

Interpreting Slavery and Civil Rights at Fort Sumter National Monument

As we waited for Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., to arrive late one fall day in 1997, we wondered aloud as to the real purpose of his visit. To my knowledge, never before had a twentieth-century African American congressman representing a Northern state set foot on Fort Sumter—much less any congressman from Illinois. As with any good bureaucratic system, the park received calls from other Civil War battlefield superintendents as Jackson traveled through Georgia following the trail of General William Tecumseh Sherman traveled some 133 years past. As he moved about the South, we heard about his impression of the battlefields and the ongoing interpretive efforts. Was Jackson planning to lay waste to these park interpretive efforts and the park managers? What would be his impression of Fort Sumter and the interpretive efforts underway? Would he be impressed with Fort Sumter and the story surrounding its important role in American history? Would the congressman chastise the staff for not accomplishing his agenda items? As is the case for most VIP tours, the congressman was running late.

Fort Sumter National Monument was authorized in April 1948 by a simple act of Congress. The legislation states that the monument “shall be a public national memorial commemorating historical events at or near Fort Sumter.” Without further direction from Congress, the National Park Service (NPS) relied upon its staff to clarify the interpretive purposes for Fort Sumter National Monument. Interpretation consisted of guides leading small groups to interesting spots within the fort.

During this period, the NPS interpretive focus for battlefields was on the “slice of time commemorative experience.” In all likelihood, this approach to interpretation came out of the battlefield commemorations conducted by veteran’s groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the

Grand Army of the Republic in the post-Civil War period. Most efforts by these patriotic and civic organizations focused on healing the division between North and South. Reuniting the country was a top priority. Military parks were authorized to commemorate the heroic events and deeds that occurred on the hallowed grounds where blood was spilled by both Northern and Southern soldiers. Congress had abandoned efforts at Reconstruction in the South and lacked the resolve necessary to guarantee the rights of citizenship to newly freed slaves. The country was not ready for the social revolution reflected in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. The role of slavery and the rights promised to black Americans were forgotten in the rush to reunify the country and memorial-

ize a brothers' war. The nation's military parks reflected this atmosphere.

Mid-twentieth century America was fraught with civil unrest as the freedoms promised 100 years ago began to emerge. It was during this era of emerging civil rights that Fort Sumter's interpretive program began to take shape. When NPS published the first master plan for Fort Sumter in the 1950s, the fort's interpretive program was based on the 1860 election of President Abraham Lincoln, the secession of South Carolina, and the subsequent movement of Major Robert Anderson from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter. The major focus was on the initial Confederate attack of 1861 and the Federal bombardments of 1863 and 1864, known as the Siege of Charleston. These components made up the interpretive programs offered at the fort.

During the following decade, once the archeology was completed, permanent exhibit facilities were needed to enhance the visitor experience at Fort Sumter. A new museum was constructed with Mission 66 funding in the disappearing gun position of Battery Huger—an Endicott Battery completed in 1899. But the focus of interpretation did not appreciably expand with the museum exhibits. The events of 1861 and the bombardments of 1863-64 remained the central interpretive themes. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, interpretation changed little at Fort Sumter.

Clearly, two major influences were at work during the early years of Fort Sumter National Monument. First, as articulated by Thomas J. Pressly, was a "climate of opinion." Immediately

after Fort Sumter was authorized, the nation was again struggling in a very public fashion with questions of race and equality. From the adoption of the Constitution in 1787 to the 1950s, questions of citizenship and equality were enmeshed in the power of politics. Although the Civil War had freed the slaves and for a short time visited certain rights on them, by the turn of the twentieth century freedom was still very limited for African Americans.

