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Freeman Tilden and the Civil War

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Freeman Tilden and the Civil War

Abstract

I spend a great deal of my time on the blog preaching (some might call it my soapbox) about the mantra, “Beyond the Battlefield,” and how Civil War battlefield interpretation should go beyond just the tactics used during the battle and military matters. Some have called me crazy, some have told me I am flat out wrong about what visitor’s want, and some have told me that if I talk about these things, I will fail. The problem with all those statements though, is that they imply that I am alone in this ideology. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory

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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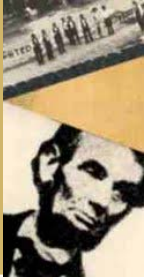
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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TUESDAY, JULY 26, 2011

Freeman Tilden and the Civil War

I spend a great deal of my time on the blog preaching (some might call it my soapbox) about the mantra, “Beyond the Battlefield,” and how Civil War battlefield interpretation should go beyond just the tactics used during the battle and military matters. Some have called me crazy, some have told me I am flat out wrong about what visitor’s want, and some have told me that if I talk about these things, I will fail. The problem with all those statements though, is that they imply that I am alone in this ideology.

I am not alone though, in fact, I am just merely a proponent (albeit a vocal one at that). I am not the gospel, just merely the disciple. Others have said it earlier and far better than me. Freeman Tilden, who many consider as one of the father’s of interpretation, said long before I was even around:

The battlefield of our great fratricidal American war is not merely a place of strategy and tactics: not a place where regiments moved this way and that like checkers on a board; not merely a spot where something was decided that would lead to another decision. It is a place of the thoughts and acts of men, of their ideals and memories; a place where on the evening of a fatal tomorrow men could joke and sing, a place of people, not armies. For we Americans are not descendants of a regiment; we are sprung from men and women.

Tilden continued,

In the places devoted to human history the objective of interpretation remains unchanged: to bring to the eye and understanding of the visitor not just a house, a ruin, or a battlefield, but a house of living people, a prehistoric ruin of real folks, a battlefield where men were only incidentally – even if importantly – in uniform.

Written in 1957, those words still ring true today. I recently came across the two quotes in my notes about interpretation. I had written them down, in my own handwriting when I first read Tilden’s book, *Interpreting our Heritage*. Reading Tilden’s book changed my entire outlook on interpretation and public history. Before reading his book, I was what I like to rail on today, a young public historian who focused on all the nitty-gritty detail, a historian who had to know everything and share with everyone I talked to how much I knew.

I’m still that nerd who loves finding arcane tidbits of historical fact about the places I work at and love. But I have changed as well. I realize that Interpretation is not so much about the past, as it is about the present. It is about us today, connecting with the people of the past at places we have found great meaning in. Battlefields are places of people. Battlefields do not belong to those of the past, but to those of us living now.