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Business, Education, and Enjoyment: Stakeholder Interpretations of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center

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Abstract

An anthropological study of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center undertaken to understand the ways in which the visitor experience is conditioned by their own personal background, as well as filtered through the carefully constructed historical narrative created by museum historians, National Park Service rangers, and administrators. The Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center is a site in which multiple stakeholders contend to ensure that their interpretations of the museum's purpose is being upheld. This paper will examine the ways in which these various stakeholders – primarily NPS rangers, Civil War historians, and history buffs – interpret the catalyst(s) for constructing the new Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum, and in turn how their understandings can be understood through the theoretical conception of the museum as a place of business, education, and enjoyment. Having outlined and analyzed their individual interpretations, I will then examine the visitor experience – through surveys given to visitors at the museum – as being conditioned by the explicit educational goals of the museum's creators, as well as by the museum's trifold status.

Keywords

Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center, Museum Studies, Civil War, Gettysburg, Battle of Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, National Park Service, Friends of Gettysburg

Disciplines

Anthropology | Cultural History | Military History | Public History | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Social History | Sociology of Culture | Tourism | United States History

Comments

Anthropology Honors Thesis

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Museum and Visitors Center

Ava Muhr
Honors Thesis
4 May 2015

Introduction

The origins of this anthropological study of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center are concretely based upon my research experiences with Civil War reenacting, as well as a summer internship at the American Museum of Natural History. Having spent months reenacting with self-described “Civil War nuts”, I became fascinated with the intense connection these reenactors had with transforming the stagnant concept of “history” into a meaningful lived reality. My internship as a curatorial research assistant at the American Museum of Natural History was also highly influential because I became deeply acquainted with the dichotomy between the individual visitor experience and the implicit and explicit goals of the museum as a site of education, business, and entertainment. My main research objective for undertaking an anthropological study of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center¹ was to understand the ways in which the visitor experience (primarily how people interact with and understand the presented history) is conditioned by their own personal background, as well as filtered through the carefully constructed historical narrative created by museum historians, National Park Service rangers, and administrators. Yet in attempting to study the visitor experience, I came to understand that the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center is a site in which multiple stakeholders contend to ensure that their interpretations of the museum’s purpose is being achieved.

In this paper, I will examine the ways in which various stakeholders – primarily NPS rangers, Civil War historians, and history buffs – interpret the catalyst(s) for constructing the new Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum, and in turn how their understandings can be

¹ From here on, I will employ the term “museum” when only discussing the museum and its exhibits found within the Visitors Center. I will employ the term Visitors Center when discussing the overall physical building that encases the National Park Service desk, museum, cyclorama, and the film “A New Birth of Freedom.”

understood through the theoretical conception of the museum as a place of business, education, and enjoyment. Having outlined and analyzed their individual interpretations, I will then examine the visitor experience – through surveys given to visitors at the museum – as being conditioned by the explicit educational goals of the museum’s creators, as well as by the museum’s trifold status.

Theory

While I used numerous anthropological and museum studies academic works, two pieces were of critical importance. First, Marcus S. Alan has studied the museum as a place of business, education, and memorial. “The first two revolve around the core purpose and function of the museum or memorial: (1) the museum as an educational facility or business enterprise and (2) the museum as a traditional museum or memorial.... The third dilemma is (3) the museum and memorial as a participant in and reflection of the larger context of local, regional, and national political and social debates” (Marcus 2007: 106). This trifold status served as an essential theoretical structure for understanding the ways in which multiple stakeholders interacted with the museum. In terms of the museum as a site of education, in my interviews with NPS rangers and Civil War historians the importance of education was consistently emphasized. The creation of the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center was intimately tied to shifting notions of the purpose of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center, and the perceived inefficiency of the old Museum and Visitors Center. In turn, visitor surveys indicated that they also primarily understood the museum to be a place of education.

The museum as a site of business or commerce was highlighted by delving into the creation of the creation of the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center, and specifically the public/private partnership between the National Park Service and the Gettysburg Foundation,

because this partnership necessitates high-income revenue to pay for the construction of the new building. When informants were asked, “What do you think about the museum as a site of business, education, and entertainment?”, they each stressed the importance of educating the public, yet they acknowledged that the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center needed revenue to survive – sometimes at the expense of education. For example, John Chase, Africana studies and history professor at Gettysburg College took issue with items for sale in the gift shop that were emblazoned with the Confederate flag. He said, “To me it’s a contradiction because I think the museum makes it very, very clear that the Confederate government was fighting to protect slavery, that that was their reason for living in a sense, and I think that’s accurate [...] yeah the fact that they sell it in that kind of memorabilia and stuff like that, I think it’s a contradiction with the message that they’re trying to get across in the museum, but [pause] I can’t imagine they would not sell it, because I’m sure it’s a money-maker” (Muhr 2014). Various stakeholders in the museum recognized the dichotomy that this trifold status posed, and they also recognized that their own understanding of the museum’s proper function may conflict with other stakeholders.

Continuing with Marcus’ third notion of the museum as a memorial, there is a rich academic tradition of Gettysburg as a pilgrimage site. John B. Gatewood and Catherine M. Cameron’s anthropological study article “Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park” has been essential in understanding Gettysburg as a pilgrimage site; “The not-so-hidden agenda of most commemoration sites, whether they are physical memorials such as those found in Washington, D.C., or battlefields such as Gettysburg, is to serve as components of a patriotic landscape. As such, they exist not simply to educate the citizenry, but to instill and sustain nationalistic impulses among the viewers.” (Gatewood and Cameron 2004: 207). One visitor who took my survey was a twenty-three year old woman from Heidelberg, Germany, whose

passion for studying the American Civil War brought her to the Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum. Yet I would also add to Marcus' theory the museum as a site of entertainment where visitors actively choose to spend their money and time as an explicit leisure activity.

The museum as a site of entertainment or enjoyment is a much more subjective experience, based upon the theme and content of the museum itself. For example, it would be incredibly difficult to argue that people visit the Holocaust Museum to have "fun", whereas this type of visitor reaction at the Philadelphia Museum of Art would be acceptable because the museum's content is not nearly as somber. As will be explored further, the histories of slavery and Civil War in the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center have firmly shaped the ways in which the creators of the museum (i.e. NPS rangers and Civil War historians) designed the museum as a leisure site with a serious, educational purpose. NPS Educational Specialist Barb Sanders said, "So yes, did thousands and thousands of men die on these fields surrounding this building? Yes, so you have to be respectful and take that in and honor that and learn about that, but you are on vacation. So...it's a tough balance" (Muhr 2015). Despite the emphasis on education, in general the trifold status of business, education, and enjoyment became a fundamental theoretical tool for understanding the impetus for the construction of the museum, as well as an informative question in later formal interviews.

Originally, I had wanted to exclusively research the historical presentation and visitor interpretation of slavery because it has been – and it remains – a polemical topic in Civil War historiography and in public history. While this remained an important theme (specifically in the framing of interview and survey questions), I decided to focus on what exactly visitors found interesting, and what they did not, in order to ascertain what they are individually drawn to, and

not just what I – or Civil War historians – think they would (or should) be drawn to.² In order to understand how visitors engage with the museum’s history, I utilized John H. Falk’s excellent museum studies work on visitor engagement, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Falk conceptualizes five different categories of typical museum visitors: explorers, facilitators, experience seekers, professionals/hobbyists, and rechargers. Each of these five types will be developed further in the paper, but it is important to note that “Research to date seems to suggest that virtually all visitors arrive at museums hoping to satisfy one or more identity-related motivations; the majority arrive with a single dominant visit motivation” (Falk 2009: 188). This theory was helpful in framing survey questions, such as the simple “why did you decide to come [to the museum] today?” Falk’s five categories were also an incredibly useful way to make sense of the data I received through my surveys and understand who exactly was visiting the museum.

