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# The Good, the Great, and the Ugly of Public History

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# The Good, the Great, and the Ugly of Public History

## **Abstract**

My last post recounted some of my favorite takeaways from my Civil War road trip this summer. But this trip was about more than just mosquito bites and cheap donuts; it was the first time I ever visited a historical site as a student of public history. My first tour was with Elizabeth Smith '17 at the Sunken Road at Fredericksburg. Elizabeth's tour was unique in that she was able to connect the events that transpired along Marye's Heights, a moderately nuanced subject, to President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, a very well-known subject. I was delighted to see this connection that appealed to a wide audience. For the hardcore Civil Warrior, Elizabeth's accounts of the 5th New Hampshire and Cobb's Georgia Legion gave the military historian exactly what he or she was looking for. Tying the mortality of the common soldier and the pathos of the war-torn nation that was so evident at Fredericksburg to the familiar and powerful Gettysburg Address gave the casual Civil War enthusiast something relatable (and perhaps it provided a new perspective to the hardened military historian as well). Her knowledge of her audience combined with her ability to connect broad themes to specifics and the importance of location demonstrated Elizabeth's skill as a public historian [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Public history, Pohanka internship

## **Disciplines**

History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### The Good, the Great, and the Ugly of Public History

*November 10, 2015*

*By Jeff Lauck '18*



*Elizabeth Smith '17 gives a tour in Fredericksburg as part of her Pohanka internship. Photo courtesy of the author.*

[My last post](#) recounted some of my favorite takeaways from my Civil War road trip this summer. But this trip was about more than just mosquito bites and cheap donuts; it was the first time I ever visited a historical site as a student of public history. My first tour was with Elizabeth Smith '17 at the Sunken Road at Fredericksburg. Elizabeth's tour was unique in that she was able to connect the events that transpired along Marye's Heights, a moderately nuanced subject, to President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, a very well-known subject. I was delighted to see this connection that appealed to a wide audience. For the hardcore Civil Warrior, Elizabeth's

accounts of the 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire and Cobb's Georgia Legion gave the military historian exactly what he or she was looking for. Tying the mortality of the common soldier and the pathos of the war-torn nation that was so evident at Fredericksburg to the familiar and powerful Gettysburg Address gave the casual Civil War enthusiast something relatable (and perhaps it provided a new perspective to the hardened military historian as well). Her knowledge of her audience combined with her ability to connect broad themes to specifics and the importance of location demonstrated Elizabeth's skill as a public historian.

Elizabeth's informative and emotionally moving tour was a prime example of historical interpretation done well. At Cold Harbor, I saw an example of interpretation done poorly. On my last day, I went on a tour of the Confederate breastworks conducted by a seasonal ranger. His woes began when he incorrectly stated that Cold Harbor was a much larger and bloodier battle than Fredericksburg. According to this ranger, Cold Harbor had an astounding 25,000 casualties, a stark contrast from the similar Battle of Fredericksburg, which he claimed had only 5,000 casualties. Both of these figures are wrong. The Civil War Trust lists the casualty count at both Fredericksburg and Cold Harbor to be roughly 17,500 each. In addition to citing incorrect facts, the ranger maintained a monotonous tone and somber mood. Although he emphasized the sheer carnage that took place during the battle, he unintentionally closed himself off to questions, as the audience fell silent with a wave of sympathy for the soldiers who fought and died where they stood. Promoting an open learning environment and conveying the seriousness of combat are not mutually exclusive ideas in public history. The ranger should have been more direct and friendly with the audience rather than preachy and morose.

Luckily, Pohanka intern Jesse Campana ('18) was attending the tour as well and was able to give me a better tour without inaccurate information or preachy malarkey. Unlike the other ranger, Jesse put the Battle of Cold Harbor in perspective relative to the entire Overland Campaign. He explained that following the futile Union assaults at Cold Harbor came the onset of siege warfare at Petersburg, as soldiers no longer wanted to make direct assaults against entrenched enemies. I also felt comfortable enough to ask him questions about different entrenchment features, which he informed me were for artillery pieces and officers. These were not questions I felt that I could ask the other ranger, as they seemed too trivial and irreverent for his somber tone. Jesse also included more personal anecdotes, such as the story of my fellow Nutmeggers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Connecticut Heavy Artillery and the 14<sup>th</sup> New Jersey, which found themselves behind Confederate lines when they found cover in a ravine. Most importantly, I felt more comfortable on the tour with Jesse because I was confident that the figures and accounts he gave were accurate and that he was committed to making sure I learned the significance of the Battle of Cold Harbor.

Public historians are tasked with a number of challenges: in addition to memorizing facts and figures they must reach broad audiences, help those audiences make personal connections, and put their subject matter into context. As we have seen, some, like the seasonal ranger at Cold Harbor, cannot always meet the bill. Our own Pohanka interns, however, have proven their skills as public historians and Civil Warriors.

Sources:

Civil War Trust. "Battle Facts: Cold Harbor." Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/cold-harbor.html?tab=facts>

Civil War Trust. "Battle Facts: Fredericksburg." Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/fredericksburg.html?tab=facts>

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