As the nation entered the 1960s, Fort Sumter was preparing for the Civil War Centennial in 1961. Fort Sumter was sitting in Charleston Harbor, surrounded by one of the most conservative communities in the nation, as slave descendants began demonstrating for their rights across America. The seriousness of segregation was highlighted by events of the Civil War Centennial Commission in Charleston:

The manner in which those controversies and disputes could generate an atmosphere bearing at least some resemblance to a century earlier was illustrated at Charleston, South Carolina, in April of 1961, at the commemoration of the centennial of the beginning of hostilities at Fort Sumter. For that occasion, the Civil War Centennial Commission, an official body established by act of Congress, had arranged a "national assembly" of centennial organizations of the various States. When a Negro woman member of the New Jersey Centennial Commission reported that she had been denied a room at the headquarters hotel in Charleston because of her race, the Commissions of several "Northern" States announced that they would not take part in the assembly at Charleston. At the insistence of the President of the United States, the



Figure 1. Mission 66 exhibit at Fort Sumter. *National Park Service photo.*

place of meeting was transferred to the nearby non-segregated United States naval base. Thereupon, the members of the South Carolina Centennial Commission, almost as if they had read the stage directions from a script written in 1860-1861, seceded from the national Commission. Ultimately, two commemoration meetings were held, one under the auspices of the national Commission at the naval base, and a second meeting at the original headquarters hotel sponsored by "The Confederate States Centennial Conference." It thus seemed possible to re-create in the United States of the 1960's a recognizable facsimile of the climate of opinion of the 1860's, even if the occasion itself was momentous only as a symbol.¹

It was in this climate that Fort Sumter began forming its interpretative program.

The second major influence originated with the commemorative activities of both North and South after the war. Efforts to honor family heroes and comrades-in-arms led the nation to view battles as important events representing gallant behavior. It would have been far more difficult for America to discuss the causes of the war and the still-unfulfilled guarantees of citizenship. Similarly, the National Park Service followed this course throughout most of the 20th century. Park rangers preferred to discuss battlefield strategy and gallant actions by fallen heroes rather than discuss the actions and events that truly led to the opening shot at Fort Sumter.

To further confound the issue, in the 1970s NPS issued a new master plan for Fort Sumter. In this plan much of the emphasis was on Fort

Moultrie to ready it for the bicentennial of the nation. It is interesting that Fort Moultrie was to be developed much as an outdoor museum depicting seacoast defenses from 1776 to 1947. However, "Fort Sumter on the other hand, will be maintained and interpreted for public use and enjoyment as a 'slice of time'— [a] singularly significant period during the 200 years of coastal fortifications that is found in the history of the Civil War at Charleston."² Still the fundamental question of why the war started in Charleston was not answered.

Fort Sumter and Charleston's re-evaluation of the Civil War could not wait any longer. With the election of Mayor Joseph P. Riley in 1975, Charleston would soon recognize that its early economy was actually based on rice, not "King Cotton." From this understanding, Charlestonians have begun to realize that highly skilled slaves were imported from the Gold Coast of Africa to cultivate the many rice fields of the Lowcountry, making large profits for the planter class. The revelation that African slaves were not imported just for their laboring ability but for their intellect as well has made a significant difference in presenting the story of the Atlantic slave trade. What has long been obvious in academia and confirmed by oral traditions is finally making its way into the streets. Now we all can learn about the contributions of our ancestors.

By the 1990s, NPS interpretive rangers were beginning to make a re-evaluation of the role of holistic interpretation in programming within the national parks. Those responsible for interpretation began this re-evaluation

long before Congress or the NPS Washington office identified it as a need. Interpretive efforts such as those begun at Fort Sumter in the early 1990s were reflected in many Civil War sites around the country. Washington supported these individual park efforts. NPS regional offices helped formalize the efforts with a multi-regional conference of battlefield superintendents, held in Nashville during the summer of 1997.

In this new environment, the interpretation at Fort Sumter began to change. At the beginning of the last decade, the park interpretive program consisted of Lincoln's election and the Civil War era. Interpretive staffing was marginally sufficient to keep the visitor use sites open on a day-to-day basis. The park did not have a historian on staff. When the question "Why did the nation separate?" was asked, it could not be adequately answered.

