

The Cupola

Scholarship at Gettysburg College



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

Civil War Era Studies

6-21-2001

Slavery and Justice Today

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, "Slavery and Justice Today" (2001). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 196.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/196>

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.

Slavery and Justice Today

Abstract

'doubleshotcanister' makes a great point about being ever mindful of our present connections to past historical atrocities, crimes against humanity, and the other not-so-shining moments of our country's history. I agree with him. Not only do we have to come clean about our nation's past history - equally laying out the bad and good to find a useable past, but also to be cognizant of our decisions and actions today. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory, Underground Railroad

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



TUESDAY, JUNE 21, 2011

Slavery and Justice Today

On [last week's post](#), the user *doubleshotcanister* left a great comment:

doubleshotcanister said...

While we may applaud Brown for its approach to the past, we must also be mindful of our own connections to slavery in the present. Many of the products that we consume, from our iPods to our shirts, are produced through slave labor, or the near equivalent. Much like many Northerners before the Civil War, we consume goods without being aware of how they were produced (or how their precursors were produced). I am all for applauding Brown for confronting its past, but we should also be mindful that we need to confront our present (for instance, the fact that I can afford the computer that I use to make this comment rests upon that fact that there are thousands of Chinese workers in near slavery making the components, as well as thousands of South Asians in India and Bangladesh breaking down discarded electronics at great personal hazard, which in turn renders the price of the recycled metals for the Chinese to assemble affordable).

June 16, 2011 9:55 PM

doubleshotcanister makes a great point about being ever mindful of our present connections to past historical atrocities, crimes against humanity, and the other not-so-shining moments of our country's history. I agree with him. Not only do we have to come clean about our nation's past history - equally laying out the bad and good to find a useable past, but also to be cognizant of our decisions and actions today. We need to take into account how our actions relate to history by asking ourselves, "Are we in fact repeating past mistakes?" I think good public history should connect historical events with controversial topics today, for we still struggle with the same basic problems our forefathers did (in the U.S. it's namely civil rights, federalism, and the ideas of freedom and liberty). While on one hand, public history is about finding meaning and relevance in the past, it is also using that knowledge of the past to engage with the present, and its similar situations related to historical events. When we discuss slavery at Civil War sites, the feeling that we as public historians sometimes impart is that the historical issues we are presenting *are* in the past - and that they have no relation to events that are occurring today.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. For example, this past fall, I had the opportunity to volunteer for [Cuyahoga Valley National Park's](#) annual Underground Railroad program they do every October. The program involved conductors (such as me) who took visitors on an approximate 2-mile hike around the park at night, where the visitors had to negotiate meeting 'historic' characters of the surrounding area on their quest for freedom. The visitors met these characters in a series of several vignettes that interpreted the struggle on the road to freedom. Visitors has to ask themselves, "Can this man be trusted?" and "Who should we ask for help?" In the end, the groups are ultimately captured by slave catchers, and boarded onto one of the park trains to be taken 'south' or in the case of the visitors, back to their cars. The train ride is pitch black with the only sound coming from

several volunteers singing the freedom songs of the slaves. It is a very moving program that is classic NPS interpretation. It is full of suspense, tension, and fear - all based on sound historical research of the surrounding area.

When the visitors get off the train, the lead ranger running the program is there to meet them and debrief with them around a roaring campfire. The interpreter leads the group in a discussion on what the folks just experienced, teasing out of the audience their feelings and thoughts about the journey. The interpreter wraps up and sends the visitors on their way, with a call to action from today. He/she relates the story of a young child who escaped from slavery in India not too long ago and came to America to tell his story. The child went on a national speaking tour raising awareness about slavery today. Unfortunately, on a trip back to his home country, that young child who had accomplished so much, was killed by slave catchers. The interpreter reminds the visitors as they walk back to their cars, the famous words of Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Thank you *doublehotcanister* and Cuyahoga National Park for reminding us all, that public history should, that public history needs to help visitors connect with the past in the present, and use their understanding of that past to engage with modern and controversial issues their societies face today.