Falk also emphasizes the process of meaning making that serves as the foundation of any museum experience:

In recent years, we have come to equate that which is attended to and remembered with the idea of meaningfulness. By definition, we attend to that we find meaningful and ignore that which we find meaningless. [...] Visitors to museums make meaning. Each and every visitor brings to bear their prior knowledge, experience, interests, and values in order to actively, though not necessarily consciously, determine which parts of the museum of worth focusing on. Museum visitors only attend to those aspects of their visitor experience that at the moment are most meaningful to *them*” (Falk 2009: 137)

While the term “meaning” is incredibly broad, I use it here as a signifier of a response to the historical material, whether it be a strong emotional reaction, or the ostensible absence of a personal or intellectual connection. The following research is thus centered on the idea of how stakeholders make meaning within the museum. This central focus incorporates two separate but

² I will go into further detail later, but I decided to not include the question “what do you think about the portrayal of slavery?” on my visitor survey because I did not want to lead visitors into focusing on slavery if they would have not perhaps remarked upon it without my prodding.

ultimately interconnected stories: the creation of the Museum and Visitors Center itself, the ways in which Civil War historians and National Park Service rangers who created the museum attempted to foster a historical environment where meaningful experience could thrive, and how this meaning making process is encased within the museum as a site of education, business, and entertainment.

Methodology

My fieldwork was characterized by two different stages: in the first stage I carried out formal interviews with Civil War historians, students, and National Park Service (NPS) rangers, as well as limited participant observation. Once I had established a firm liaison with the NPS, I was able to get permission to begin my second phase of fieldwork: handing out surveys to visitors at the museum. I began formal research in October of 2014, and I concluded fieldwork the second week of April 2015. All surveys were anonymous, and participants were asked to only put their age, gender, and residence. Those Gettysburg College Civil War historians and students whom I formally interviewed had their names changed to protect their anonymity, but the names of NPS rangers have not been changed; the rangers each gave me permission to use their real names and positions prior to their individual interviews, and it was clear that while the rangers were providing their own personal answers and interpretations, they were all well aware that they were also representing the NPS. I conducted nine formal interviews, and although each of the interviews had specifically tailored questions, each touched upon the creation of the Gettysburg Visitors Center, the public/private partnership between the Gettysburg Foundation and the NPS, and the actual historical content within the museum. Through my formal interviews, a major theme began to emerge: the tension between business, education, and entertainment at the museum.

Surveys were handed out on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from February 2015 through mid April 2015. Although I approached a large number of people, due to those who declined to take the survey, I received forty surveys in total.³ The questions on the original survey were as follows: “Which aspects of the exhibits in the Visitors Center did you find the most interesting?”; “What were you least interested in, and why?”; “If you could change anything about the museum, what would you change? (This could be adding or removing an object(s), altering a case, changing the historical information provided, etc.) and why?”; “Do you think all sides of those who participated in the Civil War were accurately portrayed?” “What did you think about the films shown throughout the museum?”⁴; “Any other comments?” When I first began handing out surveys I was concerned with the lack of what I presumed to be “meaningful” responses; the vast majority of responses were one-word responses. In order to remedy this perceived issue, I decided to reformat my survey, as well as reposition myself within the museum. On the second set of surveys, I eliminated the question “Do you think all sides of those who participated in the Civil War were accurately portrayed?” and substituted it for another: “Why did you decide to come?” This question was drawn from my literature review, specifically from John H. Falk’s theory of the five different types of museum visitor. The responses to these questions were never one-worded, and they furthermore helped me to ascertain an individual’s motivation to spend the day at the museum.⁵ In an attempt to more

³ I tried to approach men and women equally, but a greater portion of women than men declined to take the survey, and therefore I have a disproportionate amount of male surveys. Women usually declined outright without providing a reason, or they directed their husband to take it instead.

⁴ I was asked by Cindy Small, the Gettysburg Foundation’s director of marketing and communication to include this question in order to ascertain the efficacy of the films shown throughout the museum.

⁵ See Appendix A for an example of a visitor survey.

judiciously select visitors who would perhaps give more detailed responses, I moved my position within the museum.

While the physical layout of the museum ensures that the visitor must follow the prescribed narrative (which will be explored later), there are actual two exits: one may exit the museum directly after the exhibit on Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address, or there is a second exit that lets visitors out at the conclusion of the entire museum (and, by extension, the narrative of the entire war itself). Both of these exits let out onto a hallway where there is a special, non-permanent exhibit. I had first positioned myself directly outside the first exit in the assumption that those who chose to go through the entire museum would be more willing to participate in the survey, but the majority of those visitors either gave one-word responses, or they quickly walked to the end of the hallway to exit back into the Visitor Center lobby. I therefore decided to position myself further down the hallway at the end of special exhibit in order to hand out surveys to those visitors who took the time to view this collection. After editing my original survey and repositioning myself vis-à-vis the special exhibit, I received more detailed and individually qualitatively interesting responses. Yet the decision on the part of the visitor to view the entire museum – special exhibits included – is inherently linked to the story of the construction of the Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum, as well as the fundamental didactic objectives of the museum's creators – the first group of stakeholders that I will examine.

If You Build It, They Will Come

In order to understand the current museum and the ways in which the history is presented, it is necessary to explore the history of the new Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum. The Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museums opened in the spring of 2008 after the controversial demolition of the old Gettysburg Visitors Center and Museum, as well as the Neutra Cyclorama

Building.⁶ The new Visitors Center is a large circular building that encases the NPS visitor desk and administrative offices, the Gettysburg Foundation administrative offices, NPS research areas, curatorial preservation labs, and archives. There are also two gift shops, two cafés, the cyclorama painting, and the theater in which the film “A New Birth of Freedom” is shown. Originally budgeted at 40 million dollars, NPS ranger Scott Hartwig estimates it cost 129 million dollars to build the new Visitors Center. This exorbitant sum spent on construction was only made possible by the NPS partnership with the Gettysburg Foundation, a private organization who helped to finance the General Management plan, and is the current owners of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center building. I garnered the history of the demolition and construction of the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center primarily through formal interviews with NPS rangers, including Supervisor of Museum Services Greg Goodell, Education Specialist Barb Sanders, and recently retired former Supervisory Historian, Scott Hartwig. Each of NPS stakeholders were intimately involved in the creation of the new Visitors Center, and with the simple question “tell me about your involvement at the new Visitors Center”, they each delved into an oral history of its inception. The enthusiasm, candor, and length with which they spoke about the creation of the new Visitors Center reveals both their personal and institutional commitment to the construction of a museum that would better serve the needs of the visitor. It also intrinsically reveals their own understanding of the explicit role of museums: the (re)education of the general public.

As told to me by Scott Hartwig, the original Gettysburg Visitors Center and Cyclorama Building (then two separate buildings) were not efficient:

⁶ The demolition of the Neutra Cyclorama Building was a highly contentious decision because famed modernists architect, Richard Neutra, designed it. Although my NPS informants gave their reasoning behind the destruction of the Neutra Building, this paper will not focus on the controversy surrounding it.

[...] when the cyclorama center opened in 1962, I think it was, they couldn't handle the number of visitors coming in- they were overwhelmed. The building had been planned for a certain number of visitors and it didn't work. And as they were approaching the bicentennial there had been concern, like we can't handle the number of visitors we're getting here, and the old electric map building which contained the Rosensteel collection, that family wanted to sell.⁷ So the park service became interested in purchasing it- and they ended up buying the building and the collection. So now they had a museum and a Visitors Center, and it was a little confusing to visitors- well, you've got two buildings here- the cyclorama center with the painting in it, and now we have the Visitor's Center with the electric map. So it was a little bit of an inefficient type of set-up. Both of the buildings sat up on the front line of the Union line (Muhr 2014).

In addition to confusing visitors, the buildings were badly placed: sitting on the front line of the Union line, they effectively tarnished the battlefields and the historical landscape. Hartwig went on to tell me that they "never should have been built there" (Muhr 2014), a view held by every single one of my other informants. Battlefield preservation, much like slavery, has been an incredibly polemical issue at the Park for decades. The restoration of the battlefields to their original historical integrity was also a major feature of the General Management Plan that was created in 1999. This plan outlined how exactly the National Park Service was going to restore the battlefields, as well as demolish the existing Visitors Center and Cyclorama Building in favor of the construction of a new, all-inclusive Visitors Center.⁸ Apart from the physical issue with infrastructure, the Park also wanted to address the way the history was presented. Hartwig said,

So we had that problem, then, we're on historic ground, aging infrastructure, and then the National Park Service, you've been watching what's been going on in Washington since 2010, so the Park Service is getting slashed to the bone budget wise, and our superintendent saw the handwriting on the wall, it's costing us a lot of money to maintain

⁷ The Rosensteel collection still forms the basis of the current museum collection.

