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Manassas: Heat of the Moment

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Manassas: Heat of the Moment

Abstract

Before I go any further, I need to make something clear: they tried. Oh, they tried so hard. The deck was stacked against them and they gave it the old Harvard try. Heat, a weekday and more... They tried so valiantly. But they came up short. [*excerpt*]

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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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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FRIDAY, JULY 22, 2011

Manassas: Heat of the Moment

Before I go any further, I need to make something clear: they tried. Oh, they tried so hard. The deck was stacked against them and they gave it the old Harvard try. Heat, a weekday and more... They tried so valiantly. But they came up short.

I've been going to Civil War anniversary events at Gettysburg for nearly a decade now. They are always simply buzzing with activity. The visitors start in the wee hours of the morning and have a smorgasbord of opportunities to choose from until sundown. There is never a lack of things to do on July 1st, 2nd and 3rd at Gettysburg.

Yesterday I took a day off of work, firmly put on my visitor hat and walked into Manassas expecting much the same thing: buzzing activity from morning until night. What I got was a sparse schedule, full of holes and gaps. The morning began with the grand keynote opening. Baking in the hot sun was fine and planned for. The speeches ranged from adequate (Governor McDonnell) to outstanding (Ed Ayers) to inspiring (Jon Jarvis). The moments were interpretive and meaningful, Ayers especially showing his keen ability to breathe life into the war with a prescient sense of what would work for the varied audience.

I am no crowd counting expert, but spread across the hill could not have been more than a regiment's worth of spectators and dignitaries observing the event. The low-turnout ceremony was both streamlined and meaningful right up until the U.S. Army Drill Team emerged at the end of the ceremony. While spectators melted and wilted in the unrelenting sun, the drill team marched slowly and tossed guns in the air.



"There stand Jackson like Mr. Universe...
Rally on the Virginians."



What did spinning rifles have to do with Manassas?
Couldn't they have done something more solemn,
akin to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?

I thought to myself, "What does this REALLY have to do with the Battle of Manassas?" I watched, less than mesmerized. I have deep respect for the 3rd U.S. Infantry's skill. But what did tossing 1903

Springfield muskets have to do with the ground upon which they were standing? It seemed more gratuitous, frivolous entertainment, ala themepark stunt shows, than measured and meaningful commemorative activity. The program ended with taps. That trumped the disjointed spectacle of the gun juggling, but the sour taste still lingered in my mouth.

The ceremony ended at 11am. Taking a glance at the schedule, no exhibit or events even would open for another hour. The visitor center's air conditioned haven was set to be shuttered for sixty minutes (it thankfully was opened earlier than scheduled). What was the crowd to do?

They boarded the shuttle busses and went back to their cars. They were given no offerings, no direction and no opportunities to engage with the ground beneath their feet. They simply gave up. Within minutes, the majority of the folks standing on Henry House Hill had left.

We stuck around, we dedicated and geeky few, and tried to take in the offerings. The pickings were slim. We could wait for an hour in line to buy postal dedications, eat some food from the concession (which also, thankfully, opened early), browse the family exhibit tent or linger for an hour for the first piece of organized interpretation to begin. Where was the bevy of various real-time and exceedingly powerful programming that a simple 148th anniversary at Gettysburg warrants?



The crowd visiting the Robinson House site.

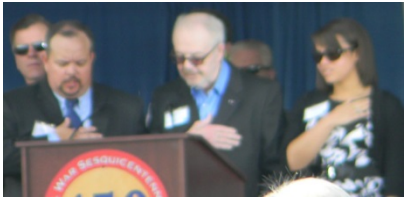
The most heartbreaking moment for me, though, as a historian of black history, was walking out to the Robinson House site. There was little to entice visitors out on the excruciating walk to the farm site. The weekend's pamphlet said little about the site, the most tantalizingly incomplete being: "Join park rangers and volunteers at the Robinson House site for a glimpse into the life of a free black family at the opening shots of the Civil War." That was enough for me, but only because black history is my bread and butter. The Marine Corps Historical Company's firing demo was much closer and far more showy. I walked alone to the Robinson House while the majority of visitors wandered aimlessly looking for something, anything to do.

I was the only visitor at the site. The only visitor on the right flank of the Confederate line on the 150th anniversary of the battle of Manassas at the exact moment that line was aflame with musketry.

There was one interpreter beneath a small awning, Ranger Lindsey Bestebreurtje. She was patient, kind and exceedingly knowledgeable. She answered all of my questions and made a real interpretive connection between the ground and the ideas. She was the highlight of the day.

But I was the only one who met her, at least for the half-hour I was out on that knoll. I'd doubt many people had the chance to feel the power of that ground, to feel the heartache of the Robinson family as two

of their sons were sold South to slavery. As Mr. Robinson hid beneath a low bridge with Federal and rebel forces streaming back and forth around his farmstead, waiting for battle to subside. As one of those young sons lost walked from the gulf coast to Manassas on hearing about the Emancipation Proclamation. Walked.



Descendants of a former slave recite the Pledge of Allegiance:
"...Liberty and Justice for All."

Meanwhile, earlier in the day, some of the descendants of the Robinsons recited the pledge of allegiance. They were introduced quite flatly, with no background as to who their ancestor was or the struggles his family went on to overcome, becoming one of the most prosperous black families in Prince William County. They were introduced by name, read the pledge and sat. I had to seek out that story. I had to hunt it down. Without Ranger Lindsey's help, it would have remained buried.

In the end, I understand it's easy to criticize from a keyboard while sporting a killer sunburn. But serious work deserves serious criticism. We all want the next event, and the next event after that, to be better and more meaningful than the last to a wider and wider audience. These critical posts aren't written with a wrecking ball impulse. Instead, it's more pruning shears, pointing to which buds might be clipped to make the prize winning rose bush even more tantalizing.

I have so much more to share about the day, but that will come as the weeks progress. The HistoryMobile is high on my list of things to discuss, have no worry. There were amazing moments and not so great moments throughout the day. I had only hoped for a larger buffet from which to choose. Too often, we came back with empty plates when we wanted to really begin to understand that important place.