

A Sesquicentennial Evolution

National Parks take a new look at the Civil War

By Karen Jones

Thoughtful men must feel that the fate of civilization upon this continent is involved in the issue of our contest. —Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to John Maclean, 1864

Nations rise and fall based on how cataclysmic events redefine them. For the United States of America, that upheaval was the Civil War. Fought nearly a century after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it dissected the republic, pitting brother against brother in the bloodiest conflict on American soil to date. This year marks the sesquicentennial of the war's final stages. While the Civil War has lost none of its resonance 150 years later, the challenge of making history relevant for the next generation of visitors to national parks and heritage sites is ongoing.



The National Parks Service (NPS) is the chief steward and conservator of many of America's defining places, from Yellowstone to Gettysburg. It is the largest landowner of Civil War battlefields (24) and holds 6.2 million objects in its battlefield park collections. Using the sesquicentennial as a "call to arms," the service devised a comprehensive action plan early on to find ways to update its Civil War interpretations to include more diverse exhibits and programs without compromising their core mission. "One thing we do very well is talk about the battles. Nothing will change that, but some of us felt we needed to expand our interpretation," says Robert Sutton, chief historian for the NPS.

The NPS started by reviewing existing exhibitions and programs at its sites, particularly the battlefields. Traditionally presented through the lens of decisive battles, iconic leaders and brave soldiers from both sides of the Mason Dixon Line, the story of the Civil War today encompasses much more. Also key to understanding what happened before, during and after the fighting

began are the topics of slavery, the African American populations of Northern and Southern states, homefront families, the communities of both armies, women and children, medical facilities and practitioners, and the common soldier's hopes and fears.

In 2000 the NPS invited leading Civil War scholars to a symposium at Ford's Theatre, site of President Lincoln's assassination and now an NPS site in Washington, DC. Experts on subjects from causation to Reconstruction were in attendance to help devise a plan to add depth, diversity and relevance for today's visitors. "The days when America was able to claim a single uncontested memory of itself are gone," says John Hennessy, chief historian of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. He adds, "Nations go to war for very specific reasons. People go to war for thousands of reasons."

Hennessy wrote the original draft of *Holding the High Ground: A National Park Service Plan for the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War*, a comprehensive 2008 report that served as



"The Last March of the Iron Brigade," a special Gettysburg battle anniversary program held in July 2013.

a battle plan for NPS initiatives. The report states that the prevailing historic interpretation of the Civil War has taken a military focus, ignoring the diverse experiences of different people who were influenced by their race, gender, geography, socioeconomic status and cultural background.

"Are we responsible for conveying history in a learned sense, or are we responsible for caring for the memory of the war? I think we are both," says Hennessy. He adds that the NPS remains "deeply committed" to honoring the men from both sides who fought the war, but also responsible for engaging people in a conversation about these places to help understand the war from many perspectives.

Challenges and goals outlined in the 2008 report included:

- conveying the significance and relevance of the war to today's visitors
- addressing the institution of slavery, its role in why the war was fought, emancipation and civil rights
- repairing damaged battlefields and sites
- updating visitor centers and interpretative media to enhance the overall visitor experience
- telling stories that go beyond battles yet still honor the NPS mission

To gauge the internal scope of what was required, the NPS asked all park superintendents to "self-declare" if their venue could be called a Civil War site or had a story attached. Of the 401 parks in the network, 130 responded affirmatively. Whether the parks are primary, secondary or tertiary Civil War sites, they run the gamut from Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial to the Lincoln Home National Historic Site to battlefields like Manassas and Fredericksburg. The approaches these sites undertook were as varied as their impact on the war itself, reflecting each site's mission, budget and staff capacities, and visitorship.

CHANGES AT GETTYSBURG

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure,"—President Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863

Gettysburg National Military Park is one of the most famous battlegrounds in the world. Three days of intense fighting in and around the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in July 1863 turned the tide of the war in the Union's favor—at a staggering cost in human life. The park, which will celebrate its own centennial in 2016, welcomes

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up to 2 million visitors a year. It preserves and protects artifacts, land and resources associated with battle, and the Soldiers National Cemetery, where President Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address.

The park is also a leading example of how the NPS transformed its Civil War programming in time for the sesquicentennial. For Gettysburg, this work began over 20 years ago. The heart of the Gettysburg visitor experience is rooted in the battlefield, but it begins in the visitor center that, by the 1990s, was in desperate need of an upgrade, says Katie Lawhon, NPS public affairs specialist. "Because our facilities and museum center were outdated," she says, "we were losing our opportunity to tell the Gettysburg story in a compelling way or provide for long-term protection of the collection" of nearly 1 million physical and archival pieces. The park's largest and most famous piece, *Battle of Gettysburg*, is a cyclorama (in-the-round) painting depicting

Confederate General George Pickett's famous charge. State-of-the-art entertainment in the late 19th century, the Gettysburg Cyclorama is one of only 20 cycloramas worldwide today. After a century of neglect, the 377-foot-circumference, 42-foot-high Gettysburg Cyclorama was badly in need of restoration.

