

The National Park Service and Civic Engagement

Edward T. Linenthal

FROM 2002 THROUGH 2005 I HAD THE HONOR OF SERVING AS A VISITING SCHOLAR for the Civic Engagement program of the National Park Service. Speaking at the National Collaborative of Women's History Sites' annual meeting, former NPS Northeast Region Director Marie Rust characterized civic engagement as "a focusing of current efforts at partnering with communities, expanding our education agenda, telling the 'untold stories,' and working with communities and partners to preserve sites that represent the fullness of the American experience."

This vision of civic engagement connects with the public in a number of different ways: it asks employees of NPS to be more inclusive of public voices in their planning, to take more seriously their role in using historic sites—what some have called "America's greatest university without walls"—for civic education, and to balance the voice of "heritage," by definition a voice that venerates and shapes progressive narratives of national experience, with the voice of "history," which integrates into these same national narratives more problematic aspects of our national stories, ones that offer opportunity for somber reflection and an antidote against coarse triumphalism and preening ethnocentrism.¹

One of my responsibilities has been to direct seminars on public history for NPS managers at various sites around the coun-

try. We examine some of the dramatic case studies in public history: among them the evolution of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument from a shrine to George Armstrong Custer to a historic site that represents various Americans who fought on both sides of the famous battle; the "razor's edge" issues that emerged in the location and representation of Holocaust memory in America during the making of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; a "cultural autopsy" of the ill-fated *Enola Gay* exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum. From these "spectacle" case studies, the seminars then address various interpretive issues that engage the energies of NPS staff at our host site. This serves to ground our discussions in the ongoing work of a particular site, and often allows our hosts the luxury of having

their peers discuss and offer suggestions on some difficult issues.

Throughout my long association with the National Park Service, which began with a research trip to the Little Bighorn in December 1980, I have been impressed with the dedication NPS colleagues bring to their public stewardship of the nation's cherished sites. Civic engagement has always been a way of "doing business," although it was not always business done with great sensitivity, and some of the most successful case studies in NPS's commitment to civic engagement reveal the tremendous energies expended to repair relationships with local communities that often felt disenfranchised by NPS.

The new emphasis on civic engagement mirrors similar programs in a great number of cultural institutions, reflecting, I think, a growing unease at the shriveling of thoughtful public dialogue and a desire to practice once again the arts of democracy using NPS sites as forums, as well as shrines. Civic engagement for NPS means a focus on an inclusive process: "stakeholder" involvement in park planning, for example, from programming to land acquisition issues, as well as partnerships with educational and professional organizations.

I have been witness to and participant in some interesting civic engagement processes beyond the world of NPS. I observed the "democratization" of exhibition planning at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a content committee helped ensure that survivors would be involved in the creation of the permanent exhibition and, indeed, in much of the other work of museum planning. During the *Enola Gay* debacle, I felt both sadness and disgust when too many members of Congress and the press, presented with an

opportunity to model in public and for the public how to disagree responsibly—civilly and thoughtfully—with curators and some historians over one of the nation's sacred and controversial stories, instead resorted to character assassination and political intimidation. During my many visits to Oklahoma City to learn about the aftermath of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, I learned about the thoughtful memorial process that enabled a 350-person task force, many of them burdened with the recent murder of loved ones, to move beyond attachment to a particular memorial design and think about a wider public meaning of such a memorial project. It was a most profound example of the enfranchisement of a diverse public in the most extreme of circumstances, particularly as some people participated in a public process for the first time as a way to honor a murdered loved one, and from this experience moved on to be active in the community in ways they would never have imagined only months before.

And yet the issue of who is designated as a "stakeholder" in such processes can be tricky. In one sense, of course, any member of the public is a stakeholder who has the right to address NPS, to be heard. But at some point NPS has to say, "These are the scholars, museum professionals, conservation managers, archivists, tribal leaders whom we are going to involve in planning because we value their professional expertise." With such expertise often under fire, however, this is often a bumpy road, and "balance" is rarely the way out. One would not dream—at least in any coherent world I choose to live in—of "balancing" a board of planners at the Holocaust Museum with Holocaust deniers, of "balancing" geolo-

gists with creationists. And yet, at the Grand Canyon bookstore, at least, just this issue of professional expertise has raised its head. This makes it all the more important for NPS to be able to say, “These are the people we have asked to help us develop this site, this exhibition, this interpretive brochure, and here’s why,” and then be ready and willing to defend their choices aggressively and flexibly.

A more mindful process is serving NPS well. During seminars, NPS managers talk with each other about strategies to bring people into the ongoing lives of their dynamic sites. As the nation grows ever more diverse, how can NPS link varied publics to their sites and stories? How to include newer immigrant groups, for whom participation in such public processes does not necessarily come naturally, but could be one vehicle into full participation in public life? What are stories to be learned from and told about newer Americans? And what are successful strategies in dealing with those for whom civic engagement does not always mean civil dialogue, but an angry expression of ownership of a story or site?

