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Abstract

An overview of the "Lost Cause" and the resultant challenges faced by interpreters in Civil War parks.

Keywords

Appomattox, Lost Cause, Civil War, Slavery, Race, Historical Interpretation, Civil War Interpretation, National Park Service, Battlefield Park

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History | Public History | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration | Social History | United States History

Comments

This paper was written following the author's internship at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, Summer 2015.

Slavery and the Civil War: The Reflections of a Yankee Intern in Appomattox

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Introduction

For the Summer of 2015, I worked as an intern¹ at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park. My daily duties fell with “the Department of Education and Visitor Services,” though other parks often call it simply “interpretation.” Both of these ways of wording the job description get at the same basic principle: working with visitors and showing them the stories and significance of the cultural and historical resources within the park. Many stereotypes and preconceived notions exist for interpreters in national parks, just as they do for teachers and professors in schools and colleges, but the approaches taken by my coworkers varied significantly: we all had our own distinct styles of interacting with visitors and sharing the historical significance of the park. While this can often foster a varied repertoire of talks and programs, it can also lead to uncomfortable situations with visitors who have certain incorrect conceptions of history.

One does not need to look too far to find instances of dissatisfaction with Park Service interpreters thanks to differences of opinion. In 2014, for example, Brian Ettling, a ranger at Crater Lake National Park, included a discussion of climate change in one of his talks, prompting an outrage from many visitors who were of the persuasion that climate change did not exist. The conversation which Ettling endeavored to foster focused primarily on the economic consequences of an environment out-of-control, with a goal of prompting visitors to reevaluate their impact on the environment. Indeed, one of Samuel Tilden’s² so-called “Principles of

¹ A chronicle of my experiences is available at jondanchikappomattox.wordpress.com.

² A man widely referred to as a definitive authority on the structure, philosophy, and pedagogy of interpretive work.

Interpretation” is that “the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”³ Ettlting was delivering a program that aimed to cause introspective thought; however he encountered visitors who angrily met his words with their own: before long, people who considered themselves to be journalists were referring to Ettlting’s program as “another sign of government’s ideological encroachment on the citizens it purports to serve.”⁴ The same article went on to label Park Service interpreters as “mouthpieces trumpeting a political agenda.”⁵ Many of those who found themselves in disagreement with Ettlting and his program quickly arrived at the conclusion that Park Service personnel have no freedom in what they said or did, and that they are made to deliver programs conducive only to certain predetermined agendas.

In my experience, the nature of talks and programs was always up to the discretion of their facilitators. It was assumed that, being at Appomattox Court House,⁶ all programs would cover the history in the park in some way. The most common way this was done was to discuss the battle and subsequent surrender of Lee’s army, but as long as such material fell somewhere along a facilitator’s desired continuum, anything was fair game. Other talks done by rangers, volunteers, and interns covered topics such as the surrender from the McLean’s⁷ point of view, the history of the town itself, and the lives and thoughts of multiple individuals present at the time. The subject material of nineteenth-century America presented its own difficult issues with

³ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 35.

⁴ Ben Bullard, “A Dose of Ideology with Your National Parks Vacation?” *Personal Liberty*, December 15, 2014.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Yes, “Court House” is two words. Were it one word, it would refer to a building; however, as two words it refers to the name of the village where Robert E. Lee surrendered on behalf of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

⁷ Their family house was selected as the meeting place between Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.

which to contend, arising from growing desire, both in public and academic spheres, to contextualize and make peace with the past.

I developed my program, entitled “Visions of Peace” throughout the course of the summer. It usually lasted for about thirty minutes, and began with a gradual walk down the main stretch of the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road, from the park visitor center to the McLean House. As I made my way through predetermined checkpoints with my groups, I discussed key points of the events, such as the details of the battle, how the armies ended up there in the first place, and other narrative details to ground the visitors in the events, a common practice with interpreters at Civil War sites,⁸ before arriving at some challenges. The talk, by design, would eventually lead to the McLean House, partially because I wanted visitors to experience what is held to be the most important structure in the entire park,⁹ but also because I wanted to bring up something often overlooked: the peculiar white structures behind the house.

When I asked visitors about the buildings and what they thought they were, I got a variety of answers, most of which were guesses that the buildings were storage sheds or kitchens. Things got noticeably more quiet and somber once I indicated that the structures upon which we focused our attention were reconstructions of the McLean family’s slave quarters. From there, I made a point of discussing the role of slavery in the American Civil War. Emancipation, I said, was not a simple matter of signing something into law; it was a complex matter of removing a central tenet upon which American society, up through that point, was built. Realistically, discrimination could not cease overnight. The plight of the slaves was even more dire: sure, they

⁸ Christopher Gwinn. Personal Interview. Gettysburg, PA. November 13, 2015.

