined what they enshrined.

I was going to phrase that idea less harshly, but there it is. The actors of the past are long dead. Their

agency departed with them into the grave. Their interpretations of artifacts, their specific desired enshrined meanings, mean naught when I'm helping the people of today find their own meaning in something.

Many in the Civil War community are decrying the merger of the Museum of the Confederacy and the American Civil War Center in Richmond. There are voices fearing how the collections of the Museum of the Confederacy might be used to tell the *whole* story of the war.

"That's part of the point," Christy Coleman, president of the American Civil War Center was quoted [in an AP story about the merger](#). "They have an incredible collection that is absolutely Confederate strong, but there are a lot of artifacts that have not been able to be fully explored or used to relate to the African-American experience or immigrants or the role of Jews."

No rebel veteran ever foretold this.

Dan Sickles erected a monument to himself in the National Cemetery at Gettysburg in 1893. He intended it as a symbol of his importance. When I take people there, it is equally a symbol of his braggadocio and hubris. Does that pain me? Not a lick.

Rebel veterans donated artifacts to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the detritus of war, to create the core collection of the Museum of the Confederacy. To them they were sainted artifacts of a Lost Cause. But today, audiences need other meanings, other stories.

We are a broad racial tapestry still wrestling with the fruits of that war. What in the 1880s was a photographic artifact that a veteran thought told the story of two friends fighting through four years of war, today can be an image of racial power and the Stockholm Syndrome of Southern slavery. Did he intend for it to be used that way? No. Does that pain me? No.

If we let the people of the past encode what that past means, solidify it for all eternity, there would be no need for historians. Ever.

Reinterpretation, revision and rediscovery of the hidden elements of the past is what we do. We find the meaning of the present in the story of the past. History, and especially applied history, is evolution.