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Provoking New Questions at Richmond National Battlefield Park

Kaylyn L. Sawyer
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

he first time I ever gave an interpretive tour was two years ago at the Virginia Museum of the Civil War in New Market, Virginia about a farmhouse that was in the midst of the fighting. My supervisor told me to make the house a home. Her advice to make a human connection between visitors and the past has influenced my style of interpretation, and I have carried it through other various internships including my time this summer at Richmond National Battlefield Park. While working in Richmond, I have been challenged, and challenged visitors, to think differently about the conflicts and battles in and around Richmond. The style of interpretation at Richmond National Battlefield Park follows what Freeman Tilden believes about interpretation: provocation is elemental to effective interpretation. Although it comes with its challenges, provocation brings opportunity and diversity to the visitors' experience and sheds new light on concepts they thought they understood before exploring the park.

Keywords

Battle of Cold Harbor, Interpretation, Kaylyn Sawyer, Pohanka Internship, Richmond National Battlefield Park

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Provoking New Questions at Richmond National Battlefield Park

By [Kaylyn Sawyer '17](#)

The first time I ever gave an interpretive tour was two years ago at the Virginia Museum of the Civil War in New Market, Virginia about a farmhouse that was in the midst of the fighting. My supervisor told me to make the house a home. Her advice to make a human connection between visitors and the past has influenced my style of interpretation, and I have carried it through other various internships including my time this summer at Richmond National Battlefield Park. While working in Richmond, I have been challenged, and challenged visitors, to think differently about the conflicts and battles in and around Richmond. The style of interpretation at Richmond National Battlefield Park follows what Freeman Tilden believes about interpretation: provocation is elemental to effective interpretation. Although it comes with its challenges, provocation brings opportunity and diversity to the visitors' experience and sheds new light on concepts they thought they understood before exploring the park.



Kaylyn begins her tour at Cold Harbor.

When it comes to interpreting the Civil War, there is no shortage of sensitive information. People are often uncomfortable engaging with the dark moments of our country's past, such as slavery. Interpreters are tasked with presenting difficult

historical narratives in an accessible way that is thought provoking and pushes the visitor without offending them. Museums and their brochures, films, exhibits, etc. are also meant to be provocative. In this regard, it means telling various sides of the same story in order to gain different perspectives. The visitor center at Historic Tredegar does a good job of seamlessly weaving together narratives of Union and Confederate soldiers, women, and African Americans. Even though provocation has its challenges, the reward is well worth the risk. Visitors are able to think differently and more deeply about subject areas they are familiar with, and they gain a broader understanding of the topic. Additionally, provocation is dynamic; there is always another layer to an event that continually allows visitors to rethink and redefine history.

As an intern here at Richmond, one of my main duties is to interpret and tell the story of the battle at Cold Harbor in June of 1864. Most visitors that are familiar with the battle before they arrive have preconceived notions about why the battle failed as well as its impact. They associate this battle with “Grant the Butcher” and the hopelessness of the attack on the morning of June 3. As part of my tour, I explain Grant’s actions and decisions in the battle, and how the events unfolded. I have visitors question whether it really was all Grant’s fault, or if others were responsible as well. Since Grant was the overall commander and the general in charge he normally takes the blame. However, technically speaking Grant did his job; he issued a general order to Meade who was supposed to provide his corps commanders with the details. Instead, General Meade left the tactical aspects up to his corps commanders who did not communicate with each other. This line of thought goes through the rest of the chain of command, all the way down to the privates who had been fighting for thirty straight days and were exhausted. The failure of this battle was not the responsibility of one man.

In terms of the battle itself, visitors often believe it was a failed attempt from the beginning. That was not the case. Grant and the Army of the Potomac outnumbered Lee’s army nearly two to one. Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, was only ten miles away and Lee’s back was to the Chickahominy River, so he was trapped. During the June 1st fighting the Union army managed to breakthrough a small portion of the Confederate line. The plan to attack was not a failure, but the fight failed because the men executing it were exhausted and had reached their limit.

Interpreting the battle at Cold Harbor has allowed me to grow as an historical interpreter. I enjoy challenging visitors and diving into deep and difficult conversations with them. It is a two way street: I learn from them as much as they learn from me. Their insight into historical events provokes me and forces me to consider something I may not have thought of. Learning is a never-ending process; there is always more information being discovered and new ways to interpret old information. This summer experience, along with my other internships, has confirmed my love of public history and solidified this path as my career goal.