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Provocation and Personalization: Sharing the History of Manassas Battlefield

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Abstract

When I first read Freeman Tilden's "Principles of Interpretation", I was surprised to find that provocation was considered essential for effective interpretation. I reread it, to make sure I hadn't read it wrong or misunderstood. Provocation? Why would the National Park Service want to provoke people? As an intern at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park last summer, I learned that Tilden didn't mean angering visitors; he meant inspiring the public to want to learn more on their own. To paraphrase, Tilden wrote that instruction and information are not the same thing as interpretation. Interpretation is not a fact-based lecture. Effective interpretation uses information to make broader points. However, the end goal of an interpretive site or program should not be the communication of information, but cultivating an interest among the public. Hence, provocation is key.

Keywords

Interpretation, Jeff Martin, Manassas National Battlefield Park, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Provocation and Personalization: Sharing the History of Manassas Battlefield

By Jeff Martin '18

When I first read Freeman Tilden's "Principles of Interpretation", I was surprised to find that provocation was considered essential for effective interpretation. I reread it, to make sure I hadn't read it wrong or misunderstood. Provocation? Why would the National Park Service want to provoke people? As an intern at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park last summer, I learned that Tilden didn't mean angering visitors; he meant inspiring the public to want to learn more on their own. To paraphrase, Tilden wrote that instruction and information are not the same thing as interpretation. Interpretation is not a fact-based lecture. Effective interpretation uses information to make broader points. However, the end goal of an interpretive site or program should not be the communication of information, but cultivating an interest among the public. Hence, provocation is key.



At Manassas National Battlefield Park, there are several opportunities for visitors to seriously engage with the history of the site. Our museum houses many artifacts, from the sword of Union General Fitz John Porter to canteens and medical supplies, that challenge visitors to try and place themselves in the period. Being able to physically see

what the average soldier or civilian used in 1860 can be the connection that some visitors need to fully comprehend the struggles people faced to survive. The park also has over forty miles of hiking trails, all of which have waysides and historical markers to provide context about the surrounding area. This way, those who want to enjoy the natural beauty of Manassas can also learn something about the history as well. Some places and names mentioned on the waysides might be familiar even to those who do not study the Civil War, such as William T. Sherman or the Stone House. Reading these waysides on the scenic trails might inspire people to learn more about Sherman's crossing at Farm Ford during the First Battle, or about Civil War medical practices. These waysides help the park engage with people who ordinarily might have little interest in the historical significance of the park.

One of the most difficult things about provocation in interpretation, in my experience, is that not everyone is interested in the same story. This especially becomes problematic on guided walking tours. As interpreters, it's our job to engage as much of the tour group as we possibly can. However, the programs themselves tend to lean towards the particular interests of the guide who is leading it. For example, my programs tend to emphasize the experiences of soldiers on either side during the First Battle of Manassas. This works really well when the group of visitors is primarily interested in military history. However, if someone on the tour was particularly interested in hearing about the story of slavery in the area, or how the battle impacted specific civilians, my program would not provoke that person. It's important, then, to gauge the audience. If a large part of the group seems interested in a specific part of the story, it can be beneficial to craft a tour that satisfies that interest.



Ultimately, provocation is something that all interpreters should attempt to do. It will not always work; sometimes, visitors will just not be receptive no matter what is presented to them. However, most people come to these Civil War sites for one reason or another. Figuring out what that reason is, and then engaging visitors about that

subject, is how a good interpreter becomes a great interpreter. This generally leads to a more satisfying visit for the public, which is the ultimate goal for any historic site.