Upgrades, restoration and new visitor centers cost money, which Congress is not always eager to provide, so the NPS partnered with the Gettysburg Foundation, a nonprofit "friends" organization that provides philanthropic support and educational outreach. To date the foundation has raised money for ongoing initiatives including substantial battlefield rehabilitation, monument and land preservation, the purchase and conservation of artifacts, and a 139,000-square-foot museum and visitor center facility that opened in 2008. The lovingly restored Gettysburg Cyclorama takes pride of place in the new center. Over 500 acres of battlefield and historic land have also been preserved.

Cindy Small, the foundation's vice president for marketing and communications, says that her organization works "hand in hand" with the NPS to ensure the brand is preserved. The foundation owns and manages the museum and visitor center, allowing the rangers to "do what they do

best, which is the running of the park and the upkeep of the monuments," she says.

Though the Gettysburg visitor center is the only privately owned and operated visitor center in the NPS network, public-private partnerships are not new to the agency. The NPS's original director, Stephen Mather (1867-1930) enlisted the assistance of the railroad companies to help promote the idea of national parks. Recent partnerships include \$80 million in grants to Yosemite National Park from the Yosemite Conservancy.

The new Gettysburg Museum and Visitor Center includes 12 museum galleries, 11 of which are based on phrases from President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The special exhibition "Treasures of the Civil War: Legendary Leaders Who Shaped a War and Nation," which runs through 2015, includes not only traditional figures such as President Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, but also Clara Barton and Frederick Douglass. Slavery, the African American experience and the path to civil rights are also explored in various exhibits and programs, all new since 2008.

The new visitor center inspired new programming tied to the 2011-2015 sesquicentennial commemoration of the war, while also, according to Lawhon, enabling the park to meld the authentic experience of walking the battlefield

At the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitor Center, visitors can use interactive displays (below left) and see an original battle flag (below right).



QUILTS BRING VISITORS BACK

The Civil War sesquicentennial has given museums a unique opportunity to revisit collections and create exhibitions that go beyond pivotal battles and famous military heroes. "Homefront & Battlefield: Quilts & Context in the Civil War," a traveling exhibition now at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, explores the vital role textiles played in the politics and economics of the time, and the courage and heroism of communities on both homefronts.

"This is an important new perspective on the war," says Margaret K. Hofer, curator of decorative arts at the New-York Historical Society (NYHS), which hosted the exhibit earlier this year. With an era that has been so deeply studied, an exhibition like "Homefront" takes visitors "in through the back door. It is not giving primacy to politics and male leaders. It is about people at home and the important role of cotton." Textiles were deeply entrenched in the economics of both North and South, and the cotton picked by enslaved labor was a leading American export commodity.

"Homefront" was organized by the American Textile Museum (ATM) in Lowell, Massachusetts, where it debuted in 2012. After its stay at the Shelburne, the exhibit will travel to the Great Plains Art Museum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, presented in partnership with the Nebraska Historical Society. Original curators Madelyn Shaw and Lynne Zacek Bassett spent three years identifying and selecting the artifacts, of which quilts are a significant part. The result is over 130 objects, including textiles, clothing, artifacts and images. The exhibit's breadth and scope—including personal clothing, uniforms, flags, hemp and rope, fabrics and blankets—helps visitors make a connection with war-time life. The power of these objects is undeniable, whether it's the hemp rope used to hang abolitionist and slave rebellion leader John Brown, or the "Reconciliation Quilt" made by a Brooklyn



A quilt made circa 1865 from uniform fragments illustrates the life of a soldier in a volunteer Zouave regiment.

woman in 1867, depicting an American eagle and an African American man telling a white man, "Master I Am Free."

As to engaging the younger set, Hofer says that like all museums, the NYHS has employed technology to meet the "comfort level" of this generation of visitors, but often there is no substitute for authenticity. This is particularly true with articles of personal clothing. "We have noticed there are a number of objects that speak to younger people, like seeing uniforms on mannequins which bring to life the soldier on the battlefield," she says.

Hofer says that "Homefront" has a large section on women's volunteerism: "There was a huge amount of fundraising, stitching and knitting on both sides." She adds that exhibit organizers were very careful to provide equal representation. Artifacts reflect the many organized quilt-making societies in the North, and the "gunboat" circles in the South where women

A quilt made circa 1862 was likely created to raise funds for fighting the Union blockade.



stitched quilts to be sold at auction to help fight the Union blockade.

Particularly compelling are swatches of “slave cloth”—material used to clothe the nearly 4 million slaves at the time. Demonstrating the pre-war entanglement of the Northern and Southern economies, much of the rough fabric came from Rhode Island.