Another of the driving forces in the Fort Sumter interpretive plan was a need to change the vintage Mission 66 exhibits that had served the park since 1961. The exhibit space did not meet the basic Life Safety Code, nor was it fully accessible. In addition, it was recognized that "the exhibits have a very narrow focus on Civil War events 1861-65, with little information on the constitutional issues of the preceding decades that led to the conflict. In the same manner, the significance of antebellum Charleston as a powerful and independent social, economic, and political force is not emphasized."³ The objective outlined in the interpretive plan was to "enhance public understanding of the social, economic, and political events leading up to

the Civil War.”⁴ From this exercise, three basic questions arose: Why did the nation separate? What role did Fort Sumter play in the Civil War? What will the visitor see at Fort Sumter today?

The 1960s-era museum at Fort Sumter was redone by park staff in the early 1990s. Completed in 1995, the new museum retained many of the treasured artifacts that were a part of the old museum, exhibited in fresh surroundings with a more sweeping story line. Blocking out damaging sunlight and providing handicap accessibility were important priorities designed to safeguard artifacts and improve the visitor experience. Another high priority was bringing the text in line with current scholar-

ship. New exhibit text and graphics includes an introductory section that deals with the growth of sectionalism, antebellum politics, and slavery as the causes of secession and war. Most of the exhibit remains site-specific, dealing with topics such as the fort’s construction, people and events leading to the firing of the first shot of the Civil War, and what happened to the fort during the ensuing war. A section was added on the participation of African Americans in the war, highlighting the role of the 54th Massachusetts on nearby Morris Island.

An even more ambitious exhibit project began in the fall of 1999 with exhibit planning for the new Fort Sumter tour boat facility at Liberty Square. The new building was sched-



Figure 2. 1990s renovation of exhibits. *National Park Service photo.*



Figure 3. Liberty Square ferry terminal. *National Park Service photo.*

uled to open in June 2001. Here was the opportunity to prepare the visitor for the Fort Sumter experience on the mainland before boarding the ferry. Decades earlier, planning had begun to locate a new Fort Sumter departure site in downtown Charleston. First conceived in 1961, it was not to be a reality until 40 years later. Two major objectives were included at the outset of the 1990s planning effort. One, the original garrison flag would be displayed in the new facility. The garrison flag that flew over Fort Sumter from December 26, 1860, until April 11, 1861, had been on display at the fort from 1961 until 1980. It was removed and sent to the NPS conservation center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Prior to the planned opening of the new tour boat facility, the flag would be treated and placed in a permanent container for exhibit. Secondly, the new dock facility exhibit would emphasize the causes leading to the outbreak of the Civil War. The exhibits at Fort Sumter would continue to provide interpretation regarding the events of the war in Charleston Harbor.

About the same time, NPS directors such as Roger Kennedy began to challenge the field ranger to do a better job of relating sites to the changing demographics in America. Director Kennedy wanted the parks to better meet the needs of the American population by the year 2000. We were

encouraged to not repeat the mistakes of 1970s environmental education by preparing “stand-alone” programs but rather to fully integrate interpretive efforts with professional scholarship. The parks were encouraged to step into the professional community to discuss interpretive ideas and approaches taken in the parks to provide visitor understanding.

Parks were looking for ways to ensure full implementation of a new interpretive effort centered around the concept of holistic interpretation. After the 1994 reorganization of the national park management system, parks were aligned within geographic groups called “clusters.” Fort Sumter was a park of the Atlantic Coast Cluster. During a meeting of park managers representing the twenty-four parks in the cluster, the managers realized that, thematically, these parks could not be easily linked because of the multitude and variety of interpretive themes arrayed among them—themes that were themselves representative of a geographic diversity that ranges from Cape Hatteras south to Cape Canaveral and inland to Tuskegee, Alabama. However, the parks could be linked through honest and forthright interpretation at each site that included all people and all themes appropriate to each park. So in May of 1998 each superintendent in the Atlantic Coast Cluster agreed to five principles:

1. We will enlighten our visitors with a holistic interpretive experience, well told and rooted in the park’s compelling story.
2. We will not be deterred by controversy in presenting the park’s compelling story.