⁸ Another catalyst was the Cyclorama Building itself. Hartwig said, "the cyclorama building was having a lot of problems inside the building, but the biggest problem was the roof to the cyclorama painting was a flat roof, and eventually it started to leak" (Muhr 2014). This leaking lead to severe water damage on the painting. This resulted in a multi-million dollar restoration of the painting, and the NPS firmly argued in favor of destroying this historic building on the basis that it was unfixable.

those two buildings. If we can find a partner, a foundation will build us a new visitors' center, and they will absorb some of those costs, that's gonna help us be able to do our job here. So, we had a budget issue. And then finally it was possible for a visitor who was coming to the park to go to the electric map, to go to the cyclorama, to take a two hour tour of the battlefield and leave and never understand why there was a Civil War, why the Confederates invaded Pennsylvania, where they went afterwards, how the war ended, what the war meant- nothing. All it did was- the museum was a really cool curiosity cabinet [...] so we didn't tell the story, we didn't tell the story- we avoided the story of the Civil War, we told the safe story, it was just about commanders, battlefield decisions, battlefield movements and things like that. And so we wanted to build a museum that placed the battle within the context of the war. So you couldn't do that in that building, that building was a piece of junk (Muhr 2014).

The invocation of the former museum as a "curiosity cabinet" was frequent. Greg Goodell referred to it (perhaps more diplomatically) as a "compartmentalized museum, where you had "here's a bullet, here's a case of guns, here's a case of long arms, here's a case of swords, here's a case of uniforms, here's a case of relics from the battlefield, here's a case of this, here's a case of that" type collections, and without a lot of connectivity between the pieces" (Muhr 2015), whereas Gettysburg College history and Civil War era studies professor Christopher McGovern said the old Visitors Center "didn't allow for an intelligent, interpretive experience. It was old school with cases filled with all kinds of things, mostly muskets and guns" (Muhr 2014), and Gettysburg College history and Africana studies professor John Chase said, "It really wasn't much of a museum" (Muhr 2014). These responses indicate that NPS historians, as well as academic historians, saw the museum as failing to teach the public, a didactic objective that would come to define the rallying call for the construction of a new museum.

This movement toward the reconfiguration of historical museums and sites as places in which the narrative of history is the key unifying thread and theoretical framework is not relatively new, nor is it unique to Gettysburg. "Scholars have been critical of this blinkered view of the past for decades, and the rise of social history, combined with empowerment movements and other political developments, has brought about a sea-change in the messages that public

history sites are trying to communicate” (Peers 1999: 42). This shift toward a public history is more inclusive in terms of weaving together a narrative from diverse voices, many of which are usually overlooked (such as racial or ethnic minorities, women, children, etc.). Yet, in terms of Civil War sites, Gettysburg *is* unique because it has fully embraced this call for revisionist public history in order to create a museum in which the historical narrative thread begins with and concludes by putting forth an important historical argument: slavery was the catalyst for the secession of the southern states, and therefore for the Civil War. The old Gettysburg Visitors Center was simply a “curiosity shop”, or a building filled with hundreds of Civil War artifacts that did not tell a cohesive story. Professor McGovern said, “It was material culture on display for the sake of being on display” (Muhr 2014). Therefore the historical and theoretical architects of the new Visitors Center decided to create a museum in which visitors would be able to engage with an actual narrative of history, and not just look at artifacts within a glass case.

Furthermore, in “The End of History Museums: What’s Plan B?”, Cary Carson examines the dynamic between modern visitors and historical museums in order to help failing museums attract visitors. In doing so, she highlights the museum as a place of business, entertainment, and education. When visitors attend museums, “[...] they expect to become personally acquainted with the historical figures they meet there, share their joys and sorrows, and in effect join in the action of story being told” (Carson 2008: 19). For public historians such as Carson, as well as Scott Hartwig and other Gettysburg NPS rangers, they understand average visitors as no longer being content to simply view objects on display; instead, they want an experience that will connect them on an emotional level in order to foster a meaningful understanding of the past. The use of films and interactive games throughout the museum is another medium through which connection can be made between the visitor and the presented history. Yet the promise of a

personal, meaningful acquaintance with the past is also a tool for museums to attract visitors, and therefore increase revenue. The museum can serve as a place of education, and use those educational goals as a way to exist as a place of commerce.

This transition from “curiosity shop” or a Civil War collector’s dream to a museum united by narrative certainly succeeded in ruffling the feathers of self-described Civil War “psychos”, which will be discussed later on. In response to this type of criticism, Professor McGovern said “One of the things again we need to do at these historical sites is get people to develop a way of thinking historically, to move away from seeing an artifact as just an artifact of truth. And to understand that people at that moment [during the Civil War], the information that is at their disposal is partial, it’s fragmented, it’s confusing” (Muhr 2014). Historical museums without a narrative thread, or without adequate information plaques, run the risk of giving *too much* power to the visitor to interpret or understand the presented history. Furthermore, in regards to the polemical and contentious issues of slavery, state’s rights, and the “lost cause”⁹, the old Gettysburg museum that did not have a narrative thread that reflected current, accepted academic theory regarding the roots of the war (i.e. slavery). This (both theoretically and in reality) allowed visitors to disengage from history and project their own understandings onto inanimate objects accompanied by sanitized and basic information not connected to the grand moral narrative of the war.

⁹ The lost cause is a highly criticized, though still largely popular, historical interpretation about both the causes of the Civil War and its outcome. One of my reenactor informants, Mary, gave me this explanation: “The lost cause is an idea that comes about in the 1880s [...] the idea that the Southern men were never outfought, it was just that the northern Yankee industry was too powerful to- that they just couldn’t overcome it that the industry, the manpower- Grant “the butcher” could afford to just keep throwing thousands of men into the overland campaign cause he could afford the casualties and Lee couldn’t- the idea that Lee was this magnificent, perfect General [...] that the war had nothing to do with slavery...” (Muhr 2013).

The criticism of the museum as a “curiosity shop” is linked to subjective visitor interpretation as to the purpose of the museum. While museum historians and academics may have viewed the old museum as simply a building filled with material culture for the sake of material culture, visitors were sometimes critical of the new museum. A sixty-two year old male from California who had visited both the old and new museum more than fifteen times criticized the lack of artifacts (in comparison to the old museum) because the museum was “hiding the good stuff” (Muhr 2015). The visitors with whom I spoke understood the old museum and its collection as a vital place for Civil War “nuts” and collectors to view the Rosensteel Collection (considered to be one of the best Civil War collections) in order to continually commune with the presented artifacts.

There is a wide array of academic literature on the Gettysburg battlefields as a place of pilgrimage. “The pilgrims at Gettysburg are not seeking grace, communing with a deity, or making speail [sic] requests. They are, however, having transcendental experiences – numinous ones – as they contemplate the desperate battle fought in those same places in early July of 1863” (Gatewood and Cameron 2004: 213). The perception of Gettysburg as a place of pilgrimage was frequently invoked in my surveys and conversations with visitors. When responding to the survey question “why did you decide to come?”, a seventy-two year old man from Sioux City, Iowa responded “I have wanted to visit Gettysburg all my life. It has taken me 72 years to get here.”¹⁰ Yet I would argue that the museum itself – and not just the battlefield – is also a pilgrimage site because it is the place in which the average visitor typically begins his or her journey into the constructed memorial that constitutes the physical battlefields, as well as the intellectual landscape of the Civil War.

¹⁰ In the section “Any other comments?” He wrote that it was “well worth the trip.”

