

Changing Interpretation at Gettysburg NMP

Last summer, with my wife and daughter, I visited the Gettysburg National Military Park. We spent only one afternoon there, so I do not claim to have absorbed the full Gettysburg experience. Nonetheless, my visit persuaded me that some of the premises of National Park Service historical presentations need to be re-examined.

Too often, I believe, the NPS adheres with excessive rigidity to the principle that its presentations of history must be “site-specific”—that is, that events at the site itself must be emphasized rather than broad historical forces originating elsewhere. On one level, this makes perfect sense: visitors come to a site like Gettysburg to encounter the actual terrain where a pivotal event of our history took place. Gettysburg is a battlefield, not a history museum. But the current presentation at Gettysburg, perhaps the country’s premier Civil War site, also exposes the problems of a “site-specific” approach.

Not surprisingly, history at Gettysburg focuses on the battle, the greatest in the history of the Western Hemisphere. What is lacking is the historical context without which the battle is incomprehensible. A great deal of attention is lavished on the maneuvers of armies, but there is no mention of what brought soldiers to Gettysburg in the first place, what, that is, they were fighting for.

Never that day did I hear the words “slave” or “slavery” spoken. Never was there a discussion of the causes of the Civil War, or the way the war’s purposes had, by July 1863, been transformed by the Emancipation Proclamation. There was no mention of the black presence at Gettysburg and in the surrounding vicinity. To be sure, no black troops fought at Gettysburg, but hundreds, perhaps thousands, of black laborers—teamsters, cooks, personal servants—accompanied the two armies. Free blacks played a major role in the hasty construction of fortifications at nearby Harrisburg.

But none of this is evident in the NPS presentation.

I do not raise these issues to criticize the current managers of the Gettysburg site. More significant is how the presentation of history at Gettysburg perpetuates a series of misconceptions concerning the Civil War, long abandoned by scholars but still quite pervasive among the public at large. One is that the war was, essentially, a family quarrel among white Americans. Blacks were significant as a cause of dissension, not historical actors in their own right. Indeed, over the years, Gettysburg has become less a shrine to the Civil War than a memorial to (white) reunion—a situation sealed by the commemoration held in 1913 on the battle’s 50th anniversary, which formed the emotional centerpiece of the final episode of Ken Burns’ celebrated television series. In this view, the meaning of Gettysburg lies in the shared valor of the soldiers, not the issues that divided them.

The major flaw of Gettysburg, as I have indicated, lies in the failure to place the battle in any kind of historical context. Surely, without creating a comprehensive museum of Civil War history, it would be possible to include material on the war’s causes, conduct, and consequences. Surely, slavery—which, as Lincoln noted in his Second Inaugural, was understood to be the war’s cause by everyone who lived through the period—deserves some examination. Indeed, not only are events before the battle ignored, but so too is the Gettysburg Address itself, delivered a few months later. Lincoln’s address, and the concept of the war as a “new birth of freedom” for the nation, could introduce now-neglected historical issues without sacrificing the “site-specific” imperative.

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Dr. Foner is exactly on target with his observations about Gettysburg National Military Park. We have a tendency to emphasize the personal valor and sacrifice of the soldiers on both sides, without taking much time or effort to ask ourselves (or the public) why they were here. It’s a traditional NPS way of being non-controversial.

There is hope for the future, however. Our new Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) goal for interpretation is [to assure that] “the public understands and respects the significant events associated with the Gettysburg Campaign and their impact upon the development of the nation.” We know that we have to put our interpretation of both the battle and the Gettysburg Campaign back into the context of “the causes and consequences of the Civil War.” One of those causes indisputably was the institution of slavery. Reintroducing the cause, however, can be dicey (see Jim Horton’s article).

Gettysburg NMP is in the midst of a planning process to build a new visitor center and museum, with completion possibly in 2003. Because of this, we will not be investing any funds in changing the current exhibits in the near term, but we will provide this context in the new museum. We will be inviting historians and educators to advise us on the interpretative design of the new museum to make sure we get it right. In the short term, we are happy to note that the Organization of American Historians will be visiting Gettysburg this spring to evaluate the park’s exhibits and programs and help guide us toward our goal.

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Gettysburg National Military Park