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"With high hope for the future": Holy Temples of Democracy

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Abstract

I did it again. I went to Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual conference (this year in Harrisburg). I always seem to be the black sheep at these gathering, focused on raw emotional meanings and the usable past far more than the broader historiographical implications of either the proverbial or actual price of tea in China. This year I went to present a paper on the knock-down, dragout brawl that Daniel Sickles and William H. Tipton have throughout 1893 over the preservation of the Gettysburg Battlefield to a room full of professional historians. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Public Historians, Academia

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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2012

I did it again. I went to Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual conference (this year in Harrisburg). I always seem to be the black sheep at these gathering, focused on raw emotional meanings and the usable past far more than the broader historiographical implications of either the proverbial or actual price of tea in China. This year I went to present a paper on the knock-down, dragout brawl that Daniel Sickles and William H. Tipton have throughout 1893 over the preservation of the Gettysburg Battlefield to a room full of professional historians.

OK, so the room wasn't full. There were five spectators. Yeah. That's how these academic conferences tend to go for me.

Before my session (where Dr. Bloom, my Master's thesis adviser joined me to talk about the Carlisle Indian Industrial School), I sat in on a session on Pennsylvania's colleges' and universities' Public History programs.

It was interesting to see the lay of the land, but I was unimpressed by the general trend of the conversation. I think one of the key problems that academics (even public historian of the academic stripe) have is that they are terrible communicators for a general audience. I never got the chance to ask the question during the Q&A, "do you have a mandatory interpretation or communication course in your program?"

Like a petulant preteen, I took to Twitter to grouse about it. "Here's the point the panel missed," I tweeted, "'office' historians can't communicate effectively w/ normal folks. That *NEEDS* to be problem #1."

Twitter is one of the safer places to complain like this at professional conferences I've found because barely anyone over 30 pays attention to the social media dimension of these events. To some extent, I'm simply complaining aloud to myself like a psychotic mumblor in the corner of the Metro car, swathed in a worn fatigue jacket and sporting an unkempt greying beard.

Much to my chagrin (and maybe elation) one of the panel's participants, Aaron Cowan from Slippery Rock University, [wrote back](#). He noted that there's been, "much agonizing over this in profession." But his keen question was simple: "but do we ask this of English lit, chemistry, psych? Are historians worse?"



A Temple to Democracy
/ CC Kevin Burkett

So I bit. [I responded. Twice.](#)



Not simply a temple to Christ, but a temple to liberty as well.
/ CC Meghan

"I don't think historians are worse than all acads," I wrote, "but I fear the effect is more dire: under-informed electorate." "But," I noted, "I'm one of those funky, altruistic Federal public historians."

I *am* one of those funky, altruistic Federal historians who thinks that our parks and sites of cultural import are sacred spaces and safeguards of liberty.

If applied physics fails, and an engineer makes a miscalculation or two, a bridge falls down and a few folks end up dead. It's a tragedy but it's ephemeral. If applied mathematics fails, and an economist makes a poor prediction or two, some investors lose a chunk of change in the market. It's a loss but it's relatively small.

But what happens if applied history fails, if public historians aren't effective in their work of communicating America to Americans?

America is a society built upon a secular religion. Our sacred spaces are our historic places. And our citizens learn the craft of citizenship, the process, the pitfalls and the promise of America, within those temples to freedom. Public historians are the scions of those spaces. If we fail to help the public find the meanings they need, if we fail to even entice them to come inside the temples, we risk losing America.

If applied history fails, and civics evaporates from the American peoples' consciousness, America falls down.