Gettysburg College history and Civil War era studies student Thomas said, "...anyone who has ever heard of the Civil War at all, they've heard of Gettysburg. [...] So the Park, when they rebuilt their visitors' center, they decided okay, if we're going to be the place that people go to first, we need to cover everything up to and including the battle of Gettysburg" (Muhr 2014). Thomas' response is nearly identical to that of Professor McGovern's: "And there was agreement, that for most Americans, if they were to have any contact with a resource related to the Civil War, it was going to be here at Gettysburg, and they didn't want to miss an opportunity- the only opportunity- for many to get a bigger story about the battle itself" (Muhr 2014). In creating the museum and the narrative that serves as the thread connecting the physical artifacts to the war, as well as the visitor to the war, the museum administrators and NPS rangers understood that they could not just focus on the battle of Gettysburg alone; rather, they needed to place the battle within the context of the entire Civil War in order to ensure that the average visitor would understand the war – its causes and outcomes – and not just Gettysburg solely as a disconnected military site.¹¹

The physical layout of the museum itself is indicative of the NPS historians' desire that visitors understand their narrative thread – that the battle of Gettysburg is embedded within the greater history of the Civil War – by designing the museum in a way that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to view the exhibits and objects as separate, disconnected displays. First, there is no paper map of the museum that visitors can carry with them in order to locate certain exhibits or

¹¹ The different types of visitors will be explored later in the "Visitor and Survey" section, but when I refer to the "average visitor", I am employing two of Falk's categories from his five visitor theory. They include explorers, who are "[...] individuals who say they are visiting the museum because of curiosity or a general interest in discovering more about the topic or subject matter of the institution" (Falk 2009: 190), and experience seekers, who are "[...] often tourists, [they] are typically motivated to visit primarily in order to "collect" an experience, so that they can feel like they've 'been there, done that'" (Falk 2009: 196).

objects. Second, the museum has an almost labyrinthine layout that moves visitors in a circular motion as they move deeper into the museum. Third, the narrative structure of the museum, and the utilization of historical artifacts as tools for telling the story of the Civil War – as opposed to displaying a large quantity of artifacts to simply just display them – facilitates the movement of visitors as they proceed throughout the museum as they move forward to learn about the war; it is difficult to go backward because one is essentially going backward in “time”, and the labyrinthine layout also makes it difficult. The floor arrangement of the museum was designed in accordance with museum objectives of educating the public through a narrative thread.

Mads Daugbjerg explores the ways in which curators and visitors understand and make meaning (specifically in terms of nationhood and the construction of heritage) at the Dybbøl battlefield and other historical sites. When discussing the Sønderborg Castle, he writes “[...] the stance of the curator stressing to me the museum as a space of information for the public. Museum visiting, in such a perspective, is viewed as a civic ritual. As temples of modernity, museums work, Bennett suggests, as places in which ‘citizens’ go to learn of their ‘rights and duties as citizens’ (263). And crucially, this instruction is held to be an activity for the eye: the museum is analysed [sic] as a civic space of *seeing*.” (Daugbjerg 2014: 50). The subtle difference generated by the application of Daugbjerg’s conception of the museum as a “civic space of *seeing*” to the Gettysburg museum is the type of “seeing” being done: seeing should also be accompanied by an intellectual engagement and understanding of the objects, material, and narrative presented. As evidenced by the demolition of the original “curiosity shop”, objects should not be seen just to be seen, but to serve a purpose to educate.

Daugbjerg also analyzes the Dybbøl battlefield and Sønderborg Castle in terms of civic engagement and citizenship building; “[...] Danish museum visitors, despite a number of

differences, participated in the upholding and social reproduction of a firm and nonelective understanding of Danish identity. At the core of these processes lie powerful structural and cultural assumptions about what a museum is or should be, and what key terms such as ‘history’, ‘heritage’ and ‘nation’ mean and do” (Daugbjerg 2014: 76). The Sonderbørg Castle Museum curators and historians sought to show both the Danish and German sides equally and objectively. Danish visitors nonetheless “banally assumed” (Daugbjerg 2014: 91) the museum to be a place in which Danish identity was prioritized and reaffirmed. While many of my interviewees implied that citizenship building was important (i.e. in connecting the Civil War to the modern day), this was an explicitly important aspect for Educational Specialist Barb Sanders, who spoke at length about the ways in which the museum and the educational programs she has created were designed to encourage students engage with the museum and its material in such a way that they understand what it means to be American.

For students we have really involved programs with pre-visit work and post visit work and we’re reevaluating- *I’m* reevaluating them currently to really connect with different- new curriculums that I had talked about like social studies, common core curriculum-writing and reading curriculum process, so to perhaps maybe have- this is just one example- maybe have a student program where students and their teacher and the park ranger look at the causes of the war as evidenced by, for example, inscriptions on monuments- you know what did they say this battle meant? [...] we want people to come and leave with a greater understanding of the War, of the battle within the context of the War- but we, I primarily work with students and teachers and for that, I want any program to connect with their objectives in the classroom. So in other words, I don’t want this place to just be a place where people go on their way to D.C. because they’ve heard of it and they think it’s important – and I don’t want it to be just a place where if there’s time or money at the end of the year of the school year you come up for a quote “fun day” [used air quotes]... you know I want this to be a place that is integral to the curriculum and the learning objectives of schools and teachers, and integral to the story of what it means to be an American citizen- for families, or for anyone (Muhr 2015).

Unlike the Sonderbørg Castle Museum curators, Barb Sanders explicitly used the museum as a tool to provoke questions about what it means to be an American citizen; through the understanding of the battle, as well as the ways in which previous generations understood the

cultural and memorial significance of Gettysburg, Barb Sanders wants visitors (specifically students) to connect the history of the Civil War to the present in order to affirm American citizenship ideals.

When responding to the question “Which aspects of the exhibits in the Visitors Center did you find the most interesting, and why?” a twenty-five year old male visitor from Jacksonville, Florida wrote “The areas preceding the actual battle exhibit + after it. Reminds you war was much bigger picture than just 1 pivotal battle.” This response shows that, for at least one visitor, the park historians’ goal of situating the battle within the Civil War was attained. Yet the demolition of the old Visitors Center and Cyclorama Building, the rehabilitation of the battlefields, and the construction of a new Visitors Center needed to tell this story was far from cheap.

The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

Gettysburg College history and Civil War era studies student Anne, a Confederate reenactor whom I interviewed during my reenactment research project, has interned as an NPS guide at Fredericksburg National Military Park, Spotsylvania National Military Park, and Richmond National Battlefields. When asked about the interpretative direction of the museum, she responded, “Every [Civil War] Visitors Center wants to be like [the] Gettysburg Visitors Center because not only do they have the interactives, but they do not take a side- they really don’t. They might be more on the Union side because they win, so they have more information to show and say that they win- the Union won, the Confederacy lost. [shrugs shoulders] Sorry. But they’re able to portray that in a way that is more productive than museums who don’t have that type of funding” (Muhr 2014). In claiming that the Gettysburg Visitors Center does not take a side, and later in the interview declaring her admiration for the NPS’ decision to outright focus

on slavery, Anne reveals that she interprets the narrative viewpoint of the museum to be objectively truthful and historically unbiased by centering on slavery as the catalyst for the Civil War. In her opinion, Anne argued that the partnership Gettysburg Foundation allowed the NPS to “not take a side” and present a somewhat more truthful depiction of the Civil War because the partnership financed the construction of a completely new museum that wholly rejects the “lost cause” theory. Other Civil War National Parks do not have the ability to renovate their museum facilities because the NPS budget has been greatly reduced within the past five years. Barb Sanders comments on the reduced NPS budget as well:

I don't want to make any kind of statement or get myself in trouble, but recently you may have read there were more national parks added to the National Park Service, but there's no increase in funding or staff for even the sites that there currently are. So I can only speak to federal sites- there are state sites and privately owned sites and historic houses, etc. but there is somewhat of an anti-government, not anti-government but smaller government sentiment right now and- sometimes the National Park Service is a well-respected agency and can ride through some lean years, and definitely that hurts things too. If you don't have as much staff to teach people about it and work to preserve it, then those things fall by the wayside (Muhr 2015).

