

**Case Study: Observations of an Independent Historian of
National Park Interpretation
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Issue: National parks often ignore, downplay, discount, or argue against traditions held tightly by local communities. These local traditions might also be called myths, stories that have a kernel of fact that motivate people to act, often to preserve and honor the places or events associated with the myth. Interpreters should care about these local traditions, or myths, because they indicate what is important to a primary audience of the park, plus these traditions might provide insights into the preservation and commemoration history of the parks.

Example 1: At Fort Stanwix National Monument in Rome, New York, the park refuses to acknowledge the closely held local tradition that this Revolutionary War fort first flew the Stars and Stripes in battle. This local tradition helped to convince people to support bulldozing their downtown and have the National Park Service reconstruct the fort in the place of some beloved homes and buildings of architectural character. Each superintendent has had to address questions from the local community and its leaders about the flag. The Park Service has argued that there is no conclusive evidence to support this tradition and does not provide interpretive materials on the subject. The public loses a chance for understanding the mix of evidence supporting and discounting the tradition. In the course of examining the flag story, the public would then learn about the reasons why the local community embraced the reconstruction effort and yet feel some ambivalence about the park today.

Example 2: At Minute Man National Historical Park in Concord, Massachusetts, the park ignores the local tradition of the Bullet-Hole House, where British soldiers and a Patriot clashed just after the events at the North Bridge. The park calls the house the Elisha Jones House, has a clear plastic covering over the so-called bullet hole, and does not provide interpretive waysides describing the tradition. Within the local community, this house has long been noted for its bullet hole, and local tours and guidebooks often retold the story while making the house a frequent stopping place. There are problems with the bullet-hole story, such as the fact that in the 19th century, the owner of the house so severely reconfigured the building that it is impossible to know what building features were present in 1775 and which were added later. In addition, the bullet-hole story comes down through family retelling that did not surface in print until well after the event. However, the tradition itself speaks to the commitment and bravery of the local residents on the day the British ransacked Concord and shot and killed some of its citizens. If the Park Service today told the story, the public would gain an appreciation of the continued commitment of Concordians for the actions taken by the Patriots.

Example 3: At Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, some park interpreters continue to tell the traditional story of how the national park idea emerged around a campfire in 1870 even though the park's historians have argued for more than thirty years that this event probably did not happen. Until 1972, the campfire myth had been an established part of park (and service-wide) interpretation, with superintendents and even NPS

directors and other agency-wide officials using the story to explain how the United States became the first country to set aside land for the benefit and enjoyment of people today and into the future. In time for the centennial celebration of Yellowstone's founding, though, park historian Aubrey Haines made the case that the 1870 campfire story had no corroboration. Park historians and many of its interpreters have slowly tried to dispel the myth as they have also taken the story out of their contacts with visitors. But, the myth persists, and I heard it retold this past summer with glowing reverence at a ranger talk in front of an erupting Old Faithful. This myth should be accepted as a part of the interpretive story of Yellowstone (and the National Park Service), including a discussion of the people and events that led to establishment of the park and an acknowledgment of its mythic status within the agency. By either refusing to tell the story or by retelling it as fact only, the park loses an opportunity to explore with visitors the complexities of meaning of the national parks to people over time.

Resolution of the Issue: National parks have power. They motivate people to visit, they engage people with their stories and ideas, they force people to confront what may not be popular or good, and they make people think about what this country means. For national parks to have that power, there must be myths that connect people to the larger issues. Myths provide motivation for action, for preservation, for commemoration, and for stewardship. Yet, myths are stories, with a kernel of truth but also a lot of fiction thrown in. By examining these myths with visitors, national park interpreters have an unequalled opportunity to explore what a park means, what our country means, and where there are challenges for the future.

Readings: I have written administrative histories of Fort Stanwix National Monument (to be published in April by SUNY Press) and Minute Man National Historical Park (just completed and to be available on the park website). My dissertation, *Promoting National Parks: Images of the West in the American Imagination* (University of Maryland College Park, 1997), looks at myth and the national parks. Works by Patricia Nelson Limerick generally provide a counter viewpoint of myth and the West while works by William Cronon generally provide a sympathetic approach toward myth.