⁹ The McLean House was where Robert E. Lee met Ulysses S. Grant to formally surrender his army.

were eventually freed, but most of them had very little means of going anywhere—most could not even read. Even a century after the Civil War ended, the Civil Rights Movement was one of countless indicators that gross inequalities lingered in American society.

Recent events made connecting this idea to the current day more understandable: at the time I delivered my talks, the shootings in Charleston¹⁰ were painfully fresh in public memory, and while I did not deem it appropriate to dwell on their specifics, I invoked them as only the most recent reason that America is still not a society of equals, or even into a phase that could reasonably be described as “post-racial.” Following the idea that interpretation should provoke thought instead of simply forcing ideas into guests’ minds, I ended with a challenge to find different meaning in the park than simply the military history. One could easily make the claim that the events at Appomattox were the end of one chapter our nation’s history, and the beginning of another which has yet to end.

It was from such claims that I received the most reactions from visitors. There were those who accepted the challenge and went about their visits with fresh perspective, and there were those who got agitated at the thought of their own conceptions being challenged. Of course, there were also those who were eager to see the McLean House, where I chose to end my talk, and left to explore it at the first opportunity. Once I was accosted at the end of one of my programs by a woman who was something of a vanguard for a visiting school group, and was told rather forcefully by her not to even consider delivering my program to her students. She had ancestry to Confederate soldiers, as did every student in her group, and felt deeply offended when I connected slavery to the cause of the Confederacy and the course of the Civil War. In the interest

¹⁰ June 17, 2015.

of professionalism, I calmly assured her that I was done offering programs for the day, and that her students would receive no such talks from me. It was clear that she was here in the park for very specific narratives—ones that did not in the slightest challenge or contradict what she wanted to hear. Her group would see the McLean House, and they may have even had time for a viewing of the visitor center’s film or a living history program, but because of one person’s misplaced defensiveness, an entire group of students—people, who, by very definition should be taught and challenged—were being denied anything that did not fall into an oversimplified, sanitized telling of the history that portrayed their ancestors in an unrealistically positive light.

The Lost Cause and the Denial of Slavery

Slavery is not only critical to the narrative of the Civil War; it is crucial to a basic understanding of American history. Ira Berlin remarked that “slavery shaped the American nation, its economy, its politics, its culture, and its most fundamental principles.”¹¹ Indeed, many of America’s founders owned slaves, and the nation’s early participation in the international community, mostly on an economic level, was made possible by slave labor. When abolition became a matter of contention, fear of losing slaves played an instrumental role in the secession of many Southern states and the beginning of hostilities that would come to make up the American Civil War. Denial of such realities became apparent in what would eventually be known as the “Lost Cause,” a school of thought based on venerating Confederate veterans and the moral fiber of their fledgling nation so highly that issues such as slavery and racism are often overlooked, downplayed, or inadequately explained away. According to the Lost Cause, the

¹¹ Ira Berlin, “Slavery in American Life: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Symposium on the Civil War*, ed. Robert K. Sutton. (Eastern National, 2001), 12.

South lost a war against unyielding, numerically-superior hordes of blue-clad yankees, slavery was justified by the Constitution and religious views, and prominent Southern leaders, such as General Robert E. Lee, were portrayed as nearly superhuman in their restraint, intelligence and exhibition of virtues deemed to be Southern.¹² The “Rally on the High Ground”¹³ report said in its introduction that “this theory suggested that the Confederacy was doomed to defeat almost from the outset, because the North simply had too many men, too much industrial might, too much of nearly everything for the South ever to win the final victory.”¹⁴ Similarly characteristic of Lost Cause thinking and vernacular is the replacement of the word “Confederate” with the word “Southern,” making distinctions between the two harder—it is easier to goad an opponent into appearing to make shoddy generalizations than it is to argue a point that is inherently wrong. If any attack against your argument can be bent to be an argument against the entire South which allows a claim to a status as a victim, therein lies some measure of defense, however misinformed it may be.

The Lost Cause began as soon as the Civil War ended and many veterans returned to their regular lives from the horrors of such a bloody conflict. Indeed, “death on such a scale demanded meaning.”¹⁵ With the Confederate States of America quickly becoming a memory of failure and collapsed promise, many groups of ex-Confederates materialized in the 1870s to embellish their

¹² Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 134.