The partnership with the Gettysburg Foundation has allowed the Gettysburg Visitors Center to restore, rehabilitate, reinterpret, expand, and to survive in lean economic times. Greg Goodell said the “[...] joint cooperative venture between the National Park Service and the Gettysburg Foundation [is] a means of providing better service and interpretation and museum experience to the general public, something that the Park Service could not do with it's limited resources and budget” (Muhr 2015). The NPS decided to enter into a partnership with a private organization while still under the direction of the now resigned NPS superintendent of the Gettysburg National Military Park, John Latschar. The NPS requested proposals for the construction of a new visitors center, and the Gettysburg Foundation to help raise money for the project. The Gettysburg Foundation still owns the building.

Latschar was the driving force behind the reconstruction of the Visitors Center and the rehabilitation of the battlefield. Latschar's motivation was twofold: he wanted to increase visitation, as well as demolish the old Visitors Center and create a museum with a narrative story thread. Professor McGovern said, "John Latschar was very clear that we had to do more than just retrace where the troops fought- how they fought, where they fought, those were important questions. But why did this and what it meant, those were absolutely essential. He raised that, he understood that discussing the role of slavery and the coming of the war was vital. The team agreed upon that as well" (Muhr 2014). In terms of the economics, Scott Hartwig commented, "[...] he thinks years down the road, and what he saw was this aging infrastructure, this lousy museum, this appalling park painting, and that was going to effect visitation. And ultimately that was going to affect the economy of Gettysburg, that's going to affect everyone's bottom line. You build a new facility and you can boost your visitation because people always like to go to something new" (Muhr 2014). The dual goal of creating a better museum in terms of historical content in order to attract new visitors is indicative of the balance of the museum as a place of business, education, and entertainment. The public/private partnerships between the NPS and the Gettysburg Foundation has allowed for a multi-million dollar renovation that would have never been possible if the NPS had to fund their renovations alone.

Cary Carson analyzes the decline in visitor numbers to historical museums that have taken place over the last twenty years. (Carson 2008: 15). She writes, "Overpopulation among history museums themselves means more competition. It is estimated that fully half the museums in the country have opened since 1960" (Carson 2008: 12). While the NPS rangers and historians emphasized the importance of educating the public, they were also concerned with ensuring that Gettysburg – the town itself, but specifically the Gettysburg National Park Service – remained

viable in an economy that was (and still is) in the throes of a recession. Furthermore, the proliferation of historical homes and museums (as evidenced by the myriad of museums throughout the tiny town of Gettysburg) served as competition to a badly aging museum that did not facilitate average visitor engagement with the presented history. The NPS rangers and historians who created the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center therefore understood the museum as both a place of education and a place of business that needs to attract visitors in order to survive. While my informants praised the partnership with the Gettysburg Foundation – who, according to Scott Hartwig, Greg Goodell, and Professor McGovern played no part whatsoever in selecting the historical content that would be featured in the museum – other informants have voiced some concern in regards to the ways in which a public enterprise, and their ultimate pursuit of profit, can negatively impact the museum as a site of education.

The Customer is Always Right (?)

The Gettysburg Foundation is a non-profit organization, but in order to pay for the construction of the new museum, as well as the continual rehabilitation of the battlefields and upkeep on the museum, there is an entrance fee to the museum – something that did not exist at the exclusively NPS owned old Visitors Center. “Museums walk a fine line between serving as places of learning and generators of funding. Education is essential to most museums’ missions, yet they cannot survive without an adequate cash flow. Many have new directors with corporate backgrounds and are encouraged to function like businesses” (Marcus 2007: 106). The Gettysburg Visitors Center as a business has raised the question “who owns public history?” For example, the objects within the museum itself are owned by the NPS, but the building in which they are housed, i.e. the entire Visitors Center, is the property of the Gettysburg Foundation. This situation allows the Gettysburg Foundation to charge an entrance fee to the museum. Civil War

era studies adjunct professor James Baldwin was the director of the Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg¹² for one year, and was involved with the merging of this organization with the Gettysburg Foundation, but he left shortly after the merger. Professor Baldwin repeatedly expressed his concern in regards to the question of public ownership of history within a private context.

And when the Rosensteel family donated their collection, there was a caveat that said it would be free to the American public. The movie ["A New Birth of Freedom"], well quite honestly that wasn't something that had been at the old museum so if they charged for that, okay. And the cyclorama, the same thing. The cyclorama wasn't finished when the museum opened- you know the restoration. And so if you wanted to see the movie I think you paid something, it took, it might've taken eight months or so before the cyclorama was ready- it was a significant amount of time. The Foundation said they weren't making enough money. They had made a lot of projections on how much they would make. And I have to tell you I was in meetings saying "I don't believe it. I don't think this projection is valid." And my experiences were that I knew enough about all of this. And so they raised the prices, and then it eventually became a deal where you had to pay for all three. There was a tremendous number of Civil War people- Civil War students, advocates, psychos [points to himself; both laugh] who are extremely resentful about this. The National Parks belong to the people as opposed to the government or the Park Service. Now that's a nice theory, but it's just not real. And so a lot of resentment. That transfers to [the type of] people going. [...] And so, as a person who would go to that place maybe twenty times a year, if it was reasonable [in terms of price] to get in, I've gone none, except when I take my students. And I won't go.

Despite working as the president of an organization very much like the Gettysburg Foundation, Professor Baldwin objected to the merger not because it necessarily conflated the public with the private sector, but because he found the ticket prices at the Visitors Center to be far too high; a ticket for an adult (aged 13 plus) is \$12.50, which includes the cyclorama, the twenty-minute film "A New Birth of Freedom", and the museum itself. Yet the ticket is all-inclusive, and one

¹² According to the Gettysburg Foundation's "About Us" page, the Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg "[...] was started in 1989 by a small group of concerned citizens who wanted to help preserve the national parks at Gettysburg. Since its founding, the Friends has become a national leader in battlefield landscape preservation, land protection, monument restoration and education, providing millions of dollars to Gettysburg National Military Park for preservation programs." <http://www.gettysburgfoundation.org/4>

cannot opt to purchase a ticket to participate in only one of the three experiences. Furthermore, Baldwin raises the issue surrounding the Rosensteel collection: the family gave their collection to the NPS in 1971 in order to have it shown to the American public free of charge, but the high cost of the construction of the Visitors Center (including the museum itself), as well as the nature of the public/private partnership between the NPS and the Gettysburg Foundation has necessitated that these “publicly owned” artifacts be housed within a private building, therefore entailing tickets.¹³

The question of “who owns history” is fundamental to the Gettysburg Visitors Center because the NPS museum historians and interpreters actively tried to and continue to try to create meaningful links between the Civil War and modern civic identity building. “*It [history] makes them feel important.* It tells a story big enough to convince them that their participation in the narrative has involved them in something important in American history” (Carson 2008: 20). If the museum content and NPS ranger lectures send the message that history is an integral aspect of our shared American past, both in terms of familial connection and sacrifice as well as upholding American socio-cultural and political values, how does the museum administration reconcile the fact that some visitors view tickets as antithetical to the notion of public ownership

¹³ When Harwig, Latschar, Sanders, and others on the interpretive team had designed the whole museum and were at 90 million, Hartwig was told that he needed to remove some of the storyline in order to cut costs. Hartwig says “Bob Wilburn was the president of the Gettysburg Foundation and he didn’t say anything in this meeting [about budget. . . .] But anyway he was just sitting there and his face just keeps getting redder and redder and finally he said “we can’t cut those, we can’t cut those- we have to have those.” And basically what he was saying was I’m putting myself out there and raise that extra money, and he did- he raised that extra money to be able to add that space. So it was a lot of money to raise, so that’s part of the reason why everything ended up costing so much” (Muhr 2014). Although the Foundation raised the money, their museum centered around pieces owned by the NPS. This situation illustrates the interconnected relationship between public history and *publicly owned* history with private industry.

of history? The NPS invokes the cost of construction as a justification for ticket prices, along with emphasizing the role of the private Gettysburg Foundation.

Yet even Hartwig, a former NPS ranger intimately involved with the NPS/Gettysburg Foundation partnership remarked that this public/private relationship could complicate the ways in which history is presented.

