

The Cupola

Scholarship at Gettysburg College



Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

Civil War Era Studies

12-20-2011

Experience + Interaction

Jacob Dinkelaker
National Park Service

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Dinkelaker, Jacob, "Experience + Interaction" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 161.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/161>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Experience + Interaction

Abstract

What do our historic sites and museums offer to visitors? More importantly, what should we strive to offer? Right now, I think many of our historic sites offer two different things: a variety of experiences and access to a wealth of information. Sites like Antietam offer a number of different experiences – from taking a tour over the battleground where so many fought and died, to driving through the battlefield at night seeing thousands of luminaries, each one representing a life. Our historic sites also offer access to knowledge and information – many times through those experiences they offer. Continuing to use Antietam as our guide, this access to information includes things such as a talk with a park ranger who has studied the battle for many years, to a movie that explains the battle complete with maps and reenactments in the park theater. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Antietam

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."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Experience + Interaction

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2011

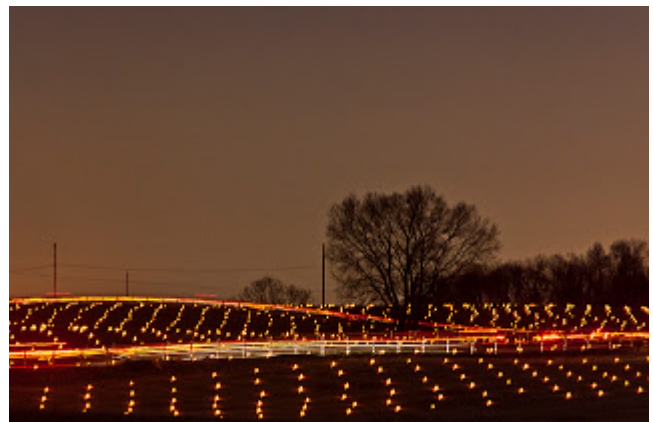
Or, my final thoughts on the Illumination...

What do our historic sites and museums offer to visitors? More importantly, what should we strive to offer? Right now, I think many of our historic sites offer two different things: a variety of experiences and access to a wealth of information. Sites like Antietam offer a number of different experiences – from taking a tour over the battleground where so many fought and died, to driving through the battlefield at night seeing thousands of luminaries, each one representing a life. Our historic sites also offer access to knowledge and information – many times through those experiences they offer. Continuing to use Antietam as our guide, this access to information includes things such as a talk with a park ranger who has studied the battle for many years, to a movie that explains the battle complete with maps and reenactments in the park theater.

In our increasing technological age, the old gatekeepers of knowledge are dying fast. Archives are making their holdings accessible online and anyone can search Google or Wikipedia to find a wealth of information about any historical topic. Historic sites and parks are no longer the “go to resource” when trying to find information about that historical place, and I think that’s generally a good thing. But it means that parks can no longer see themselves as the only places to access that information about history. We have to see ourselves as places where you can experience history.

Experiences such as the Antietam Illumination are a start. Depending on the person, each experience will affect them in a different way. For some, the experience of the illumination is enough. Just being there where your ancestor fought, just walking into slave quarters where people lived, or just seeing all the shoes that were left behind by those killed during the holocaust is enough. That experience alone triggers a reaction. It might trigger a sense of meaning. It might trigger a feeling that this place is important, and needs to be preserved. It just makes sense to some people. They get it through experience alone.

Just as many visitors, though, don’t. The experience isn’t enough for them. It is sterile and lacks meaning. It might be because the experience is new and they don’t have anything



What can it all mean? / courtesy of GWNPublicAffairs

to fall back on or relate to. It may be because they had no ancestor who fought in the Civil War, or they can't relate any type of meaning to what their eyes show them, or they may just feel confused and don't know what to think. They need experience + interaction. One such experience that isn't just enough for me is the Antietam Illumination. For that experience to mean something, I need to interact with that experience, to think it through, and mull over it. I need to openly talk about it with others. I need to relate what I'm seeing to myself and I need a little help. Does that make the experience worthless? Certainly not. But in order to reach as many as possible, in order to reach people like myself in this case, sites have to offer both experience and interaction together.

This interaction between visitors and their experience already takes place in several different ways. Whether it be [attaching makeshift art to a monument's fence](#) or just talking out loud on a blog about an event you've recently experienced (see [here](#) and [here](#)) both of these are examples of that interaction. They are conversations between the past and the present built upon experiences. The goal now, though, is figuring out how we can foster that experience and interaction for all when they visit our historic sites.