3. We will seek to make the story interesting to the visitor.
4. We will seek to share with all visitors the exclusiveness and plurality that the park’s story represents.
5. We will ensure that the story is factual and based upon the highest-quality research available.⁵

One of the first major efforts to begin implementing a broader approach to Civil War interpretation in parks began with a conference in Nashville originally intended to discuss external land issues surrounding parks. However, the managers represented there chose to include proposals for interpreting Civil War battlefields in the conference proceedings and recommendations. The published findings captured the basis for most Civil War interpretation. “We have replaced the reminiscences of returning veterans with the interpretation stressing military tactics and strategy they so loved. In so doing, we have forgotten that the audience of the veterans knew the context of the war. We often do not provide adequate context for the site-related stories we tell.”⁶ As a result of this thoughtful observation, a guiding principle was developed to help with interpreting the Civil War:

Battlefield interpretation must establish the site’s particular place in the continuum of war, illuminate the social, economic, and cultural issues that caused or were affected by the war, illustrate the breadth of human experience during the period, and establish the relevance of the war to people today.... They [museum, historic sites, and classrooms] should spark or encourage or provide a personal journey of historical inquiry.... Changing perceptions about the past, broadening our understanding of what history is and how it is construct-

ed, is at the core of our profession.⁷

Soon following the Nashville conference, several major events happened in the National Park Service that would have a lasting impact on the way Civil War history is interpreted. With Congressman Jackson's visit and subsequent legislation, the efforts of many in the National Park System to change interpretation came to the forefront. In an NPS report to Congress, *Interpretation at Civil War Sites* (published in 2000), an overview of current NPS Civil War site interpretation was included.

A review of the survey reveals that there is room for improvement in all categories including exhibits, way-sides, films, web sites, publications and personal service programs. Some Civil War sites clearly are covering the causes of the Civil War better than others. In general there is a desire on the part of battlefield managers to improve all areas of interpretation. This desire is thwarted primarily by limited staff and resources in relationship to the amount of media that needs to be made current both technically and academically.⁸

The next major step in battlefield interpretation was "Rally on the High Ground," a conference held in Washington, D.C., on May 8 and 9, 2000. In the introduction, Congressman Jackson's legislative language was noted. It directed the Secretary of the Interior "to encourage Civil War battle sites to recognize and include in all of their public displays and multimedia educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War." Although simple in content, it has raised a public debate regarding prop-

er interpretation at Civil War battlefields. Some still believe that the war was about glory and battle tactics and should remain a "slice of time" commemorating the events and men who played them out on the battlefield. Others "begged to differ" on the causes of the war, referring to "states' rights" versus "slavery" as the real cause. This is illustrated in a letter from Dwight Pitcaithley, chief historian of the National Park Service, to a concerned citizen who had objected to NPS's interpretation at Civil War battlefields and raised two points often debated in the public arena. "Your letter," Pitcaithley wrote, "raises two concerns."

The first is that Civil War battlefields were established so that future generations could learn about military actions and remember and honor the men who fought in these special places.... Your second concern is that the National Park Service should not address causes of the war at these places and that, in any event, slavery was not the immediate cause of the war.⁹

Pitcaithley went on to point out that NPS will continue to provide the history of Civil War battles. This is a fundamental part of the need for battlefield interpretation. In reference to the second concern, he went on to say:

National Park Service interpretive programs throughout the country are designed to explain what happened at a particular park, discuss why it happened, and assess its significance. We do this at parks as diverse as presidential birthplaces, the site of the battle of the Little Bighorn and at the U.S.S. ARIZONA in Pearl Harbor. Understanding why an event happened is essential to making meaningful an event as tragic as the