So that's one of the challenges for the future at a place like Gettysburg- whether you can uphold the story you've told, against money, because money talks- you've got the foundation that can raise money, but if you've got a person saying look, I don't like the film, I've got 10 million dollars, and I want you to do blah blah with it, that's going to be tough in the future because some of your stuff's aging, might need to be replaced. One of the reasons why you can never have foundations run these historic sites [is] because of this very fact: they can be influenced by outside forces whereas the government is supposed to always be kind of partial referee to tell everyone's story, and to kind of be objective- but that is a danger as budgets get tighter and you've got to replace things (Muhr 2014).

Hartwig argues that private foundations cannot run historic sites alone because they are not required to be objective, whereas a government entity such as the NPS must to be. His subjective opinion reveals that the NPS are to be the trusted interpreters, stewards of historical meaning, and facilitators of identity building, while the Gettysburg Foundation that should be an affiliated organization solely entrusted with the financial power to ensure that the NPS can effectively do their job. When asked if he would change anything about the Visitors Center, Thomas responded "I hate to say this, but I would get rid of the Gettysburg Foundation- it adds a lot of barriers. [...] It's a barrier to people, it's a barrier to the park: it adds a whole other level of bureaucracy because not only do you have to keep the visitors happy, but now you have to keep the Foundation happy as well" (Muhr 2014). Although he went on to express his "love" for what the Foundation has done, he primarily understood the Gettysburg Foundation as a "barrier" between the visitor and the historical narrative, as well as the physical artifacts of the Civil War. As self-described Civil War "psychos" and "nuts", Professor Baldwin and Thomas perceived the

Gettysburg Foundation as “barrier” to their constant access to the Civil War artifacts within the museum via ticket prices.

David Arnold, a local African American businessman has spearheaded a movement to open an African American Museum in Gettysburg. Like Professor Baldwin and Thomas he finds the Gettysburg Museum to be an excellent museum, but views it as not wholly serving his or the African American community’s needs. He said, “If you leave it [historical interpretation] to people who don’t have a stake in the story, it’ll be white washed” (Muhr 2015). Thus the museum exists as a site in which multiple stakeholders contend for the right to ensure that the museum is essentially doing what it is supposed to do, in their subjective opinion. Just as the battle of Gettysburg is a link within the greater story of the Civil War, visitor engagement is embedded within the greater story of the construction of the new Visitors Center, and the various stakes in which Civil War historians, NPS rangers, and Civil War fanatics had in the story the museum told through its narrative, and through its artifacts.

In “Gettysburg: Display Window for Popular Memory”, Jim Weeks chronicles the historical evolution of Gettysburg as a pilgrimage site. While he contends that Gettysburg was and still is as an important American shrine, he also rejects the notion that the commercialization of Gettysburg is a new phenomenon:

What needs to be given its due is the prodigious market activity that entwined with venerative gestures at Gettysburg to produce a popular American shrine. It was no coincidence that the Gettysburg icon grew apace with America's shift from a producer to a consumer nation. As we shall see, a variety of purveyors in the decades surrounding the turn of the century marketed Gettysburg for a commercial society characterized by display, spectacle, images, and commercial leisure. In the vernacular of merchandising, Gettysburg became a display window for popular memory (Weeks 1998: 41).

Criticism over the privatization of the Rosensteel Collection against their expressed wishes is certainly legitimate. Further, criticism over the high-ticket price that prevents routine visits is

understandable. Yet the understanding of Gettysburg as a pilgrimage site wholly divorced from or above market activity due to its “sacred” stance is unfounded because “commercial leisure”, as Weeks defines it, has defined Gettysburg since the early twentieth century. Therefore, the museum as a site of entertainment, education, and business has a long historical precedent in the history of tourism at Gettysburg.

The Visitor Experience

When asked if she would change anything about the museum, NPS ranger Barb Sanders said, “If I was able to raise money I would have said, “let’s raise money and have a pot for museum evaluation.” A pot of cash for going back and saying what we got right and what we didn’t get right. Overall I’m so proud of it, I think everybody did such a wonderful job, but you gotta keep looking at it and figuring out what’s working and not working” (Muhr 2015). This indicates that since its creation, the museum has not undergone a formal review, and that my research is the first to likely inquire about museum’s efficacy in educating the public. Having already encountered extreme Civil War fanatics during my reenactment project, I fully expected to encounter them at the museum. After numerous surveys in which I received one-worded or lackluster answers, I began to wonder where the Civil War fanatics were? By adding the question “why did you decide to come?” I hoped to understand an individual’s motivation for visiting the museum, and hopefully some of the responses would indicate that these Civil War fanatics visit constantly, but they did not want to provide detailed responses.¹⁴ When this failed to prove that the fanatics were there in a large number, I began to become nervous (what was my paper going to say?) and frustrated because my interviews with Scott Hartwig, Greg Goodell, and Barb

¹⁴ On-the-spot conversations with visitors did reveal that some fanatics were there, such as the twenty-three year old German woman who is deeply interested in the Civil War.

Sanders revealed that when the museum first opened, there was a huge amount of vocal dissatisfaction with the new museum.

Civil War fanatics and collectors were appalled with the smaller number of artifacts presented, and some were upset with the narrative direction of the museum, deeming it too simplified. Civil War fanatics and collectors are looking for minutiae, and while many – such as Professor Baldwin – concede that the museum is great, it is not serving their needs. Professor Baldwin said “But the truth of the matter is, many of the Civil War psychos are not pleased with it. And the people who like- who want to see a lot of guns, who want to see a lot of uniforms, or want to see a lot of artifacts, they’re not seeing as much as they wanted to. Even though it’s probably a big museum by most standards, and it has neat videos and it has neat layouts” (Muhr 2015). Professor Baldwin’s responses made me realize that the Civil War fanatics who voiced their displeasure in the months following the new Visitors Center opening no longer routinely visit the museum due to the ticket price (which did not exist at the old museum), but more importantly because this museum was not really designed for Civil War fanatics or collectors. Hartwig, Goodell, and Sanders continually emphasized the education of the average visitor on the battle of Gettysburg within the context entire Civil War; it is incredibly difficult to keep Civil War fanatics and collectors happy when they expect to see a large quantity of artifacts accompanied by information on historical minutiae when the explicit goal of the museum is to engage the average visitor. The old museum, as a “curiosity shop” filled to the brim with artifacts and lacking a narrative cohesion, was the ideal museum for Civil War fanatic and collector. The

new museum, containing far fewer artifacts and a narrative story arc that seeks to educate the visitor about the entire Civil War, much better serves the casual visitor.¹⁵

Gettysburg and the Gettysburg Visitors Center are tourists sites, and “[...] tourism is a very complex phenomenon, encompassing issues that are economic (to do with supply and demand, business, and markets); psychological (stressing need and motivation); social (including roles, contacts, and ties); and cultural (such as transmission of knowledge, and tourism as a factor in change)” (Burns 2004: 11). The economic, psychological, social, and cultural factors each play(ed) a significant role in the formulation of the museum’s layout and its content. Although the museum is a place of education, it is also a place of enjoyment where the visitor decides to spend his or her leisure time. Thus the politics of historical representation at the museum are tied to economics, as well as attracting a certain type(s) of visitor who would chose to spend his or her time and money at this site. Anne succinctly encapsulated the dilemma: “It’s a very fine line between do you want to attract the normal visitor, or do you want Civil War nuts who come here to pay homage to Gettysburg? How do you make these two happy?” (Muhr 2014). In *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, John H. Falk has outlined five different types of typical museum visitors: Explorers, facilitators, experience seekers, professionals/hobbyists, and rechargers:

“Explorers are individuals who say they are visiting the museum because of curiosity or a general interest in discovering more about the topic or subject matter of the institution” (Falk 2009: 190)

¹⁵ Goodell also stressed the importance of the physical preservation of artifacts in the decision to display fewer of them. The old museum had artifacts “[...] without a lot of connectivity between the pieces. While that’s not necessarily a bad thing, what it lead us into was a crisis in preservation because when you have this volume of stuff out, a lot of times its static because you don’t have a depth to pull from. So for example, if you have seven or eight uniforms out, you might only have two or three in the queue left whereas if you’re putting our two uniforms at a time, you can refresh those uniforms on a regular basis and they’re not sitting out, soaking up light, getting exposed to the elements [...]” (Muhr 2015).

