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You Don't Get A Tour; Come Back Next June

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You Don't Get A Tour; Come Back Next June

Abstract

A friend of mine and former supervisor said something to me the other day. I deeply respect him; he taught me the very basics of interpretation. But his words shocked me. I still don't know exactly how to process them.

He said something like, "I saw you leading a tour on Friday with three visitors. It takes something to go out there when you know you're only going to get so few people. I respect you for it; I couldn't do it." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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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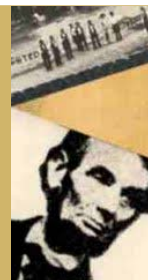
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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You Don't Get A Tour; Come Back Next June

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2012

A friend of mine and former supervisor said something to me the other day. I deeply respect him; he taught me the very basics of interpretation. But his words shocked me. I still don't know exactly how to process them.

He said something like, "I saw you leading a tour on Friday with three visitors. It takes something to go out there when you know you're only going to get so few people. I respect you for it; I couldn't do it."

The most exciting sight in a National Park for me is a simple sign. Sometimes it's brown and mounted up on a high post. Sometimes it's low to the ground with a little magnetic slot for a time placard. Sometimes, like at Harpers Ferry, it's wooden and dangles from metal rings off of a mobile stand.

The signs read, in clear, plain letters, wherever they are, "Ranger Program Begins Here."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeT5otk2R1g&feature=player_embedded

The soundtrack for today's post is brought to you by the Five Man Electric Band...

I have a timeslot on that particular sign. On Fridays all through the summer (and now into the fall) I've been doing experimental programming in the park, trying out and testing new techniques, honing my skills and in general staying fresh. I spend the rest of my week shackled to a desk, so getting out and talking to the public is a welcomed breath of fresh air, and makes me feel like a real Park Ranger and not some obscene pretender to the title.

But lately, my brown sign has been disappearing. Someone has been tucking it away behind the buildings. And thank god for the stalwart volunteers who, every time I call the information center on a Friday morning and remind them I'll be doing a tour, drag it back out from it's hiding place and slide the "11:00" tag into it's proper place.

And some well-meaning soul, by the next Monday morning, has dragged it back into hiding.

But why?



A sign that can literally stop visitors in their tracks. I've seen it happen nearly every Friday

The answer is simple: it's not summer anymore. There are no more tours, or very few. And, I'd wager, the person dragging the sign behind the brick walls of the buildings is trying not to tease visitors or get their hopes up. That's a valiant reason, but is it really productive or simply sweeping a broader problem under the rug?

The [Clemson / Virginia Tech](#) report on effective National Park Service interpretation has been rattling around in my brain lately. Beyond its implications [for the individual interpreter](#), the report released last month will hopefully have deep implications for management and program planning.

One of the key findings of the report is stark (emphasis added):

Because ***nearly all programs produce positive results*** and these data have the highest potential to be measured consistently, we recommend monitoring ***numbers of programs*** and attendees, as well as the proportion of scheduled programs that actually take place. These ***appear to be the most reliable measures of interpretive program health*** across parks.

The health of interpretation can be measured in the sheer number of personal services programs a site puts on the schedule.



So what's the health of interpretation *after* the college kids disappear from our parks in August? Many parks eviscerate their tour schedule. Many days, nary a personal services program is offered. And with the schedule go my favorite signs.

But why hide them?

What if we left the signs out? Might they work as amazingly powerful motivators?

Hide it under a bushel? No.
Why not let it shine?

For parks with limited or non-existent staffing, what types of conversations would they spark with visitors? When a visitor asks when the tour begins at the sign, imagine having to tell them that the park doesn't have enough in the budget to have enough staff to offer them a tour. What sort of righteous indignation (or meaningful letter begging a Congressman to increase that park's budget) might that encounter inspire?

And what about parks where interpreters are content not giving tours? What about those sites where there's enough staff, but ambition seems to have dried up? Might my favorite badge of honor become a deeply motivating mark of shame each time a visitor asks, "why aren't there any tours beginning at that sign today?" Might it move some rangers to step back out into the sunshine and help visitors find new meanings, even if it's only one or two on a program in late August or early September?

After all, they came here and they desperately want to care. Why make them wait until next June? Why not help them care today?