

Jill Ogline

C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, Washington College

Finding Common Ground between Interpreters and Historians

Many academically-trained public historians “come up” in the gray and green, shuttling back and forth between semesters in libraries and archives, and summers in the field. If and when our direct involvement with the agency ceases, we rabidly collect stamps for our National Parks passports and clear a place of honor on our bookshelves for a well-thumbed copy of Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting Our Heritage*. But we often struggle with the question of how to maintain an ongoing professional relationship with our interpreter colleagues. I find myself as perplexed as the next person.

Yet since taking a position with Washington College’s C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, an innovative university-based history center, I’ve wondered if these kinds of co-curricular centers might offer the potential to play a unique role in bringing historians and interpreters into closer communication. Centers such as my own stand at the juncture between the academic world and the broader public, positioned to serve multiple and diverse audiences through interdisciplinary programs. Our expansive mission statements allow us to work simultaneously with writers, readers, scholars, college students, secondary school teachers, museum professionals, and public servants. When combined with the resources of a college or university, this public orientation ideally situates us to facilitate exchanges between interpreters and public historians.

Perhaps we might begin by transforming the nature of the contacts we already possess, from ad hoc encounters framed around field trips and internship placements to

sustained and reciprocal relationships. We might ask an interpreter to join a Teaching American History grant committee or serve as an instructor for a session on place-based education, jointly plan and oversee a student field experience project linked to interpretation, or reassess our course structure to make it logistically and financially possible for rangers to enroll in seminars relevant to the interpretive themes of their park. We could offer our advanced students' services in conducting the kind of background research essential to launching a new interpretive program, or look into developing interpreter-in-residence programs that would offer an interpreter – perhaps one on furlough – access to university resources and a stipend while working on developing a new program, writing an article on the craft of interpretation, etc.

We might also consider seeking to insert ourselves more directly in the NPS's training apparatus, i.e. jointly sponsoring content seminars for interpreters, offering our services as program auditors, and hosting historian/interpreter open conversations at professional conferences frequented by interpreters, such as National Association of Interpreters and Association of Living History, Farm, and Agricultural Museums. If financially feasible, we could use our students' desire for compensated internships as a bridge to bring us together. In this age of dwindling budgets for seasonal interpretive staff, most parks would leap at the opportunity to hire advanced history majors receiving compensation from their academic institutions. In exchange for this service, the parks would enroll a set number of interpreters per year in public history courses or offer themselves as a laboratory for experimental field projects.

The potential for public historian-interpreter collaboration is great. We share a commitment to, in James Green's words, "bringing the boundaries of history closer to

people's lives." We cherish the cultural landscape alongside the documentary record, and share a fascination with the concepts of memory and place. College-affiliated history centers, due to their broad audiences and expansive mission statements, offer several intriguing possibilities for furthering meaningful interaction between these two groups.