“Facilitators are visiting in order to satisfy the needs and desires of someone they care about rather than just themselves” (Falk 2009: 192).

[Experience seekers] “This group of museum visitors, often tourists, are typically motivated to visit primarily in order to “collect” an experience, so that they can feel like they’ve ‘been there, done that’ (Falk 2009: 196).

Typically, individuals with a Professional/Hobbyist motivation represent the smallest category of visitors to most institutions, but they are often disproportionately influential” (Falk 2009: 199).

[Rechargers] “These are individuals who visit in order to reflect, rejuvenate, or generally just bask in the wonder of the place” (Falk 2009: 203).

Each of these typical museum visitors – all of whom were represented to varying degrees in my surveys – come to a museum with a specific motivation, and this underlying motivation informs and defines their engagement and experience with the museum. While NPS historians and administrators wanted to ensure that all visitors would enjoy the new museum, they consciously created the exhibits with the goal of educating the average visitor. As stated earlier, the “average visitor” would be best understood as either explorers or experience seekers. When asked, “Why did you decide to come?” a fifty-five year old man from Chester Springs, PA wrote, “weekend away, never stayed in Gettysburg.” A twenty-six year old man from Main wrote, “Had free time, never seen the museum.” A twenty-three year old man from Pittsburg, PA wrote, “Parents are visiting, something interesting to do.” This genre of “something to do” response was habitual and greatly outnumbered those of the professional/hobbyists whom I had expected to see. This “why not” attitude toward visiting the museum was also highly present at the Dybbøl battlefield and Sønderborg Castle. Daugbjerg writes, “[...] to many, a day trip to the museum and/or battlefield centre was just something they did because this is what you are somehow ‘supposed to do’ when holidaying in southern Denmark [...] Such comments, and the generally odd looks I got when asking people of their motivations for visiting, attest to a deeply ingrained culture of museum going and sightseeing as a mundane and routinized holiday activity” (Daugbjerg 2004: 72).

Visiting museums and historical sites during one’s vacation appears to be a cross-cultural

phenomenon that has helped to define the Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center as an almost ritualistic destination in the construction of modern American civic engagement.

Yet the particular attention paid to explorers and experience seekers has led to tension with Civil War “nuts” (who would be categorized as professional/hobbyist or recharger, depending on the frequency of their visits) the main clientele of the old museum who feel as if the new museum is too facile. In fact, while handing out surveys I did encounter so called Civil War “nuts”, but not to the extent that I had anticipated. An example of a professional/hobbyist response comes from a fifty-nine year old man from Milwaukee, WI. When asked “Why did you decide to come?”, he wrote “History buff. Have visited Gettysburg several times but not since the new Visitors center has been completed and wanted to see it.” Professor Baldwin therefore explained that Civil War “psychos” did not want to (or did not have the financial means) to pay the ticket price, and that the museum itself was not serving their needs. The tension between attracting the average visitor (or the experience seekers) and pleasing the professional/hobbyist highlights the difficult balance between the museum as a place of business, education, and entertainment because as a now semi-private enterprise, the Gettysburg Visitors Center needs to attract a large clientele in order to sell tickets, yet they have alienated other visitor groups in the process. This is a difficult balance, and museum historians did not choose to completely ignore the Civil War fanatic (in fact Barb Sanders and Greg Goodell both stressed the importance of pleasing this type of visitor), but they did put more emphasis on the meaningful experiences of the average visitor.¹⁶

¹⁶ For example, when asked “Which aspects of the Visitors Center did you find interesting, and why?” A sixty-year old male from Maryland said “The battles. How it all fit together – Gettysburg in the larger war.” His experience corresponds to the didactic goals of the museum for the average visitor.

The pursuit of educating the visitor about the whole war (as well as the subsequent Reconstruction period and commemoration events) often resulted in “museum fatigue.” When I went through the museum for the first time in September of 2014, I became tired pretty quickly. It required a second trip the next weekend for me to view the museum in its entirety and not skip certain exhibits. Barb Sanders was consciously aware of the museum fatigue phenomenon when designing the amount of historical material to be included. She drew upon her own experience at the D-Day Museum in New Orleans:

I think that my level of knowledge and interest in World War II is about the equivalent of an average visitor to Gettysburg, and what I found was, I went through and I looked at the maps and I- at first I was really starting to get an understanding, but by about the middle of that museum, my museum fatigue set in and I was just drawn to the cases that told the story about an individual person, artifacts and story about an individual person, so that, that’s really something you have to account for- even the person who reads every little thing- these are big museums to go through, so hopefully it’s a place where you can come back and you can spark your interest if you have no interest, otherwise it’s a place where you can’t get through it all and want to come back so that’s kind of where we were looking for that balance.

Park ranger historians emphasized the importance of creating a cohesive historical narrative that linked the past to the present.¹⁷ For example, the final film in the museum connected the emancipation of the slaves through the Reconstruction era up to the Civil Rights Movement by analyzing the struggles that free black people faced in a virulently racist society. The goal of linking past to present necessitates a longer story, and therefore a longer museum. Yet the length of the museum was also a purposeful attempt at ensuring that the visitor would have a reason to return because he or she likely did not fully absorb everything in the museum. I believe Barb

¹⁷ When answering the question “Why did you decide to come?”, a fifty-six year old man from Hawaii said “to learn the history from past to present.” This indicates that he was interested in understanding the Civil War itself, as well as the ways in which it has influenced modern politics and society. Therefore, his objective for visiting the museum aligned with that of the museum’s creators.

Sanders and other NPS rangers truly want visitors to return to ensure that they engage with the history and understand the war, but in regards to the symbiotic relationship between the NPS and the Gettysburg Foundation, this is beneficial financially for the foundation; if a visitor has to return a second (or third) time to really take everything in, that is two or three more tickets sold. Professor McGovern said that by the time an average visitor gets to Emancipation to Civil Rights film, “[...] by then everyone’s like “phew, I want a drink of water!” Right? I want to sit down! And so they don’t really soak in the conflicted and contradictory legacy of the Civil War. What I wish they had done was scale back the artifacts even more, there’s too much stuff there, too much stuff. And then picked maybe three or four narrative lines that could have carried people through that museum experience” (Muhr 2014). This viewpoint was expressed in three museum surveys when asked “If you could change anything about the museum, what would you change?” A sixty-year old man from Maryland said “nothing- it was too much to take in at one session.” A twenty-one year old female from Omaha, Nebraska said “There were enough cases w/ uniforms in them. Like to know more personal facts about various soldiers/civillians [sic].” I argue that the types of responses I received were intrinsically linked to the length of the museum, as well as the individualistic and subjective nature of the museum experience.

While I was at first disappointed by the lack of detailed responses in my visitor surveys, I was later intrigued by this phenomenon. Every single one of surveyed participants gave an overwhelmingly positive review of the museum, even in the event of criticism (which were generally mild suggestions, such as better lighting) or in the event that they really had nothing else to say. This can be explained through the understanding of museums as the voice of authority, and the trust in which the average visitor vests within this institutions.

Although Americans frequently visit museums and memorials, these experiences may be devoid of critical analysis of the sites. They may not think of the sites as constructed

representations of history. Museums are viewed by many as “reliable, authentic, and comprehensible” (Falk and Dierking 2000: 2). Using a scale of 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 10 (completely trustworthy), one study found that museums were rated an 8.4. They were seen as more trustworthy sources of historic information than are college history professors, high school teachers, and nonfiction books” (Marcus 2007: 106).

