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Crowdsourcing History: When We All Get To Help

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Crowdsourcing History: When We All Get To Help

Abstract

I'm a bit bitter this week. The arrival of the Space Shuttle Discovery to the Washington, D.C. area has got me down. My first dream job as a kid, before I wanted to be a LEGO model designer or National Park Service ranger, was the illustrious position of space garbage man. I think part of that came from my grandfather's penchant for taking me around the neighborhood on trash day during his smoke breaks and picking through the fine assemblages of junk the neighbors had left by the curb. There was some sort of glamour in the idea of seeing the trash of the stars, I guess. But a lot of that desire came from a deep fascination with space. One of my favorite sandbox toys was a die-cast Space Shuttle that sat on a big-rig trailer. The little sticker on its nose read, "Discovery." I had two of the iconic early '90s LEGO Space Shuttles. In the past year, I've acquired two more. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Social Media, Crowdsourcing

Disciplines

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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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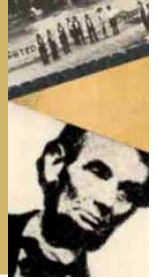
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Interpreting the Civil War

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Crowdsourcing History: When We All Get To Help

THURSDAY, APRIL 19, 2012



Standing above "Freedom,"
looking at *Discovery*. /
CC NASA/SI/Harold Dorwin

I'm a bit bitter this week. The arrival of the Space Shuttle *Discovery* to the Washington, D.C. area has got me down. My first dream job as a kid, before I wanted to be a LEGO model designer or National Park Service ranger, was the illustrious position of space garbage man. I think part of that came from my grandfather's penchant for taking me around the neighborhood on trash day during his smoke breaks and picking through the fine assemblages of junk the neighbors had left by the curb. There was some sort of glamour in the idea of seeing the trash of the stars, I guess. But a lot of that desire came from a deep fascination with space. One of my favorite sandbox toys was a die-cast Space Shuttle that sat on a big-rig trailer. The little sticker on its nose read, "*Discovery*." I had two of the iconic early '90s LEGO Space Shuttles. In the past year, I've acquired two more.

Tuesday put me in a sour mood. For my whole lifetime, from my earliest possible memories, the Space Shuttle has been the embodiment of what America can be. It defined our nation: we fly to space. Sure, it was only Low Earth Orbit, but it was our nation's greatest everyday achievement. Tuesday, the reality that that achievement has evaporated became real when the Space Shuttle *Discovery*, the same one I had played with in my sandbox, landed at the Udvar-Hazy Center for its permanent dry-dock. It's ironic it happened on Tax Day. One of the reasons I'm proud to pay my taxes each year is that it means we can go to space. Now we can't.

Tuesday was an historic day. And the amazing thing about that historic day was the everyday people who captured it. Twitter was alive with the hashtags #Discovery and #spottheshuttle the whole morning. Amazing photos rolled into [the Flickr group](#) created to allow folks to document their experiences. By noon, nearly 1,000 photos had been added to the group, capturing the shuttle and its 747 ferry winging over DC landmarks as diverse and disparate as The Lincoln Memorial, the Smithsonian Castle and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

An official NASA photo captured the wonderment the district felt nearly perfectly. Standing atop the scaffolding surrounding the Statue of Freedom crowning the Capitol dome are two construction

workers, marveling at the spacecraft winging by. That wonder translated for many into holding their smartphones aloft, to clicking the shutter button on their point-and-shoots, to zooming in with their expensive telephoto lenses. They all became historians of the present, capturing the moment in time *they saw history* for a future generation, then sending their view out to the world to be processed, catalogued and preserved.

Imagine that impulse for a moment, the impulse to capture this event and preserve it in your heart and on your hard drive. That's the historian's prerogative. We grab the world around us and frantically try to bottle it up, synthesize it, find meaning in it and share it with the world.

Crowdsourcing is not a new concept. [SETI@home](#) has been using spare CPU cycles of volunteers' computers to analyze data collected from our radio telescopes since 1999. [Folding@home](#) has been doing the same thing since 2000 to analyze protein folding and molecular structures. Science has lent itself easily to these computation ways that individuals can help solve a problem.

The humanities have been a whole other problem to tackle. We are just now, nearly a decade and a half after SETI@home started trolling the skies looking for a cosmic collect call, beginning to think of the general public as valid sources of our analysis.



My grandpa in Europe, 1944. Jess says that I have that same "surlly" look in my repertoire of facial expressions. I can only hope.

Tuesday, just as Discovery was winging overhead, the National Archive's blog NARAtions [pointed out a project they've undertaken](#) to create an index for the 1940 census. When the census was released on April 2nd, I was disappointed to say the least. My grandfather's family (the same Grandfather I trash-picked with) bounced around the city of Syracuse, NY like a pinball in the 1930s and '40s. My Mom likes to share the joke he used to make that, for a long time, he didn't know which house to come home to at night 'cause the family might've moved while he was gone.

To find anyone in the 1940 census, you need to know their address, their *exact* address on April 1, 1940. There is no index for the census, so you need to know the *exact* location where your ancestors lived when the census taker came knocking. Good luck finding that for the Bullard family. I can't find George and Gladys Bullard or their son, my Grandfather Bob, anywhere in the areas of Syracuse I'd expect them to be.

But amateurs are going to help me. A corps of amateurs, a gaggle of amateur citizen historians, are going to help me find Bob Bullard. A quarter million people have volunteered to help me find Bob Bullard. They will be helping to index the 1940 census, using software provided for free by NARA, and thereby helping me find my grandfather once again. According to NARA, "the entire 1940 census data will be indexed by a community of volunteers and made available for free. The free index of the census records and corresponding images will be available to the

public for perpetuity." That means that someday my cousin Leanne's daughters, my 1st cousins once removed, will be able to find the name of the great-grandpa they never met in the 1940 census thanks to a crowd of amateur historians today.

We all make history. We don't need degrees. We don't need robes and mortar boards and dissertations. We just need our wits and a few tools. Sometimes they're our cameras. Sometimes they're the computer sitting in front of us. Sometimes they're our bare hands.

We all can make history.