American Civil War. It is also important to distinguish between the causes of the war and the reasons why individuals, North and South, fought. The first has to do with political interest and leadership while the second stems from varied political, personal, and individual responses to the unfolding secession crisis.¹⁰

Last year, the National Park System Advisory Board's report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* made these observations of the National Park Service:

The public looks upon national parks almost as a metaphor for America itself. But there is another image emerging here, a picture of a National Park Service as a sleeping giant—beloved and respected, yes, but perhaps too cautious, too resistant to change, too reluctant to engage the challenges that must be addressed in the 21st century.¹¹

In other words, it is time for the Park Service to move out of the “box.” To do this, the Advisory Board recommended two specific items very pertinent to battlefield interpretation. NPS should:

- Embrace its mission, as educator, to become a more significant part of America's educational system by providing formal and informal programs for students and learners of all ages inside and outside park boundaries.
- Encourage the study of the American past, developing programs based on current scholarship, linking specific places to the narrative of our history, and encouraging a public exploration and discussion of America's experience.¹²

It was in this context that Fort Sumter National Monument was rethinking its overall management efforts as well. Long-range planning

within NPS had evolved since the park's 1974 master plan was issued. By the early 1990s it became apparent that development pressures surrounding the park and a dramatic increase in visitation necessitated changing park management. No longer could Fort Sumter sit on the sidelines with a limited presence in Charleston. Following a management objective workshop in November 1994, the park began real planning that would lead to a new general management plan (GMP) for Fort Sumter. More than twenty-five organizations and individuals were invited to participate in this workshop and subsequent public planning efforts.

The new GMP provides guidance to establish and direct the overall management, development, and uses in ways that will best serve visitors while preserving the historic resources contained within the park. In addition to planning elements, the document contains a statement of the park's mission and of its compelling story. The mission statement reads:

Fort Sumter National Monument commemorates defining moments in American history within a military continuum spanning more than a century and a half. Two seacoast fortifications preserve and interpret these stories. At Fort Moultrie, the first American naval victory over the British in 1776 galvanized the patriot's cause for independence. Less than a century later, America's most tragic conflict ignited with the first shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.¹³

The GMP is not an action plan. Action plans emanate from the GMP. For interpretive actions, the comprehensive interpretive plan is prepared and a long-range interpretive plan is

developed. During the GMP effort, the park staff also prepared the park's compelling story. The compelling story is used to succinctly tell the importance of the resources protected and is at the heart of the interpretive effort. It is used to train rangers regarding the importance of site-specific resources and is a significant part of the foundation for defining the

History provides us with defining moments from which we judge where we are with where we have been. The Civil War provides the United States with one of its critical defining moments that continues to play a vital role in defining ourselves as a Nation. Fort Sumter is the place where it began.

America's most tragic conflict ignited at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, when a chain reaction of



Figure 4. Panorama of Liberty Square. *National Park Service photo.*

park's interpretive themes. It focuses the park's message on the essential, most relevant stories the site has to tell and how these stories fit into a larger scientific, historic, social, and economic context. Every visitor should receive the compelling story prior to his or her departure from the park. This is Fort Sumter's compelling story:

social, economic, and political events exploded into civil war. At the heart of these events was the issue of states' rights versus federal authority.

Fueled by decades of fire and confrontation, South Carolina seceded in protest of Lincoln's election and the social and economic changes sure to follow. With Fort Sumter as an unyielding bastion of Federal authority, the war became inevitable.

A powerful symbol to both the

South and the North, Fort Sumter remains a memorial to all who fought to hold it.¹⁴

With these documents underway or completed, the park embarked on a mission to answer the burning question, Why did the nation separate?

As work began on the exhibits, the question of what to name the new facility arose. Since the site was developed in partnership with the city of Charleston, applying a name by either organization would likely have resulted in “Aquarium Park” or “Fort Sumter Park.” However, Mayor Joseph Riley and the author agreed at the outset to eliminate either of these extremes and look for something in the middle ground. Out of these joint efforts came the name “Liberty” as suggested by Robert Rosen, a Charleston historian and lawyer. “Square” was added to the name to differentiate between terms used within NPS (such as “Park”) that might confuse the general public as to the role the site plays in Fort Sumter National Monument. Today the development site is known as “Liberty Square.”

