

Foreword

Historic places serve many functions in our society. They anchor us in time and space, they provide a focal point for celebration and remembrance and contemplation, and they act as springboards to understanding meaningful truths about our social and cultural development. The National Park Service's education program examines those truths through the use of compelling stories that connect place and meaning. These compelling stories expand our understanding of both place and meaning and explore the "universal questions, moral dilemmas, beliefs, drama, and conditions that make up the human condition."

In March 1996, the National Park Service published an issue of *CRM* with the theme, "Connections: African-American History and CRM," (Vol. 19, No. 2). This issue of only 48 pages met with such demand that the Park Service ordered a reprinting that resulted in the distribution of 11,000 copies to teachers, parks, federal agencies, state and local governments, and the public. It stimulated discussions in conferences and classrooms. In response to one of the largest responses to a *CRM* issue to date, we have prepared a second *CRM* offering that strives to connect African-American history with the specific places in this country where that history can be visited and studied.

That history is rich and wide and deep. While the public perception of black history generally focuses on the South and the North and primarily east of the Mississippi River, scholars like Quintard Taylor remind us that the history of the African-American people is truly a national story. His article, in the winter (1996) issue of *Montana: The Magazine of*

Western History, titled "From Esteban to Rodney King: Five Centuries of African-American History in the West," demonstrates, yet again, that the story of black Americans is inextricably a part of the distinctive mosaic of American history. The articles in this *CRM* issue further illustrate the richness and depth and complexity of that history as they contribute to our understanding of the Texas frontier, War of 1812, John Brown, maritime history, and American independence, to name only a few.

Our understanding of the past is not monolithic, rigid and static, but dynamic and fluid. We search for truths, knowing that ultimate truth will always elude us. Historians also understand now that our understanding of history comes not just from the written record, but from various tangible and intangible remnants from our past. Wallace Stegner captured this understanding when he wrote, "The past becomes a thing made palpable in the monuments, buildings, historical sites, museums, attics, old trunks, relics of a hundred kinds; and in the legends of grandfathers and great-grandfathers; and in the incised marble and granite and weathered wood of graveyards; and in the murmuring of ghosts." (*Wolf Willow*, 1962.) As we continue to explore this provocative puzzle we call the past, the stories collected here will illuminate and expand our understanding of Stegner's monuments, relics, graveyards, and ghosts of African-American history.

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