An interest in a more inclusive and expansive process certainly seems a compelling response to historian David Hollinger’s call for the formation of a “post-ethnic” society, which “prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society.”²²

Civic engagement—and the realization of a post-ethnic society—also means the development of a more expansive and complex national historic landscape. How stunningly different would the NPS landscape

look, for example, to an anthropologist from Mars who had visited here in 1950 and returned in 2005! Such a visitor would note so many more sites telling American stories beyond those of war and politics, and especially sites of challenge, sites that ask visitors to reflect not only on stories that engender pride, but also on stories that engender humility and an understanding of the complex legacies of our national past.

I have participated in two NPS conferences on civic engagement: one held in New York City in December 2001, the other in Atlanta in December 2002. In New York, more than fifty people listened as NPS managers talked about the challenges of their sites, all of them new to our Martian visitor: Manzanar National Historic Site, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, and the “Forest for Every Classroom” project at Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller National Historical Park. They listened, for example, to Frank Hays, superintendent of Manzanar National Historic Site, discuss the challenge of providing an “adequate context through which the public can be engaged in a discussion of social issues related to the internment of Japanese Americans,” since “only a few remnants of the camp are visible.” This dilemma led to intense discussions with Japanese Americans about possible reconstruction of barbed-wire fences and guard towers, for example. Civic engagement at the site helped NPS listen carefully to Japanese American views about “the initial development and management of the site.” There are, Hays observed, “disagreements about how to tell the internment story,” often focusing on whether these places should be called “concentration camps.” After describing an extensive

review process of the park's interpretive programs, Hays stated his belief that such a process would "facilitate, if not ensure, that a truthful, balanced context will be presented to the visiting public."³

People listened as John Latschar, superintendent of Gettysburg National Military Park, discussed substantive transformation in the interpretation of Civil War battlefields. Traditionally, Latschar observed, programs "emphasized 'safe' reconciliationist topics. We discussed [the] battle and tactics, the decisions of generals, the moving of regiments and batteries, the engagement of opposing units, and tales of heroism and valor. . . . Internally, we call this type of interpretation 'who shot whom, where.'" However, Latschar said, in 1998 Civil War site superintendents published *Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes*. This document led to an NPS symposium at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., in May 2000. Robert K. Sutton, at the time the superintendent of Manassas National Battlefield Park, told the audience that visitors to Civil War battlefields should understand not only "who shot whom, how, and where, but why they were shooting at each other in the first place. And, when the story of the shooting is finished, visitors should understand that all of this bloodshed turned the nation in a different direction."⁴

There is no better example of the ignored, compelling stories at Civil War battle sites than those told in historian Margaret S. Creighton's *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg's Forgotten History*. She writes:

When we see the battle through the eyes of immigrant soldiers, for example, we come to know the Union army

at Gettysburg less as a seamless fighting body engaged with an enemy than as a socially divided set of men beset by internal battles. . . . When we measure Gettysburg by the yardstick of women's work, the battle's geography shifts distinctly. The circumference of battle expands beyond the familiar Cemetery and Seminary Ridges to include both the borough and the civilian farms for miles around. Seen from the vantage point of civilian women, the battle's chronology also changes. The trauma lengthens from three days' worth of killing to at least three months' worth of recovery and ministrations. . . . Viewed through the lens of African American experience in Pennsylvania the Battle of Gettysburg expands again . . . both a momentary explosion in 1863 and the climax of decades of threats from below the Mason-Dixon line. . . . It is a battle all about, utterly about, freedom.⁵

Creighton's book is a compelling response to those who claim that battlefields need only to tell stories of the military aspects of "battles." There were, as Creighton illustrates, many battles going on at Gettysburg, and our knowledge of them greatly enriches our understanding of how ordinary and extraordinary Americans struggled with these shattering events and their aftermath. This is not, as some neo-Confederates would have it, capitulation to "political correctness" (a term that has, to be sure, lost whatever distinct meaning it once had in the culture wars); rather it is an attempt at historical correctness and an attempt to resurrect and interpret the lives of many Americans. In truth, the kind of

“history” that has been told at Civil War sites has been minority history for far too long. What could be more important to the integrity of NPS’ educational mission, to the “ethics” of history, if you will, than telling such stories, and including, in the manner of Frank Hays, communities with deep connection to site and story? And yes, of course this is revisionism! Recall, please, Avishai Margalit’s observation that “revision of our past history asks us to look for that which is absent but not to invent that which did not exist.”²⁶

The audience in New York listened as well to Ruth Abram, president of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, talk about the significance of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, founded in 1999, a coalition that now includes several NPS sites. The goal of the coalition, Abram declared, was to “transform historic sites into places of citizen engagement, where visitors are invited and encouraged to address the contemporary implications of the topic interpreted at [each] site.”²⁷

The Atlanta conference in December 2002 featured reports from Victor Shmyrov, the director of the Gulag Museum at Perm-36, Russia, with whom NPS is working to develop interpretive materials, a major traveling exhibition, and public programs in the United States to accompany the exhibition. Participants also heard from NPS’s Todd Moye, of the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project at Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, and from colleagues at a variety of non-NPS sites: among them Jeff West of the 6th Floor Museum in Dallas, Beverly Robertson of the National Civil Rights Museum, and Nick Franco, superintendent of Angel Island, California, State Park.