As it turned out, this choice of name was fortunate since the word “Liberty” became a unifying concept that finally brought into focus the interpretive themes of Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Fort Moultrie, and Fort Sumter National Monument under a single umbrella. A main objective for the new development site was to provide a gateway for the NPS in Charleston as well as to other NPS sites in the area. Liberty Square was able to do just that.

The word “Liberty” also provided a platform that allowed the staff to

explore the advancements of this ideal from our birth as a nation through the Civil Rights movement in the twentieth century. This idea was developed when Mayor Riley suggested the central fountain in the Liberty Square complex be dedicated to Septima Clark (1898-1987), a lifelong educator and civil rights activist. Clark lived in Charleston and worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King to extend real voting rights to the African American populations in the South. One of the quotes to be used at the fountain is from Clark: “Hating people, bearing hate in your heart, even though you may feel that you have been ill-treated, never accomplishes anything good.... Hate is only a canker that destroys.”¹⁵

From this, a draft long-range interpretive plan was completed for Liberty Square and work began to implement its recommendations.

Liberty Square is also important as an appropriate location for the interpretation of liberty, a broad, regional theme in terms of Charleston’s people, geography, and nearly four centuries of European and African settlement. Here, visitors will learn about people and events associated with the liberty theme expressed at any number of locations, including Fort Sumter National Monument, Fort Moultrie, and Charles Pinckney National Historic Site.¹⁶

With this charge the staff chose to use fixed media in the landscaped area to highlight contributions to America’s liberties from the Constitution era to modern times. With the basic understanding that generally only white male property-owners over 21 years of age had any real liberties in 1787, the staff began to look at other moments in history to identify those who made

significant contributions to expanding the cause of liberty. Thirteen quotations from authors such as Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Franklin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Pearl S. Buck, and others are found on bronze markers scattered throughout outdoor garden rooms of Liberty Square. Each marker invites the visitor to reflect on the meanings of liberty. An introductory marker by NPS Chief Historian Pitcaithley reads:

In 1776 this nation embarked on a great experiment, an experiment based on the self-evident truth that "all men are created equal." It has not been a steady progression, there have been many bumps in the road, but along the way this country's sense of equality and liberty and justice have been expanded to include a broad range of people, people not originally envisioned in that original Declaration of Independence. The past, like the present, was filled with choices. We are not accountable for decisions made by those who came before. We do have a responsibility to study those decisions and learn from them, to understand them in context of those times, and to apply the lessons learned to better nurture this experiment in democracy we call the United States.

The exhibit plan for the new Fort Sumter visitor education center and dock facility at Liberty Square evolved out of a fall 1999 meeting between park staff and NPS personnel from the Denver Service Center and Harpers Ferry Design Center. The interior exhibits would provide orientation and enticement to visit the fort, exhibit and interpret the Garrison flag, and interpret the causes of the Civil War, with a special emphasis on the role of slavery in America and the role of

Charleston in particular.

The next planning meeting at the park was in February 2000. Park staff met with exhibit designer Krister Olmon from California; Anita Smith, the contracting officer and exhibit designer from the NPS Harpers Ferry Interpretive Center; NPS staff from the Denver Service Center; and historian Marie Tyler-McGraw of the NPS History Office in Washington, D.C. An outline and major themes came out of this meeting. Tyler-McGraw completed the initial research and writing for content development. Park staff also submitted research materials and potential graphics to Olmon that were incorporated in his concept package. Exactly two years later, in February 2002, the exhibits were finally installed. The interim period was filled with five major text revisions and numerous editorial changes, graphic selection and acquisition, and peer review as park staff writing exhibit text grappled with sensitive topics in a politically charged atmosphere.

