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Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the NPS

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Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the NPS

Abstract

[Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service](#), a joint report between the NPS and the OAH was released a couple of weeks ago. Since then, it has been mentioned on Twitter, other blogs, on the OAH's website, and it figures to be the topic of much discussion when [the NCPH and OAH meet up in Milwaukee this weekend](#) for their annual conference. I've read the report several times now, and I have been mulling over it for some weeks. I felt now would be a proper time to throw a couple of my reactions out there as well.

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, National Park Service, NPS, OAH

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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TUESDAY, APRIL 17, 2012

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Generally, I think most of the report is dead on - it confirms much of my feelings about history in the National Parks. It feels somewhat satisfying that your fears and troubles have at least been recognized - I think we have identified in this report the major problems that National Park Service faces as an agency.

Yet, one thing not described in the report is the language barrier. Simply put, professional historians and park ranger interpreters don't speak the same language. [The definition of interpretation](#) is different in both professions, one that will be a thorn in everyone's side going forward. To me, interpretation isn't an argument about the past. Interpretation doesn't answer the question, "Why did it happen, what it means, or why it is important to us today." Interpretation is an opportunity creator. It is speaking the language of the past, in order to help the present visitor connect to it. It offers up no primary argument about why such things happen, instead, it explores multiple viewpoints to find meaning, never discriminating against any one single meaning. In the end, interpretation's main goal is to promote care, and whatever form it takes. It's hard for academically trained historians to grasp this - as a master's student in history, I wrestle with these conflicting views of historical interpretation all the time. And that's a good thing, wrestling with the idea. But not having the shared language sometimes makes historians and interpreters their own worst enemies.

Three of the report's findings especially rung true to me - going forward, I think fixing these problems are the key to revitalizing history in the Park Service:

#10. The Constraints of Boundaries, Establishing Legislation, and Founding Father Histories.

[The Park Service really needs to break out of this mold.](#) No interpreter can ignore meaningful events because they aren't part of the prescribed founding legislation of his/her specific site. We can't build silos at historic sites. The world is interconnected - just like it was in the past. History that happened over here relates to what over there. We need to see our historic sites as a spider web of entangled themes and ideas, that run their course and disappear, then reappear again, slightly different, as they

have been transformed and molded once again to fit a different time period. We need to get over the [Three Days in July Syndrome](#).

#11 Fixed and Fearful Interpretation.

As I've said before, give visitors everything. Show them the good, the bad, the terrible, and the unspeakable. Help them to make sense of the country's greatest moments of triumph and darkest days of despair. We need to talk about history - especially history deemed uncomfortable and or controversial. It's hard, getting over your own fears as interpreter, whether it be over race, gender, discrimination, war, climate change or whatever other controversial subject your site deals with (most likely all of them). The NPS as a whole, has to embrace controversy, welcome it, and relish the opportunity to present the real whole history - the messy, confusing, and contradictory record of human interaction that is history.

#12 Civic Engagement, History, and Interpretation

The NPS has to take up the role of civic engagement mantle - by fostering citizens of democracy everywhere. We need to embrace the mentality of visitor engagement first at historic sites everywhere. Allowing visitors to have agency and voice, allowing them to have their say and to be heard should be mantras. But like finding #11 suggests, the NPS can't be afraid to tell visitors something they don't want to hear either...

All in all, I think the report is a good eye opener and wake up call. All that's left to do is act to keep the promise of excellent history and interpretation alive in the NPS.