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Revisiting Fredericksburg: Using Provocation to Explore New Questions

Jonathan Tracey
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

To Freeman Tilden, provocation was an essential ingredient to effective interpretation, and I tend to agree with that idea. Both my walking tour at the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and the interpretive exhibits at Chatham Manor utilize provocation in different forms, with different challenges and opportunities. Overall, the atmosphere of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park is one that supports and encourages provocative thinking by visitors.

Keywords

Battle of Fredericksburg, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Interpretation, Jonathan Tracey, Pohanka Internship, Slavery

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Revisiting Fredericksburg: Using Provocation to Explore New Questions

By [Jonathan Tracey '19](#)

To Freeman Tilden, provocation was an essential ingredient to effective interpretation, and I tend to agree with that idea. Both my walking tour at the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and the interpretive exhibits at Chatham Manor utilize provocation in different forms, with different challenges and opportunities. Overall, the atmosphere of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park is one that supports and encourages provocative thinking by visitors.



My thirty-five minute guided walking tour at Fredericksburg's Sunken Road is one that is based off provocation through challenging conventional thinking that many visitors

come with. The program focuses on the misconceptions that surround the battle in December 1862, primarily challenging the idea that Ambrose Burnside, the Union commander at the battle, was completely and wildly incompetent. By using facts, figures, and contemporary quotes, a background of the political situation and of Burnside's original plans, visitors are hopefully provoked into thinking about the man and about the battle differently. I certainly don't expect everyone to buy into it or think that Burnside was the next Napoleon Bonaparte, but I think that it is generally successful at helping visitors see a new perspective. Other sections touch on topics such as Union bravery and Confederate "invincibility," hopefully challenging traditional ideas to a small extent.

Chatham Manor provokes in a different way, relying not on formal programs, but on exhibits, a film, and supplementary informal interpretation. The less conventional idea that is pushed at Chatham to provoke thought is the presentation of the heavy slave involvement in life at the manor from its construction in 1771 through the Civil War. Exhibits note slave life at Chatham, with stories ranging from field labor to that of Charles Henry Sprout (or Sprow,) a man who was owned by Chatham's wartime resident, James Horace Lacy. Sprout escaped, joined the United States Colored Troops, and is now buried in the Fredericksburg National Cemetery. The film that discusses slave labor as well as informal interpretation about the 1805 slave uprising and court cases about manumission all challenge the idyllic image of a wealthy plantation that played host to Revolutionary elites. Hopefully, visitors leave Chatham not only with an appreciation for the architecture and elaborate gardens, but also with a greater understanding of the forced labor that once sustained the home.

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park does a great deal to challenge entrenched historical assumptions through formal programs, exhibits, film presentations, and informal interpretation. Whether it is discussing Burnside, bravery, invincibility, or slavery, each type of interpretation includes ideas that are meant to provoke deeper thought in visitors. Of course, it doesn't always work out perfectly. Occasionally I've had visitors complain to me, saying that Chatham was too heavily focused on slavery. Other times, I've had people flat out disagree with the arguments I try to make about Burnside or bravery at Fredericksburg. That's fine! For my part, I think it's alright if visitors disagree with me. My discussion on Burnside is certainly not the end-all-be-all on the matter, and if a visitor doesn't change their mind, then at least I was able to provoke them into thinking about it more deeply by bringing up an opposing view.