Assigning both a military historian and a social historian to editing and writing the text meant that while it would be a cumbersome and at times contentious process, the end product would satisfy diverse interests. And this has happened. The use of language and graphics has been painfully examined. Terms such as "enslaved Africans," "slaves," "free persons of color," and "African Americans" were used with the knowledge that the exhibits will date themselves to 2001. The staff has used images of scarred backs as well as an enslaved body servant armed to fight for the Confederacy; they have incorporated

women's voices and used first-person quotes to flesh out the narrative. The voices calling for secession were very open about what institution they felt was threatened.

The final product closely resembled the original outline. Entitled "The First Shot: What Brought the Nation to Civil War at Fort Sumter?", the exhibit contains six sections, progressing from the wide Atlantic world of colonial times to the specific site of Fort Sumter in 1861. The sections are titled "Colonial Roots of the Conflict," "Ambiguities of the Constitution," "Antebellum United States," "Charleston in 1860," "South Carolina Declares its Independence," and "Fort Sumter: Countdown to Conflict." The introductory text reads:

When the Civil War finally exploded in Charleston Harbor, it was the result of a half-century of growing sectionalism. Escalating crises over property rights, human rights, states rights and constitutional rights divided the country as it expanded westward. Underlying all the economic, social and political rhetoric was the volatile question of slavery. Because its economic life had long depended on enslaved labor, South Carolina was the first state to secede when this way of life was threatened. Confederate forces fired the first shot in South Carolina. The federal government responded with force. Decades of compromise were over. The very nature of the Union was at stake.¹⁷

The input of Walter Edgar of the University of South Carolina and Bernard Powers of the College of Charleston was invaluable. They both reviewed the text over their semester breaks during Christmas 2000 and offered insightful suggestions to improve the content. Tyler-McGraw

and Pitcaithley were also instrumental in refining the text. Everyone on the park staff had an opportunity to critique the drafts. The problem with getting park historians to write exhibit text is that they tend to be wordy and nitpicky. Further, writing by committee can end up destroying any flow in the material. After all the agonizing and creative work, a product has been produced that will engage the visiting public.

As the draft progressed, the project attracted the interest of local politicians who wanted to review the park's federal viewpoint of the "Recent Unpleasantness." So far, the perception has passed muster. But there are rumblings. A week after the opening of the exhibits in mid-August 2001, a young woman darted into the exhibit hall and took a photograph of the large 20x36 replica of Major Anderson's 33-star garrison flag. The large flag hangs above the fragile original lying in a protective case to illustrate the size of the flag as it flew over Fort Sumter in 1861. The woman told the ranger on duty: "We will be back to protest the size of that flag." Since the September 11th attacks, no one has complained about the size of that U.S. flag.

Interpretation at Liberty Square has taken on a "shakedown" mode as operations begin to approach 100%. Ferries began departing the site on August 15, 2001. Permanent exhibit installation was completed on February 22, 2002. During the intervening months, between the time the facility opened and the permanent exhibits were installed, full-scale vinyl color prints of each permanent exhibit were hung on temporary plywood frames.



Figure 5. The 33-Star Garrison Flag. National Park Service photo.

This gave visitors a chance to see and comment on the exhibit program prior to its production. Several comments were received, ranging from glowing to condemning. Most were positive, appreciative, and constructive. But then there was the indignant professor from an unnamed university “from off” who also resides in the fair city of Charleston. He wrote a blistering critique in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, referring to the “tendentious text,” “single-visioned interpretation,” and “biased political agenda.”¹⁸ The lack of Confederate flags on exhibit caused him to urge readers to send letters of protest to Interior Secretary Gale Norton. On the other hand, an elderly black man asked for a

copy of the text dealing with the Constitution’s treatment of slavery, and of a Library of Congress photograph of an enslaved family. He wanted to take the documents home and show his grandchildren.

