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Episode 61: The One with the Cannons

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Abstract

This past weekend, I found myself in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians and the National Council on Public History. Sessions abounded on both the Civil War and interpretation, as well as any other American historical topic you could imagine. The OAH debuted their new Imperiled Promise report on NPS history practices (which Jake commented on last week). Kevin Levin participated with other Civil War folks on a Civil War Working Group discussing the course of the 150th and beyond. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, OAH, NPS

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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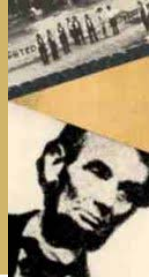
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 2012

This past weekend, I found myself in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians and the National Council on Public History. Sessions abounded on both the Civil War and interpretation, as well as any other American historical topic you could imagine. The OAH debuted their new *Imperiled Promise* report on NPS history practices (which Jake [commented on](#) last week). [Kevin Levin](#) participated with other Civil War folks on a Civil War Working Group discussing the course of the 150th and beyond.



Hollow symbol or still meaningful
with enough massaging?

But the session that caught my ear and provided fodder for what might be a boatload of posts in coming weeks was the panel session on the future of battlefield interpretation, particularly the remarks of Gettysburg College's Peter Carmichael and Richmond National Battlefield's Ashley Whitehead (I've [fully transcribed the prepared remarks](#) of both Carmichael and Whitehead for those who weren't in America's Dairyland this weekend).

Both Carmichael and Whitehead mentioned the efficacy (or lack thereof) of cannon on Civil War battlefields, and more broadly of living history interpretation in battle landscapes. Carmichael lamented the transition of the battlefield toward pristine, artistic landscape:

Unfortunately, Civil War battlefields today resemble decorative landscapes. They are largely depoliticized and I think this is best exemplified by the ways that cannon figure into visitors' experience. The iconic symbol of the Civil War has lost its meaning as a weapon of destruction and death.

"Cannon, as you well know, have become the jungle gyms where scores of kids, as you've probably seen, have imperiled themselves on the gun barrels doing all kinds of acrobatic feats while their parents were gone. Or, what has the cannon become? A toy trinket that is purchased at a gift shop then taken home as some kind of nostalgic reminder of the Civil War.

"When we allow this to happen, when we allow the material culture of the Civil War to become decorative pieces, we miss an opportunity to explore why Civil War soldiers were conflicted over the morality of killing and destroying their enemy."

Whitehead, seizing upon the concept of the meaningless cannons on the field and drilled deeper into the world where those cannon shift from silent lawn ornaments into roaring volcanoes:

And it has kind of become an issue for me when I think about how much we really tell people by doing the same cannon demonstration over and over again, by showing them how to load and fire in nine times. What is that really getting people to know? [How does it] separate the mechanics of how you would fire the gun, kind of the cool factor of being near a gun and having it fired at a living history artillery demonstration, from the fact that it is a killing machine. We need to use those living historians, I think, in a much more smart way, I guess."

Whitehead discounts the concept of a firing demonstration as a moment for meaning-making wholesale. Throughout her address, she utilizes the concept of an, "artillery demonstration," as a sort of shorthand for poor, meaningless interpretation. But reflecting on this, I'm not sure that the problem lies as much with the concept of black powder on battlefields as it does with how that black powder is framed and interpreted by a park's own staff.

The problem lies, in my estimation, not in what is being *done* but in *who* is doing the work. Artillery demonstrations and small arms firings can, through carefully crafted interpretation and intentionality in how a demonstration is presented, be made into deeply moving and engaging interpretive experiences. This careful intentionality is, however, wholly absent at many historic sites.

When I worked with the Living History branch at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, there were a few occasions when we explained the black powder regulations to a new visiting reenacting unit. Black powder is only to be issued immediately before a presentation, two range officers must be present at all times when demonstrations are being performed and, at Harpers Ferry, the majority of the interpretation is typically taken on not by the volunteers but by professional interpreters dressed in period clothing as well. At the end of these explanations of the national rules and local policies, there were a few times when an irate commander might respond, "That's not how they did it at Park X and Park Y! They just gave us our gunpowder on Friday night and said 'Have fun, we'll see you Sunday!'"

We would patiently explain that Park X and Park Y were not following the national standards for black powder and that in this park we *did* follow the rules.

I have a suspicion that the meaningless firing demonstrations Whitehead speaks about were these types of unaudited, poorly supervised and uninterpreted demonstrations. When enthusiasts are left alone, by and large, they tend to drift toward the mechanics of the material culture and away from broader, deeper meanings. A few units I have worked with *do* understand and take to heart the concepts of interpretation, offering deeper and broader emotional meanings for the Civil War beyond butt-plates, gun-stocks and trunnion caps (I'm thinking particularly of the excellent 142nd Penna. Inf.). But the vast majority of reenactors think simply listing facts and endlessly *lecturing at* visitors is interpretation.

What if we made a concerted effort to place a real, dyed-in-the-wool interpreter at that, "same cannon demonstration," that we present each weekend when volunteers come into our sites? Why not intentionally and professionally layer meaning atop the living historians' actions. Send

interpreters *out in the field* to contact visitors, to place these firing demonstrations into a broader and meaningful context.

This is not to say improvements and modifications shouldn't be made to living history programs. Living history *can* be improved and expanded to help visitors access meanings far beyond simple boxes-on-a-map military interpretation. I'm not talking about asking living history volunteers, "to come out from different spots in the tree line and see exactly where they end up," in essence asking them to be used as expensive living mannequins and nothing more.

No. Imagine placing living history volunteers into situations and landscapes where they might not readily be expected. I'm reminded of the [effective preservation photographs from Time Magazine last year](#) placing reenactors into historic landscapes which had been lost to development. The message was clear and concise, the pain of seeing these men out of context in convenience store parking lots and under highway overpasses. I can imagine reenactors spending a day "camped" in a McDonald's parking spot, talking to every car pulling through the drive-thru about how men died where they are now buying their Big Mac.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=tqyg6Ghb_dE

How is THIS different than a typical use of living history?

And the Greater Washington National Parks have done something very similar to this type of jarring juxtaposition, linking the men fighting in the field with the ideals and people for whom they fought with a new YouTube video series (the first episode of which Jake and I found earlier today and which appears at left). The young, modern stand-in for an 1860s United States soldier rides the Metro to the National Mall and marches

the long path to the Lincoln Memorial. As he walks, heads turn as realization and revelation comes to the surrounding spectators and employees. He steps into the sainted temple and glances up at the marble version of Lincoln.

But that memorial is not simply a Civil War landscape, it goes further. Those steps he walked up remind me of the Black songbird's struggle to simply share her voice with the world. Those steps remind me of the minister who preached a gospel of love and acceptance, and demanded not only to be heard, but for the world to shift into a better place.

Can deeper meaning be found by placing something in a foreign, wrong context? Sometimes, I think that's the perfect answer.