Visitor trust is conditioned by different variables. The Gettysburg Museum presents its information through static written information plaques or films. As a non-living entity, the presented information cannot be argued with immediately. Furthermore, information plaques do not provide the name of the historian who researched and wrote that information, which seemingly renders the history as untouched by subjective human interpretation. To an average museum visitor, museums are assumed to be unquestionably authoritative voice on the subject because their only objective is to research and present this history; museums are viewed as monolithic academic institutions dedicated to the “truth” and not influenced by external debates. “Many visitors uttered a view of the museum as a space for the learning of ‘objective’ history” (Daugbjerg 2014: 67). The assumption that museums are objective in nature coupled with the presumed dedication to the subject matter results in the average visitor to engage with the history presented, but none of my surveyed participants questioned the veracity of that history. Anne eloquently encapsulated the division:

There was a statistic from my public history class that talks about how what percentage of people feel more trustworthy or that they’re trusting chitchatting with an interpreter, or if they’re reading it in a museum like an actual exhibit. A higher percentage take the real facts of being with the artifacts instead of being with the person, they don’t trust people. And that’s okay, my interpretation of Chancellorsville could be totally different from my coworker, but museums don’t have that. They have one straight answer, and they leave it to your interpretation (Muhr 2014).

While the surveys I received were not qualitatively “bad” or not useful, they did indicate that those visitors perhaps did not engage on a “deeper” level with the presented historical material. In light of my surveys and formal interviews with NPS rangers regarding their clientele, I would argue that the vast majority of visitors to Gettysburg fall within the following two

categories: explorer or experience seeker. The average, non-Civil War obsessed visitor to Gettysburg decides to visit because “they have family in Virginia” (twenty-one year old man from Omaha, NE) or “famous historical site; had never been to PA” (twenty-three year old man, Omaha, NE). Thus those who decide to spend their leisure time at the museum are primarily doing so out of a mix of intellectual curiosity and an “I’ve never done this before, let’s do it” feeling that certainly acts as the impetus for the explorer and experience collector. Not everyone is deeply connected to the Civil War or Gettysburg in a deep way, and those that are (i.e. Civil War fanatics) do not visit the museum nearly as often because it does not serve their intellectual or collector needs. When trying to understand a similar phenomenon at a Danish heritage site, Daugbjerg writes,

In sum, while it is surely not surprising that the curator knew more about the exhibits than the visitors, my point is that the gap between their readings was not simply a matter of missing or outdated labeling. It cannot be boiled down to a mere matter of miscommunication. Much more fundamentally, the disconnection regards basic, deeply ingrained and habituated ideas about what a museum is, and – equally important – what the terms ‘history’, ‘heritage’ and (as we shall see shortly) ‘nation’ mean. (Daugbjerg 2014: 88).

Shortly after the museum opened, Hartwig encountered a New Jersey woman who was adamant that slavery had not caused the war: “so I [Hartwig] sent her an email and I said “we’ve received your message, and I’ve attached to this email four secession declarations from four of the eleven states that seceded, and I want you to read these and then tell me slavery wasn’t the reason the south seceded and caused the war” (Muhr 2014). The woman responded by conceding that yes, slavery had caused the war. This anecdote illustrates that the museum historians and park rangers utilize historical documents as means to justify their interpretation, which harkens back to Anne’s suggestion that they “don’t take sides.” It also illustrates that the visitor who vocally opposes museum interpretation is quite rare, the vast majority of whom made their opinions

known right when the museum opened; fervor has arguably died down in the past six years because the museum is no longer incredibly new. The “disconnect” between the average visitor and the information about which he or she is learning via the museum is again connected to our collective socio-cultural understanding of the museum as the voice of authority; when visitors do question the content of the museum, the park historians respond by returning to the historical texts, and therefore reinforcing the notion of an “objective” history.

Conclusion

It is difficult to judge a museum’s efficacy because museum experiences are highly individualistic and subjective in nature, a phenomenon that was actively exploited by the museum’s creators in order to evoke an emotional response from visitors. The construction of a new Gettysburg Museum and Visitors Center and the ways in which park rangers and historians attempted to create a space in which meaningful experiences could more easily occur (which they contrasted with the old museum) within the context of a narrative storyline chronicling the Civil War’s roots to its far-reaching effects, reveals that park rangers and historians framed the museum in a way that they believed would elicit the appropriate intellectual and emotional reactions.

I also find that the physical layout of the museum as a structured narrative played a significant role. It is difficult for the visitor to go backwards (and therefore back in “time”) and reverse the developing narrative storyline (in which artifacts and individual exhibit cases were woven by the thread of unfolding history), which lent the information presented an air of authenticity by linking it to the unchangeable element of time; visitors were more concerned with understanding the “big picture” of the story of the Civil War narrative than the minute details. Park historians also sought to create a museum space in which the visitor is fully immersed in the

history. Hartwig said,

So even the images that you see when you first walk into the museum- what we wanted to try and do is when you're outside of the museum there's that music playing, and we have those two paintings that Rick Reeves did. That was to create the pre-War euphoria that people were having, that this was going to be an adventure, this was an adventure- you open the doors of the museum [and are confronted with images of slaves], and it's not an adventure- this is grim. It was also to quiet people, like you're confronted with this stuff and this is serious, the story that you're going to hear in here is serious (Muhr 2014).

While the park historians wanted visitors to connect past to present, they also created the museum as a liminal space in which the visitor can transcend the modern to immerse his or herself into the constructed historical past. This was done through the use of visual images and background music to set the mood and tone of the exhibits, effectively engendering an emotional response and connection as well as an intellectual one. "Above all, it is recognized that for visitors, authenticity is rooted in experiencing the past: visitors need to be able to glimpse, taste, and feel the past in experiences that work intellectually, emotionally, and physically." (Lipscomb 2010: 111) When responding to the question "Which aspects of the Visitors Center did you find the most interesting?", a man who left the information section blank, but was a white senior male, said "The tragedy of the war and the aftermath that survives to this day." He talked with me for about five minutes, and said the Civil Rights to Emancipation film "brought tears to his eyes. He highlighted the "futility of it all" when discussing the war's inability to bring about racial equality. His interpretation was twofold: it hinged upon an intellectual understanding of the connection between the historical past and the present, but this understanding of the connection also relied upon a visceral emotional response that was engendered in the museum space. Barb Sanders also recognized the power and importance of establishing emotional and empathetic connections with historical actors. When asked, "what is your favorite part of the museum?" Barb Sanders responded, "Voices from the Aftermath Theater [which chronicles the

days directly after the battle of Gettysburg]. And it's raining, and there's a photo and they populate it with raindrops on it and the way he says that quote about the groans of the men in the ambulance, it is so powerful to me- I could go in there and sit there and listen to that." Through its historical narrative storyline and the interpretive tools (such as film), the museum attempts to conjure an emotional connection between the visitor and the historical past that helps to create meaningful experiences that will hopefully prompt visitors to return. Returning visitors fulfill the museum's goal of continual education and increased revenue.

Visitor interaction is fundamentally conditioned by the museum. Visitor experience is filtered through the museum as a place of business, the museum as a site of enjoyment, and the museum as means of education. These three positions have defined not only the construction of the new museum, but the ways in which visitors are able to meaningfully engage with the museum's content. This trifold status brings together the various stakeholders –NPS rangers, Civil War historians, and the visitors –as they interact with the consciously reconstructed history of the Civil War and put forth their subjective understandings of the purpose of the museum. The individual and collective experiences of visitors are intimately tied to the story of the museum's inception as a didactic and commercial space that defines the tourist experience.

Appendix A

Gettysburg Visitors Survey

Age: 62

Gender: MALE

Where are you from? CALIFORNIA

What aspects of the museum did you find the most interesting? Least interesting?

MOST: THE ARTIFACTS AND CYCLOGRAM

LEAST: NOTHING TO REPORT

If you could change anything about this museum, what would you do?

ROTATE ARTIFACTS AND DISPLAYS EVERY FEW YEARS. THE MUSEUM & FOUNDATION HAVE AN EXTENSIVE COLLECTION THAT ARE NOT PUT ON DISPLAY.

What do you think the purpose of this museum is?

TO PROVIDE A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE CIVIL WAR, THE BACKGROUNDS LEADING UP TO THE WAR, ITS SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE COUNTRY TODAY — AND A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG.

Why did you decide to come today?

FNPS SPRING MUSTER

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