Historian Gaines Foster is quoted in *Interpretation at Civil War Sites*, the 2000 NPS report to Congress:

The rapid healing of national divisions and damaged southern self-image ... came at the cost of deriving little insight or wisdom from the past. Rather than looking at the war as a tragic failure and trying to understand it or even condemn it, Americans, North and South, chose to view it as a glorious time to be celebrated. Most ignored the fact that the nation failed to resolve the debate over the nature of the Union and to eliminate the con-

traditions between its egalitarian ideals and the institution of slavery without resort to a bloody civil war. Instead, they celebrated the War's triumphant nationalism and martial glory.¹⁹

Change is difficult. Even for the dedicated staff assembled at Fort Sumter, changing Civil War interpretation was difficult. Each of us brings to the table a particular set of experiences, differing education, and varied cultural backgrounds depending on to whom we were born, where we lived, and how we were educated. Much has been done over the past ten years to implement an expanded interpretive program. It has involved increasing staff understanding and perception and broadening our community partnerships. The staff has participated in conferences, training programs, dedications, special resource studies, sensitivity sessions, and diverse cultural events to help with the transition. Today the staff sits on the "point of the sword" for the National Park Service doing its job. They are prepared to tell the story faithfully, completely, and accurately.

In 1997, as Congressman Jackson walked through the Fort Sumter museum exhibit, he noted the introductory panel outlining slavery and the war. He smiled and said, "Good." Then followed three hours of debate and discussion as we stood on the Fort Sumter parade ground. Our thoughts, beliefs, and opinions were challenged

time and time again. It was obvious: Jackson had done his homework.

The Civil War still molds and shapes opinions about people and sections of the country. Its influence reigns over the country as an unseen spirit. The war was not an isolated event that occurred 140 years ago and is now forgotten. The politics of the war and its repercussions remain with us and influence us every day, from the president to the homeless drug addict sleeping on a park bench. It is time for us to understand and place in perspective the American Civil War.

National Park Service interpretation began at Fort Sumter during a period of major civil strife and demonstration. Fifty years hence, that interpretation is clearly articulating the causes of the war in an open forum never before seen in the NPS. Times have changed, staff have changed, and understanding and appreciation have changed as well. Maybe 50 years from now we will finally grasp the importance of the Civil War in American life.

Today, the park has made many changes to expand its interpretive programming. Revisions have occurred with the introductory program for the visitor to Fort Sumter, exhibits in the Fort Sumter Museum, the NPS handbook for Fort Sumter, the Fort Sumter brochure, as well as the production of many site bulletins. Minority visitation has increased from two to seven percent. But much remains to be done.

[Ed. note: this paper was originally presented at the Organization of American Historians / National Council on Public History annual meeting, April 2002, Washington, D.C.]

Endnotes

1. Pressly, *Americans Interpret*, p. 8.
2. National Park Service, *Master Plan*, Fort Sumter National Monument, 1974, p. 2.
3. National Park Service, *Interpretive Prospectus, 1990: Fort Sumter National Monument, Fort Moultrie and Charles Pinckney National Historic Site*, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. National Park Service, Atlantic Coast Cluster agreement, July 15, 1998.
6. National Park Service, draft Nashville Conference summary, "Holding the High Ground," August 1998, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8. Draft Nashville conference summary, "Holding the High Ground," August 1998, p. 8.
8. National Park Service, *Interpretation at Civil War Sites: A Report to Congress*, March 2000, p. 5.
9. Official correspondence from Dwight Pitcaithley to Ms. Lee, October 24, 2000.
10. *Ibid.*
11. National Park System Advisory Board, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society), p. 8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
13. National Park Service, *General Management Plan*, 1998, p. 17.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
15. Fort Sumter National Monument park files.
16. National Park Service, "Draft Long-Range Interpretive Plan," p. 3.
17. Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center Exhibit text, Liberty Square, 2001.
18. Letter to the editor, *Charleston Post & Courier*, Charleston, S.C., September 7, 2001.
19. *Interpretation at Civil War Sites*, p. 44.

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