

Social History, Rebel Soldiers, and Slavery: Interpretation/Scholarship at National Military Parks

Daryl Black, Ph.D., Curator

Chattanooga History Center

This working group aims to open an important dialogue between academics and interpreters. I have decided to pursue two of the questions that appeared in the call for papers. First, can interpreters who are regularly in immediate contact with the public offer concepts or approaches that will help public historians to bridge what David Glassberg calls “the enormous distance that exists between historians and the public”? Second, how might public historians assist interpreters in contextualizing and analyzing historical information?

The beginning of an answer to the first question can be glimpsed in an interpretive program that I (along with Park Historian, Jim Ogden, Park Guide, Lee White, and Seasonal Interpreter, Patrick Lewis) have been involved in developing at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. The program, based on the popular “Common Soldier” talk format, engages the latest social and cultural history that examines the various responses of to southern nationalism and military mobilization between 1858 and 1863. The program is broad in its approach – explaining the complicated relationship between slavery and causation -- but specific in its application – telling stories of Confederate soldiers that exemplify the conflicted nature of southern wartime experiences. Overall, it provides a format that teases out the subtle and not so subtle differences in how southerners’ – black and white, men and women – responded to the crisis of secession and civil war. This linking of specific, experientially based stories to broad historic trends and politics told in a living history setting at once engages and challenges visitors. The accurately rendered impressions create visual interest and elicit visitors’ responsiveness to spectacle.

The story telling approach puts visitors at ease because stories about specific people in specific contexts dealing with problems of everyday living and deciding resonate with most. The challenge comes when the specific stories are used to illuminate difficult issues of race, politics, gender, and class.

The entire program is performed in third person by at least two individuals representing Confederate soldiers from regiments that fought at the battle of Chickamauga. One portrays a soldier who volunteered in a regiment organized early in 1861 (usually either the 10th South Carolina, a regiment largely from low-country counties with heavy concentrations of slaves or the 1st Tennessee, a regiment from the strongly secessionist areas of Middle Tennessee that had a high proportion of slave holders and merchants) the other portrays a soldier from a regiment organized after September 1861 (usually the 41st Tennessee, a regiment made up of largely of poorer and older white men from an area in southern Middle Tennessee or the 65th Georgia, a regiment made up of men from counties that had largely resisted secession in 1861). Well documented individuals serve as the spokesmen for their regiments and regions. Their stories of what motivated them to join the army and why they stayed in the army (or didn't: deserters) and the tensions between the home-front and the battlefield comprise the majority of the talk. At the same time, the story focuses on how slavery was at the root of the conflict – whether one was a planter or a poor farmer slavery caused the conflict. In many cases audience response to this argument leads to long conversations about racial identity, class and gender ideals, and socio-political resistance. Interspersed are incidents on the battlefield, commentary on the military experience, and the life a soldier in the Army of Tennessee and the Army of Mississippi.

Successfully weaving the stories together is difficult. The approach requires a significant base of knowledge of the social, political, and cultural history of the “old south” (I use scare quotes here on purpose – one of our subplots is to explain that the “old south” wasn't that old). It is, to most visitors an unfamiliar story, and questions often fly as listeners become active participants in refiguring their understanding of the south, the Confederacy, and the lingering influence of slavery and the Civil War on contemporary American culture. In general response to the program has confirmed that if done well and

imaginatively presented large portions of the amateur historians, history buffs, and tourists willingly and often enthusiastically engage a critical analysis of difficult problems of American history.

Professional/academic historians should take a cue from the success of such presentations; clever ideas that engage popular culture and meet the audience on familiar ground can be both engaging and critical.

The second question is a bit more complicated: how might public historians assist interpreters in contextualizing and analyzing historical information? My first thought is that professional historians of the early 21st century are not producing “historical information.” Rather, they are increasingly taking interpretive stances that engage literary theory, social science theory, linguistics, and philosophy. Our shared text, *The Story of American Freedom*, is an excellent example of the best of this approach to history writing. It engages with post-structural theory and provides an analysis of the constructed and contested nature of language and meaning. The book is especially attuned to the essential question asked by a post-modern society: when did things change?(Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, ix-x) But how attuned to such an experience are interpreters? In *On Doing Local History*, Carol Kammen argues “amateur historians to often *do* local history, or find themselves involved with local history, without considering just what history is all about.” Although I disagree with her characterization of history as a field based simply on “intelligence and common sense” I do believe she is right to point out that most amateur historians (and here I am lumping, rightly or wrongly, interpreters with amateurs) rarely look critically at what it means to be a historian. (Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 1-4)

What it means to be a historian has changed significantly in the past 35 years. A turn from political and economic history to social and cultural history began shortly after Freeman Tilden’s seminal guide *Interpreting Our Heritage* came on the market. Challenges to the foundations of historical knowledge based on theoretical shifts in the humanities and social sciences – most famously feminism and post-structuralism – forced historians to rethink who counts in history, to re-imagine periodization along lines of gendered experience, and to become aware of how historical narratives operate as vehicles

of power and the social and political implications of such an operation. In addition, the face of the scholarly world began (far too slowly in too many cases) to change. Women, Latinos/as, and African Americans began to make inroads into the traditionally Anglo-male dominated academy and brought with them new questions and perspectives about what the past meant to whom.

It seems to me, then, to claim that history is a common sense endeavor has long been refuted. Similarly, it seems that some of the assumptions Tilden used to structure his guide to interpretation have fallen out of date. While Tilden accurately identifies tactics for performing interpretation (know your audience, don't say too much, love what you do), his understanding of temporality needs to be seriously reconsidered. In an essential moment when Tilden defines what visitors want, he claims there is "a vulnerable spot that most people share in common: the longing for continuity."⁽⁹¹⁾ Yet contemporary life in its modern form has focused on the present and how things change without reference to the past. In its post-modern guise it has focused on disruptions or when things change. To follow Tilden, then, interpreters engage both an understanding of how people situate themselves in time and adopt model of how to project themselves into the discourse of history strangely out of step with the contemporary academy.

So where does this leave the public historian? Where does she/he stand in relation to her/his scholarly peers? And where does the public historian stand in relation to his/her interpreter peers? As I read the question posed in the CFP public historians stand between "academics" and "publics" as interpreters charged with reconciling two ways of practicing history. Perhaps, then, the most valuable thing public historians can do is to provide structures in which interpreters can engage the scholarly world on its own terms and in its own idiom. This, I believe, would go a long way toward preparing interpreters to develop their skills through a well grounded understanding of where the academic world is today. If, as Tilden claims, interpreters depend on historians, interpreters must become sensitive consumers of the most recent scholarship and methods. At the same time, the creative methods of interpretation must be carried back into the halls of academe. The impressionistic and dramatic performance of history practiced

by the interpreter – the sensitivity to the idiomatic language and concerns of audiences need to make their way into the world of the academic. Together the practices of the interpreter, academic and public historian would go far to “provide a specific temporal dimension to man’s awareness of himself.”

[Hayden White, “The Burden of History”, 48]