The Civil War has been a subject of intense study and interpretation for 150 years, but there are always new ways of looking at history, says Hofer. “It is important for museums to be a part of that and help visitors understand that [while] they might think they know everything ... there is always a new perspective.”

REMEMBRANCE AT FREDERICKSBURG AND SPOTSYLVANIA

The Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in Virginia is the second largest military park in the world (Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park is the first). It includes the Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Spotsylvania and Wilderness Battlefields, plus historic structures such as the Stonewall Jackson Shrine and Salem Church.

From December 1862 to May 1864, four major Civil War battles raged in and around the Fredericksburg area, with over 100,000 casualties suffered by both Confederate and Union armies. Tragedy and loss were not limited to soldiers, says chief park historian John Hennessey. “Fredericksburg was caught for two years between armies, and the civilians suffered terribly.”

Planning for sesquicentennial-specific events began “long before the 150th,” Hennessey says, and coincided with initiatives already in place to improve park facilities, including new visitor centers for Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

In May 2014, the park initiated two weeks of Civil War programs and events commemorating the battles of Wilderness and Spotsylvania, which marked the start of the deadly 1864

“Overland Campaign” in which Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant faced each other for the first time. Though continually blocked by Lee, Grant was able to push south into Virginia. Eleven months later, the Civil War was over.

Programs and events included walking tours, tactical and firing demonstrations, living history encampments, bus tours, processions, silent vigils and ceremonies. Hennessey says more than 20,000 visitors attended. Some “rose at dawn,” he says, to be at the site as a Robert E. Lee re-enactor arrived at a simulated battle at the Widow Tapp Field on May 6. Six days later, visitors followed the steps of the soldiers who engaged in the war’s most intense day of sustained fighting—22 hours at a battle known as the Bloody Angle. “Taps” was played on May 24 at the Fredericksburg National Cemetery to honor the victims of the brutal Overland Campaign.

“Being on the spot 150 years after something like this has happened is a powerful experience for people,” says Hennessey. “An anniversary helps drop the veil of time for visitors and allows them to empathize.”

with exhibits and events that explore the conflict’s many facets, including those beyond actual combat.

Sesquicentennial commemorations at Gettysburg reached a peak in 2013, marking the 150th anniversary of the battle. Special programs in July of that year included “Yankees, Rebels and Civilians—The First Day of Battle Ends,” which explored three iconic Town of Gettysburg sites that were thrown into utter chaos by soldiers from both armies. A full roster of family activities at the visitor center—“Family Activity Tent. Calling All Kids!”—included instruction on how to become a Junior Ranger. The ranger-led “Stay and Fight: General Meade’s Council of War” took visitors to the site of Union General Meade’s decisive gathering of commanders in a farmhouse behind Cemetery Ridge. “Pickett’s Charge Commemorative March” invited visitors to walk across the vast field traversed by Pickett’s troops, demonstrating the enormity of the valor—and futility—of the event. The park is still presenting programs and events throughout 2015 to mark the end of the war and the assassination of President Lincoln.

MILLENNIAL ENGAGEMENT

To meet the next generation of Gettysburg visitors on their own turf, Lawhon says, the NPS has a social media team creating YouTube videos, Facebook updates and Twitter feeds. The museum also features numerous interactive stations for millennial relevance. Still, for places that are rooted in the land, the true experience remains real-world engagement. “You can add technology like apps, and we need to be on target with how people are getting their information, but for us it’s the power of the place,” says Small. “Visitors need to go out on the battlefield.”

For those who preserve history and interpret its myriad lessons, the challenge of engaging the next generation is paramount. “There is no

magic bullet,” says Hennessey. “We are not just an app away from engaging kids.” He adds that appreciating history requires a reflective process that comes more easily with maturity. “Am I saying you can’t reach kids? No. Of course you have to use technology, but it’s still just a basic delivery mechanism for content, which is a human story that played out in real places at important moments in our past.” Focusing on the delivery system and not the content is “like shooting crappy ice cream out of an ice cream maker. It’s ice cream, but not very satisfying,” he says.

Battlefield parks already have a compelling physical presence that, combined with a seasoned ranger and interpreter, can create a memorable visitor experience for any age group, says Hennessey. “It is virtually impossible to come to these places and be with someone who is a skilled communicator who can relate the stories and their meanings and not walk away and say, ‘Holy cow!’ It’s not an education—it’s a revelation about the human experience that was our war. I believe we will never get an app that exceeds that combo. You have a moment like that and you’ll remember it the rest of your life.”

One of the continuing challenges facing history museums is instilling the value of exploring history in current and future generations, and determining what insights into the past can mean to the present. “I do believe that what happened at these places has meaning for our society today and for the evolution of our nation. Understanding these human experiences is critical to the health of our nation,” says Hennessey. “I fear for our country ... if the day comes when there aren’t people who care enough to understand and carry forth these legacies.” <<

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