¹³ A report that discussed the ideological and historical inadequacies of interpretation in Civil War parks leading up to the sesquicentennial.

¹⁴ Robert Kent Sutton, ed. *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, (Eastern National, 2001), xiv.

¹⁵ David W. Blight, “Decoration Days: The Origins of Memorial Day in North and South,” in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, ed. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 94.

memory and salvage what dignity they could from their defeat.¹⁶ Groups such as the Southern Historical Society (SHS) emerged to tell a more pro-Confederate historical narrative, while other groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, formed to bring Confederate veterans together, even adopting symbols of the Confederate government and military.¹⁷ October 26, 1875 is described as the first time that “Confederate veterans by the thousands staged their first major coming-out as a collective force,” during an unveiling of a statue of Stonewall Jackson.¹⁸ Jubal Early, a Confederate general who survived the war, was a prominent figure in such demonstrations. Described as “an irreligious and often profane man known by many to be eccentric,”¹⁹ Early was a conspicuous champion of Confederate pride and white superiority, though by all accounts was an unpleasant person with which to have dealings. Lost Cause thinking, however, turned him into a personification of the flawed interpretation of history which found ground in the minds of Americans. He was livid when black militia companies requested to participate in the festivities, and was only satisfied when only a small number were allowed to participate at the very end of the procession.²⁰ Such an event perfectly encapsulated the Lost Cause: the Confederacy celebrated as if it had actually won the war, while African-Americans, for all their significance to the history of the nation, were further marginalized.

The Lost Cause did not simply gain adherents in the South; during the 1870s onward, it found purchase in the North, as well. The uncomfortable reality that there were still serious racial undercurrents in America was pushed aside in favor of a simpler fiction, in which the war was

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹ Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*, 141.

²⁰ Blight, “Decoration Days,” 111.

simply sporadic episodes of sanitized combat between hapless, unfortunate soldiers in blue and soldiers in gray who nonetheless embodied courage and determination in their weathering of the conflict. Commemoration, then, would simply have to focus on the soldiers and their ordeals in different theaters of conflict. It did not take long for such an idea to become a widespread: May 30, 1877 was the day on which such ideas governed a massive celebration in the biggest city in the North—New York City.²¹ It is said that “virtually every author and editorial writer declared the day one of forgetting, forgiveness, and equality of the Blue and Gray veterans.”²² Nowhere in the narrative was slavery mentioned, as it would no doubt paint the Confederates in a negative light. Like an intense flame, such ideals in the North burned bright before virtually dying out: by the 1880s, it is noted that veterans in the North were often ignored, forgotten, or made objects of disdain, while veterans in the South were still held in high regard as a result of an overwhelmingly positive memory of the conflict.²³ The Lost Cause, though not completely dictating Northern memory, certainly pacified most of its would-be opponents, ensuring that the vocal minority was adequately empowered to their own liking. It would take decades of political and ideological fighting to see the suffrage extended to African-Americans, as well as the numerical and political decline of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, who terrorized African Americans and those who supported them.

Even the centennial of the Civil War found itself playing into the rhetoric of the 1870s. Memorial events focused on endeavors such as battlefield tours, reenactments, essay-writing contests, and simple, sanitized tellings of history that were found to be thematically compatible

²¹ Ibid., 113.

²² Ibid.

²³ Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 139.

with the simplified narrative of reconciliation and forgiveness.²⁴ Gettysburg National Military Park, widely seen as “the” Civil War park,²⁵ had almost no programs or presentations dealing with matters such as race and slavery, instead favoring vignettes put-on by reenactors of scenes intended to stress reconciliation, such as shows of chivalry between officers in combat, or two brothers embracing each other from opposite sides of the battle.²⁶ Even scholars at the time of the centennial were not completely immune to the prevailing mindsets of the day: Robert Penn Warren, author of *The Legacy of the Civil War*, wrote for most of his work on the valor and heroism of the conflict, connecting it to American pride by making the claim that victories in either of the world wars²⁷ would not have belonged to America if the Civil War had not evoked “experimental intelligence” and “experimental imagination.”²⁸ Instead of talking about essential themes such as emancipation, Warren remarks that “The Civil War was the secret school for 1917-18 and 1941-45. Neither the Kaiser nor the Führer had read the right history book of the United States.”²⁹ Surely the Civil War had much more immediate effects on American history than simple preparations for colossal conflicts on the global stage; however, Warren only makes a passing mention of slavery in the first few pages of the work, noting only that the issue is

²⁴ Dwight D. Pitcaithley “A Cosmic Threat: The National Park Service Addresses the Causes of the American Civil War” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 169.

