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A Not-So-Distant Mirror: Bringing the Revolution to Life through Interpretation

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Abstract

I have not been able to escape Freeman Tilden's grasp over the course of my three summers with the National Park Service. His writings and ideas seem to be everywhere, not out of pure coincidence, but because of the fact that nobody has eloquently and concisely gotten at the heart of what historical interpretation is quite like he has. In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, a book so ubiquitous that it might as well be hailed as the interpreter's holy scripture, Tilden asserts that "the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." This isn't meaningless fluff; rather, it's an important concept that guides what I do every day on the job. Visitors should walk away from an interpretive program with more than just a story in their heads, and it's up to interpreters to make sure that's the case.

Keywords

American Revolution, Interpretation, Jon Danchik, Minute Man National Historical Park, Mythology, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Not-So-Distant Mirror: Bringing the Revolution to Life through Interpretation

By [*Jon Danchik '17*](#)

I have not been able to escape Freeman Tilden's grasp over the course of my three summers with the National Park Service. His writings and ideas seem to be everywhere, not out of pure coincidence, but because of the fact that nobody has eloquently and concisely gotten at the heart of what historical interpretation is quite like he has. In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, a book so ubiquitous that it might as well be hailed as the interpreter's holy scripture, Tilden asserts that "the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." This isn't meaningless fluff; rather, it's an important concept that guides what I do every day on the job. Visitors should walk away from an interpretive program with more than just a story in their heads, and it's up to interpreters to make sure that's the case.

The sites contained within Minute Man National Historical Park, where I am spending the summer, enjoy a timeless historical relevance due to their association with the opening of the American Revolutionary War. As a result, just about everyone who visits knows something about what happened here. Indeed, the "shot heard round the world" still seems to be ringing in people's ears today. Some of the knowledge people bring with them is true, while other parts of it border on myth. The relative comfort afforded by a largely shared past seems to give visitors at Minute Man NHP the confidence to share their thoughts candidly in exchanges with historical interpreters throughout the park.

The famed "minute men" from which the park derives its name are the subject of a great deal of mythologizing. Many enter the park with an idea of "embattled farmers" with no military training somehow managing to fight off one of the most powerful armies the world had seen since the legions of Rome. While a popular misconception, it is one I frequently address in living history programs, in which I adopt the appearance of a member of a colonial militia company.



In colonial kit, I am not portraying anyone in particular, and am still just Jon Danchik. As a result, my exchanges with visitors are unhampered by a need to keep my experiences and mannerisms grounded in a different time.

Right off the bat, having a real person portray these figures brings them off of their pedestals and down to earth. In discussing the realities of colonial life, I am given a way to frame who these militia members and minute men were in a way that offers pushback to flawed ideas in a non-confrontational way. Instead of haughtily telling visitors that they are wrong and that there are several lingering deficiencies in how American history is taught, I help build conceptions of who these people were from the ground up. Incorrect assumptions that these men were largely untrained eventually yield to the reality that the colonists were the inheritors of an extensive military tradition. Entrenched beliefs that the colonists made extensive use of cover while the British Regulars stubbornly chose to die in massed formations on open ground falter with descriptions of the landscape and prevailing strategic doctrines of April 19, 1775. None of this is handled condescendingly, and the facts are not the end goal by themselves. It should never be that way.

To understand war is to confront several unpleasant realities, most of which I am not able to safely, comfortably, or legally portray in my living history programs. One thing I can do, however, is give a partial sensory preview to what soldiers would have experienced by offering a firing demonstration with a musket. Popular media has created an assumption that firearms are simply not all that loud. Indeed, action films and television programs often portray entire conversations happening against a backdrop of constant gunfire. Two shots with a single musket do a sufficient job of clearing that falsehood away.

Despite numerous safety warnings, the noise and smoke from the first shot always seem to shock people. This surprise gives way to a greater understanding when I explain that hundreds, maybe even thousands of these sounds are occurring all at once in battle situations. The noise, the muzzle flash, and the overwhelming complexity of organized combat all come together to paint a horrifying yet grounding picture, the scale of which many might not have fully considered before the program. I am no soldier, and I cannot claim to understand war in its totality, but by showing one small example of that

experience, visitors are left to reconstruct what they can of the Revolutionary War themselves. Walking away, they are left to think what other sensations might surprise them like the sound of a musket. Perhaps they would wonder what their own odds of survival would be if they were stuck in ranks, or if they would even be able to hold a musket to fire it in the first place. Maybe some just walk away with a greater appreciation of ordinary people being called to do extraordinary things. If visitors walk away in search of more dots to connect, I've done my job.



The report of the musket leaves behind wisps of smoke and a distinct smell. In many cases, this is the first time many visitors actually experience these sensations firsthand.

A crucial part of putting an interpretive program together at Minute Man NHP is outlining a few learning goals and objectives that you hope to accomplish by the end of your talk. Realistically, however, I cannot always anticipate how someone will walk away from my programs. By presenting other facts and points of view, I don't hope to end by leading visitors to a desired endpoint so much as I hope to open the door to yet more introspective thought. Yeah, the colonists were generally better trained and equipped than we tend to give them credit for, and no, people weren't shorter back then, but those assertions are not my desired endpoint by themselves. Factual information, framed a certain way, can help people learn fascinating stories and think more critically about how they know what they know. Contemporary discourse might lead one to believe that to challenge one's beliefs is to insult and offend, but through interpretation, it becomes clear that this is not the case.

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