



2-23-2012

History Not Hokum: Learning from Specters

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Rudy, John M., "History Not Hokum: Learning from Specters" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 152.

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Abstract

What are we to make of those who literally try to raise the dead at our nation's historical locations? Can ghost tours ever be a successful medium (pun intended) for interpretation? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Ghost Tours

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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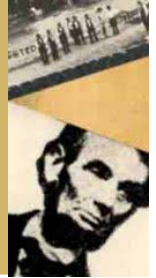
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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History not Hokum: Learning from Specters

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2012

There was a [good, provocative question](#) asked by Aaron Urbanski on my post last week:

What are we to make of those who literally try to raise the dead at our nation's historical locations? Can ghost tours ever be a successful medium (pun intended) for interpretation?

If there's one thing I love more than anything else in this world, it's a good, provocative question to chew. I've been mulling it over for the past few days and a few keen points keep bubbling to the surface.

The concept of studying ghost tours and why they are so effective was introduced to me this past fall during the Pennsylvania Historical Association annual conference in Johnstown. The keynote address was given by newly christened Gettysburgian Peter Carmichael on relevance at Civil War sites. I don't agree with everything Peter mentioned, and I think we can look even broader for relevance than the techniques of modern analogy that are his (admittedly effective) workhorse, but he raised a good point about ghost tours that has been haunting me since.

Why are they so effective? Gettysburg is swarmed with ghost tours. On a warm summer evening, walking down to my favorite ice cream shop in the battle-period home where a seminary student sheltered in the basement while battle raged around his ears, I find myself again and again shoved either into oncoming traffic or into a brick wall by throngs of visitors hunting 'ghosts.' They follow a Gettysburg College theater major or a local teenager looking to pick up a few extra bucks wearing old-timey looking clothes and carrying the ubiquitous lantern through Gettysburg's brightly lit streets. The newest of these phoney offerings arms visitors as ghost hunters with cheap thermometers and 'laser nets' (dime-store laser pointers with a weird looking lens), the tools that will purportedly help them find ghosts.

You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!

-*A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens



Remember, this spook party is not recommended for kids under 12 / [LOC](#)

I used to mess with ghost tours when I was a student at the college. I lived in Stevens Hall, my window facing out on Carlisle Street. There is a beautiful old sitting room at the front of the building. I would read draped across the couch there nightly.

When a tour was outside and flashbulbs drenched the windows, I would drop to the deck and crawl to the light switch. Flicking it on and off a few times, I would leave it off. Flashbulbs would go off outside incessantly. The poor tour guide would begin to talk louder and more angrily, telling the bogus tale of the 'blue boy.' It was childish, I admit. But I howled with laughter at what I was sure at the time was the best example of Barnum's old adage about the birthrate of suckers.

I'm not so sure now. Those people wanted something they *weren't getting* out on the battlefield. The hokum of a spirit world offers these visitors something they aren't feeling anywhere else in town: the real. They want to dialogue with the dead, meet them, shake their hand.

When you wander around Gettysburg today, it's so impossible to imagine that place nearly 150 years ago. Flickering gas streetlamps have been supplanted by halogen bulbs. Neon beer signs pour out on a square that once hosted thousands of onlookers, partying for lack of beds and hanging on the words of men like Lincoln and Seward as they addressed the crowd from their doorstep or window. Cars streak down the pavement where ambulances were overtaken and flipped by crowds of men running pell-mell toward a hill with a cemetery on it, fearing for their lives.



The Civil War is not manifest in Gettysburg. Nor should we strive to make it so. I like the bars, shops and restaurants that dot the streets of my town. I like being able to drive down the street to head to the movies or get groceries. I like being able to walk through town on warm summer evening and not worry about being mugged in the gaslight on the way for ice cream. And I'm pretty sure that visitors like these things too.

To hold hands with the dead, to feel the real presence of the past. / [PD LOC](#)

What the ghost tours provide through stories and the tantalizing offer of meeting an incorporeal actor in the famed battle is a taste of the real. Who wouldn't salivate at the opportunity to sit down with the ghost of Lincoln or Reynolds or Henry Hunt and simply ask, "So what was it like way back then?"

How can we learn what our visitors want from our special places by studying their penchant to go on ghost tours in the evening hours? Are they looking for the possibility of feeling the real, of meeting the past? Is that why they pay good money to carry around hokey versions of [Ray Stantz' PKE Meter](#) made from duct tape and some fishing wire? Is there something exciting about the prospect of meeting the past?

And most importantly, can we replicate this feeling through interpretation, telling stories of things that actually happened and not simply stories dreamed up by an overactive imagination? How can we help visitors find the real without resorting to hokum?