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Ten Weeks at Manassas

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Ten Weeks at Manassas

Abstract

My heart was pounding, my breath was shallow, and I wanted nothing more than to begin so that it would all be over sooner.

No, I was not preparing to jump from a plane. Nothing so dramatic. I was preparing myself to give a tour of Henry Hill detailing the position's salient importance in the First Battle of Manassas.

[excerpt]

Keywords

Civil War, Gettysburg College, Manassas National Battlefield Park, battlefield, history, heritage

Disciplines

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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

Ten Weeks at Manassas

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

By [Kevin Lavery '16](#)

My heart was pounding, my breath was shallow, and I wanted nothing more than to begin so that it would all be over sooner.

No, I was not preparing to jump from a plane. Nothing so dramatic. I was preparing myself to give a tour of Henry Hill detailing the position's salient importance in the First Battle of Manassas.



The Bull Run Monument on Henry Hill. Photo via Wikimedia Commons (Manassas NBP).

No, it was not my first time giving the tour. I had given this same program over a dozen times in the preceding two weeks. Each time, I was nearly as nervous as I had been when I gave my first tour. Suffice to say, the skills required for public speaking—and by extension, historical interpretation—do not come naturally to me.

Yet by the end of my ten-week internship at [Manassas National Battlefield Park](#), I could lead a tour and speak not only with confidence but with conviction. The feedback that I received from MNBP staff and [Freeman Tilden](#)'s elegant philosophy of interpretation helped me live up to the high expectations I had set for myself as an interpreter of our long and proud American heritage. Practice, of course, was also key to the transformation, and my time as a Brian C. Pohanka intern allowed me ample time to do so. Over the course of the summer, I learned to make tweaks to my program, continually developing it into a stronger and more engaging offering. Now, at the end of my time here, I can proudly say that I have never before had such confidence while presenting formally to a large group.

This was just one of my accomplishments this summer. I also had ample practice with informal interpretation—which came more naturally—at the Stone House, one of three surviving Civil War Era structures on the battlefield. On some days, I was given the challenge of helping children connect with a distant past through educational activities, a very different task than interpreting for adults. I was even given the opportunity of being a contributor to the [MNBP Instagram page](#), with the goal of making the page more robust and engaging. Through all of this, I was able to develop skills and experience that will carry with me throughout my professional career, and even assist in my personal life.

As I reflect now on what my experiences have meant to me, it also strikes me how our national parks are the perfect crossroads for bringing people together. As indicated above, I am naturally shy and awkward around strangers. Yet the historic ground on which we stood served as a middle ground for enabling meaningful conversations between me and the visitors about our beliefs and understandings. The battlefields of Manassas, in their role as a place of mutual interest, were a catalyst for visitors and me to share ourselves with each other. The resulting encounters are of unquestionable value, especially given humans' usual propensity to surround ourselves with likeminded souls.

In a sense, just as I interpreted the park and its resources for visitors, so too did the park facilitate the relationship between visitors and me.

But my favorite conversations were with those who knew little about the Civil War. Their passionate curiosity reflected their remarkable determination to approach and engage with an unfamiliar topic. In doing so, they expanded their scope of knowledge and enhanced their understanding of the world we have inherited.

I am proud to have played a role in that process. I am in turn grateful to the visitors and staff for the role they played in shaping my understanding of the challenges and opportunities of interpreting our heritage.



A July sunset from Henry Hill. Photograph courtesy of NPS/Kevin Lavery.

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