Participants also visited the stunningly powerful exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site. After curators failed to find a home among any of Atlanta’s cultural sites, Superintendent Frank Catroppa agreed to host the exhibition. It attracted more than 150,000 visitors, certainly an example of the moral dimension of civil engagement, and offered, perhaps, evidence that both NPS and the American public can engage in a mature manner such “indigestible” sites that convey, in historian Patricia Nelson Limerick’s words, “tales from hell.”

The evolution of civic engagement sensibilities regarding both process and an ever-richer, more profound NPS landscape will continue. In my opinion, one of the most exciting opportunities for new interpretive forays is in the development of NPS focus on the significance of religion in American history. While NPS does interpret some historic religious sites and occasionally presents some interpretation of American religion, all too often it is as if religion simply was either non-existent in the American story, or epiphenomenal at best. There are many reasons for NPS reticence, and Thomas Bremer’s *Blessed With Tourism: The Borderlands of Religion and Tourism in San Antonio* provides a welcome case study in the challenges and promise of NPS interpretation of American religion. As he notes, “National identities, ethnic identities, and religious identities all intersect in these spaces and in the lives of those who inhabit them. These identities sometimes complement one another but at other times conflict. An ambivalence results that generates within the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park a simultaneity of civic spaces, sacramental spaces, aesthetic

spaces, and endless other spaces.” Perhaps a model of civic engagement that takes religion seriously as part of the experience of people and their historic spaces will result from NPS’s struggle with their stewardship of these sites.⁸

There are, of course, all sorts of cautions to be offered here. Religion is often a “razor’s edge” issue, and there could be enormous pressure by various ideological groups to use NPS interpretive programs as cultural capital for their own interests. Further, is the public ready to engage how powerful religion has been in ways both humanizing and dehumanizing, that the resources of religion in America have been mobilized in ways both comforting and

horrifying? Even with these serious ideological and interpretive challenges, I cannot think of a more appropriate new direction for an even richer and more exciting NPS plan of engagement with the public.

NPS’s civic engagement program is an exciting and promising process that respects diverse, often conflicting voices in American public culture and seeks to honor the voices of past Americans too long forgotten, too long existing at the margins of national stories in which they counted in so many important ways. It is a process that trusts the public as participant, and pays a debt to the forgotten dead of our past through recognition.

Endnotes

1. For the full text of Marie Rust’s speech and other materials on the National Park Service’s Civic Engagement program, see www.nps.gov/civic/resources/links.html. An NPS Director’s Order from Fran P. Mainella on November 17, 2003, charged NPS employees to “embrace civic engagement and public involvement as the essential foundation and framework for creating our plans and managing programs” (*Director’s Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement*).

2. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 116.

3. Frank Hays, “The National Park Service: Groveling Sycophant or Social Conscience? Telling the Story of Mountains, Valley, and Barbed Wire at Manzanar National Historic Site,” *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2002), 50 and passim.

4. Robert K. Sutton, “Introduction,” in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, Robert K. Sutton, ed. (Fort Washington, Pa.: Eastern National, 2001), xvi.

5. Margaret S. Creighton, *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg’s Hidden History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), ix.

6. Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 140.

7. Abram’s comment in “The National Park Service and Civic Engagement: The Report of a Workshop Held December 6–8, 2001, in New York City,” 13.

8. Thomas S. Bremer, *Blessed with Tourists: The Borderlands of Religion and Tourism in San Antonio* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 118.

Formerly the Edward M. Penson Professor of Religion and American Culture and Chancellor's Public Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, **Edward T. Linenthal** is currently professor of history at Indiana University and editor of the *Journal of American History*. His most recent book is *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory*.

Ed. note: This article was first published in 2006 in The Public Historian (vol. 28, no. 1; <http://caliber.ucpress.net/toc/tph/28/1>), the journal of the National Council on Public History. It is reprinted, with minor changes, by permission of the copyright holders. © Copyright 2006 by the Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. Please visit the website of The Public Historian at <http://ucpressjournals.com/journal.asp?j=tph>.

Join the Centennial conversation!

Do you have a comment on the ideas presented in this essay? Ideas of your own to share? Whether it be criticism, praise, or something in between, we want to hear your thoughts on the National Park Service, its centennial, and the future of America's national park system. Write us at nps2016@georgewright.org and we'll post your comments on our Centennial webpage (www.georgewright.org/nps2016.html) and include a selection in the next issue of *The George Wright Forum*.