

Living History and Reenactments

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



You say to your soldier [in Europe] ‘Do this’ and he doeth it; but I am obliged to say [to the Americans] ‘This is the reason you ought to do that’ and then he does it.

Baron von Steuben

Introduction

Americans have long preferred to be informed about *why* a particular thing is expected of them. Baron Friedrich von Steuben recognized this as he trained American troops at Valley Forge.

The National Park Service (NPS) has strong partners in the people who study the past by stepping temporarily into its clothing and customs. They share their passion with the public as reenactors or “living historians.” To strengthen this relationship, here, the NPS explains the guiding principles, policies and the mutual responsibilities among the NPS and living history groups.



Planning for Living History

Any interpretive activity must be a planned component of an overall interpretive strategy for a site. Because living history is a powerful interpretive medium, if not properly managed, it can obscure the message it is designed to convey. Consequently, planning is especially important to determine the role and objectives for living history activities. Proposals that involve historic weapons and/or black powder should receive even closer scrutiny for safety, appropriateness, and contribution to reaching park interpretive goals.

Working with the NPS



Groups that want to work with the NPS must understand how their activities will complement park interpretation goals. Parks seek to work with groups that: function in a professional manner, demonstrate high standards, possess sound records for authenticity and safety, use documented sources, incorporate current scholarship, present the broad context in which historical events transpired, apply interpretive theory, use sound business practices, collaborate effectively with others, and communicate with park staff, within their unit, and with the public. Parks will provide guidance on standards for authenticity, sources for research and local policies.

Historic Weapons and Black Powder



By their nature, any time weapons are used—with or without black powder—there is an increased risk of injury. While both park staff and living historians share the responsibility for safe practices and many groups hold members to high safety standards, ultimately, it is the National Park Service that is responsible for the safety of an event. Because safety is the paramount concern, the NPS adheres to and enforces strict safety regulations.

Any time a historic weapon is carried in a park event—even if the weapon is not loaded—it must be treated as if it were loaded and a trained certified NPS Historic Weapons Inspector *must* be present. NPS inspectors should be consulted in planning and determining conditions for an event. They conduct inspections and serve as on-site specialists at events. Individuals and/or groups unwilling to meet all the requirements of NPS historic weapon and black powder standards and conditions will not participate in park events.

Battle Reenactments

The National Park Service is the steward for many of America's great battlefields. The lands are preserved as memorials to those who fought, died, cared about, and were affected by the people engaged in those battles. NPS policy reflects sensitivity to the human suffering and sacrifice that took place on the battlefields and prohibits battle reenactments, demonstrations of battle tactics that involve exchanges of fire between opposing lines, taking casualties, hand-to-hand combat, or any other form of simulated warfare.



Even the best-researched and most well-intentioned representations of combat cannot replicate the tragic complexity of real warfare. The activity and logistical support for modern battle reenactments is inconsistent with providing a memorial atmosphere. Another concern is the risk of damage to the land—often the only remaining tangible connection to a battle.

For living historians, a battle reenactment can be a powerful catalyst for personal reflection about the human drama and cost of war. NPS staff appreciate the strong connection and deep emotions that living historians bring to park sites and stories. So, at times, the NPS may partner with other organizations to provide expertise and support for battle reenactments on land outside park boundaries.

Types of Agreements for Living History Services



Any time a park interacts with living history groups and individuals the relationship must be recognized through a written agreement specifying provisions, conditions, and guidelines. There are a range of options and the type of agreement is determined by what activity is proposed, how it complements a park's overall interpretive program, who proposed the activity, how many participants and spectators are expected, what logistical arrangements are required, where and when the activity will take place, and the frequency and duration of the activity.

- A simple Letter of Agreement outlines the responsibilities and obligations of all parties—including any financial obligations.

- The NPS Volunteers-in-Parks (VIP) Program -- A group or individual may become a Volunteer-in-Park for an event. Volunteer status provides coverage for tort liability and work-injury compensation and may permit a small reimbursement for expenses. Individuals or groups sign an Agreement for Individual or Sponsored Volunteer Services. For groups, this agreement must be signed every time they volunteer and must name each participant in the group. Groups enrolling as VIPs must apprise members of the VIP affiliation.

- Special Use Permits -- Requests to use park areas that are initiated by an organization or individual—including any initiated by NPS partner organizations—are handled through the NPS Special Use Permit system. For permit applications, parks evaluate: the connection between the proposed activity and the park's purpose and significance; the appropriate uses for and potential impacts on park resources, audiences, and the visitor experience; the locations requested; and the demonstrated ability to comply with safety, health, and commercial use requirements. Permits are accompanied by conditions and generally incur fees. Some permits have insurance and/or bond requirements.

Sales activities are generally not permitted. Preparing and serving food to the public is not encouraged but may occasionally be permitted by the park superintendent. Food prepared for public consumption is subject to Federal health and safety standards and inspections.

- Contracting for Services -- At times, living historians or actors may be hired by a park or by another organization on a park's behalf for a particular "impression" or role. Programs may be theatrical presentations, formal programs or improvised interactions with visitors.



For More Information...

... about the NPS, individual parks and park contact information:

www.nps.gov/

... about NPS management policies:

www.nps.gov/policy/mp/policies.html

... about NPS Special Use Permit information:

www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DOrders53.html

... about NPS historic weapons, black powder information, and regulations:

www.nps.gov/policy/mp/chapter7.htm

... about NPS interpretation standards and curriculum:

www.nps.gov/idp/interp/

... about NPS volunteer opportunities:

www.nps.gov/volunteer/



The Baron Von Steuben reviewed and inspected our brigade...The Baron first reviewed the line...with a scrutinizing eye; after which, he took into his hand the muskets and accouterments of every soldier, examining them with a particular accuracy and precision, applauding or condemning, according to the condition in which he found them. He required that the musket and bayonet should exhibit the brightest polish; not a spot of rust, or defect in any part could elude his vigilance.

James Thatcher, Surgeon, May 28, 1779