²⁵ In my interview with Christopher Gwinn, an interpretive ranger at Gettysburg National Military Park, it was said that “if you’re the average American family, and you go to one Civil War site, or one battlefield park, chances are you’re coming to Gettysburg.”

²⁶ Christopher Gwinn. Personal Interview. Gettysburg, PA. November 13, 2015.

²⁷ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*, (New York: Random House, 1961), 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

present “and cannot be talked away,”³⁰ despite largely ignoring it for the rest of the book.

Apparently if it cannot be talked away, it can be suffocated with silence.

The Lost Cause in Modern Times

The sesquicentennial has come and gone. Even leading up to it, however, a noticeable attention had been given to issues such as slavery that was not given to it before. The National Park Service, the steward of many of the Civil War’s most iconic sites, has evolved its interpretive techniques within the intermediate decades of the centennial and sesquicentennial with the goal of creating a comprehensive telling of the conflict in all its aspects. Many of these changes can be traced back to “Mission 66,” an agency-wide directive with the goal of modernizing National Parks.³¹ Its roots in the mid-to-late 1950s reflect a need to prepare Civil War parks for their centennials, as well as to create more intellectually-stimulating interpretive programs for visitors.^{32 33} Conrad L. Wirth and Ronald F. Lee, both serving as directors of the National Park Service during Mission 66, oversaw the writing and publication of various informational media created with the intention of helping interpreters improve their interactions with visitors through programs.³⁴ Clearly the changes set in motion by Mission 66 were not wholesomely applied to the centennials,³⁵ though they were permitted to continue to develop, thus shaping a more inclusive series of interpretive programs in Civil War parks today.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ Ethan Carr. *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ Carr pp. 188 makes reference to the fact that post-WWII levels of education were already challenging interpreters to redefine their programs.

³⁴ Carr, *Mission 66*, 187-188.

³⁵ It has already been noted that the centennial commemorations were inadequate in painting a wholesome picture of the Civil War and its causes.

The early 2000s saw the “Rally on the High Ground” report, a collection of reports from eminent scholars of the American Civil War and public history, assembled with the goal of assessing the then-current status and effectiveness of Park Service interpretive programs. Almost universally, the reports said of Civil War Parks that they have come a long way in expanding their tellings of history, but still downplay too many issues while giving perhaps too much of the spotlight to simple military affairs. Some telling of the Civil War was present in the parks, and that was good; however, many said that such a telling was far too black-and-white to be realistic.³⁶ The report showed that there existed a sound opposition to the Lost Cause that was unafraid to confront what was finally being widely recognized as a willful ignorance of a tremendously significant part of American history. This line of thinking continued into the sesquicentennial, which, by all accounts, has done a far better job of presenting a telling of the full history of the Civil War.³⁷

In 2008, superintendents from Civil War battlefield parks met in Nashville, Tennessee to discuss existing flaws in their interpretive agendas.³⁸ Their proceedings and findings would later be published in a report referred to as *Holding the High Ground*. Multiple deficiencies were identified with hopes of remedying them before the centennial, such as the fact that many Americans simply did not see the battlefields as being particularly relevant: the parks, to them,

³⁶ Christopher Gwinn. Personal Interview. Gettysburg, PA. November 13, 2015.

³⁷ At this time, not many works exist which reflect on the sesquicentennial, but, in the course of my work, my studies, and my interviews for other internships with other Civil War parks, it seems universal that the sesquicentennial was dramatically better than the centennial at incorporating issues like race and slavery into tellings of history.

³⁸ *Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefields and Landscapes*, (Report of a Conference of Battlefield Superintendents, Nashville, TN, August 24-27, 1998), 7.

represented small, isolated instances of regrettable bloodshed and little more.³⁹ Additionally, however, the National Park Service itself was not doing enough, through endeavors such as interpretive programs and museum exhibits, to stress the significance of the Civil War and its connections to the modern world.⁴⁰ To counter the Lost Cause mentality that battlefield parks were simply battlefields and little more, the National Park Service developed plans of “resource-based interpretation,” which draw on localized, individual resources to construct a historical narrative that extends beyond the details of battles.⁴¹ After that, it was stressed that Park Service interpretive staff need to stress that the “battles had implications far beyond the battlefields,”⁴² that define the modern world in both positive and negative ways. It has been remarked⁴³ after the centennials that “the diversity of NPS interpretive programs in the wake of the Holding the High Ground initiative has played no small role in casting the Civil War 150th as the antithesis of the Centennial’s lily white celebration of American unity.”⁴⁴ That such observations and changes were endorsed and defended by the National Park Service indicates a profound shift away from acceptance or simple toleration of the Lost Cause. It is now on the defensive as it falls from favor and relevance.

The Lost Cause and Appomattox

The evolution of interpretive programs at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park was in an acceptable place when I was there, but I was informed that many changes were

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 5.

⁴² Ibid., 6.

⁴³ I would like to thank Peter S. Carmichael for providing me with an article of his that has yet to be published in the Spring 2016 issue of *Civil War History*.

⁴⁴ James Broomall, Peter S. Carmichael, and Jill Oglie Titus, “The Future of Civil War History,” *Civil War History* (Spring 2016): 12.

very recent. Some even occurred as I worked there. The controversy in the Summer of 2015 over the Confederate flag,⁴⁵ I would say, was a defining factor of my experience. Eastern National⁴⁶ pulled all items depicting solely the Confederate flag from the shelves of the bookstore, and visitors came into the park determined to get to the bottom of the controversy. Many were, unfortunately, uninformed to some degree regarding the issue, and many were of the incorrect persuasion that the National Park Service was getting rid of all Confederate flags, when, in reality, they were simply being reviewed,⁴⁷ with ones essential to learning and communicating historical narratives being retained. As long as a Confederate flag held meaningful connection to a message of the park, it was retained, though visitors were often misinformed as to its place and standing with the National Park Service.

The slave quarters behind the McLean House, which formed the foundation for a significant part of my program, were only recently given such a name, having previously been referred to as “the servants’ quarters.” Now, however, they hold exhibits that either depict snapshots of what a slave family’s home would have looked like, while another building has a more traditional museum-style exhibit about slavery in the Americas. No attempts are made to hide the reality that slavery was a core economic and cultural component of American life.

The slave quarters, however, are not the only way that Appomattox is working to include the narrative of slavery. Preparation for the sesquicentennial apparently gave more attention and much-needed funding to the park, as well: a new movie was prepared for the visitor center,

⁴⁵ I will confront the ongoing debate of the Confederate flag’s place in American society in another paper.

⁴⁶ A separate but co-dependent entity to the National Park Service which oversees gift shops and, in some cases, living history personnel.

⁴⁷ One of the rangers had to take pictures of every flag in the visitor center to document them and justify their significance to the exhibits present.

called “With Malice Towards None,” replacing the decades-old film, “Honor Answers Honor.” The older film is no longer shown, as it falls more in line with the manner of thinking from the Civil War centennial. Themes on which any focus is placed are limited to the heroism of soldiers and the reconciliation of fellow countrymen on either side of a bloody and unfortunate conflict. The newer film, however, tells a much fuller narrative, covering the essential story of Lee’s surrender, but also discussing the causes and outcomes of the war.

I suppose that such ideas contradict all the signs advertising Appomattox as the town “where our nation reunited.”⁴⁸ In Appomattox, an army was dissolved and the main fighting force of the Confederacy was taken out of the field,⁴⁹ but the war lasted a while longer. One might even say that a war of combat ended but a war of ideas continued on. The gunfire ceased, for all the good that did. Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement were turbulent times in their own rights. It is good that the bloodshed of the Civil War ended, but it is natural to ask the question: what was really accomplished?

I often thought that Appomattox Court House National Historical Park would have a better time fending-off urges to focus solely on military affairs because it is not the site of a massive set-piece battle. A place of defeat for adherents of the Confederacy, and known to many locals as simply “the surrender grounds,” I did not think that it would merit much attention from “Lost Causers,” and, if it did, the battles are straightforward and short, presenting little in the way of large narratives in which to lose oneself in the bureaucratic details of militaristic fervor. At the end of the day, there is only so much for a follower of the Lost Cause to appreciate. One

⁴⁸ One only needs to drive around Appomattox for a few minutes to see a sign with this slogan.

⁴⁹ Other armies remained in the field, and the last surrender occurred months later. Large-scale combat, however, was mostly done after the surrender at Appomattox.

might look to Lee's measured, gentlemanly conduct, or to the factually incorrect signs up the hill from the park containing supposed counts of all the soldiers present to talk about numerical superiority,⁵⁰ but little else exists in Appomattox to glorify the Confederacy unless that something is, by a stretch, created and imagined. At this point, the National Park Service is doing the narrative of the Civil War justice, and now the public needs a few decades of its own to catch up.

⁵⁰ This is in reference to a sign installed by the state of Virginia decades ago, drastically underestimating the amount of Lee's soldiers while equally drastically overestimating the amount of Federal soldiers present.

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work,
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Jonathan G. Danchik
