Civic Engagement

An Update on Civic Engagement in the National Park Service

The Northeast Region is committed to building a seamless network of parks that embraces civic engagement as the essential framework and foundation for creating plans and developing programs in national parks. This newsletter, which is the second in a series of regular updates, describes the key activities by the Northeast Region of the NPS to promote civic engagement.

INTERNATIONAL COALITION OF HISTORIC SITE MUSEUMS OF CONSCIENCE 2003 CONFERENCE

From July 24-29, 2003, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience convened at the Pocantico Conference Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The Coalition was founded in 1999 by leaders of nine historic sites from around the world, including the Northeast Region of the National Park Service as represented by Marie Rust. Founding members signed the following declaration: "We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function."

Fourteen path-breaking historic sites came together to plan how historic sites can serve as centers for truth seeking, reconciliation, and civic engagement: the District Six Museum (South Africa); Liberation War Museum; (Bangladesh); Lower East Side Tenement Museum (USA); National Park Service as represented by Director John Manis, Assistant to the Regional Director John Masun, Visitor Welcome and Accessibility Specialist, (john.masun@nps.gov), Lisa Sevcenko, Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Other Planned Activities

November 2003 Sessions at Joint Ventures Partnership Conference, Los Angeles

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NER Sites of Conscience National Historic Landmark Survey

Contributors to the November Issue of Civic Engagement include:

Nathaniel H. Wolfson for the NPS places of passive learning to places of active citizen engagement. We seek to use the history of what happened at our sites - whether it was a genocide, a violation of civil rights, or a triumph of democracy - as the foundation for dialogue about how and why it happened.

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In adopting civic engagement as agency policy, the NPS is making a commitment to involve individuals in its planning, programs, and decisions. Public involvement is to be sought sincerely, openly, and in the initial planning stages of NPS projects, (continued on page 2)

National Park Service Director Commit to Civic Engagement Through New Director's Orders

The NPS commitment to civic engagement is being formalized in Director's Order #75A, "Civic Engagement and Public Involvement," which directs all National Park Service units and offices to "embrace civic engagement as the essential foundation and framework for creating plans and developing programs." Laying out the purposes and background of the initiative, the document maps out the scope of the directive and introduces eleven policies through which it will be enacted.

"September 11th really taught us about the role that heritage sites can play in building a lasting peace and elevating human dignity. We are looking at the Coalition’s approach to preservation of our cultural heritage as a metaphor for the entire process of democracy."


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Where these issues are alive today, and about what can be done to address them.

To propel this new movement forward, Coalition members came together to 1) design and refine a replicable set of programs that will help historic sites around the world serve as effective centers for democratic dialogue on sensitive contemporary issues; 2) provide current and future members with the tools, skills, and resources necessary to implement these programs; and 3) solidify and expand the Coalition’s membership and ensure its future stability and growth.

Goals of the 2003 Conference

1. Strengthen the capacity of historic sites around the world to serve as effective centers for democratic dialogue on sensitive contemporary issues;
2. Deepen the partnerships and collaborations between historic sites and organizations promoting democracy;
3. Increase the number and diversity of historic sites committed to serving as centers for dialogue, in terms of geography, issues, time periods, and resources;
4. Ensure future growth and support for historic sites around the world to serve as centers for addressing social issues.

Sights of Conscience Strategies

The 2003 meeting was structured to stimulate learning and exchange among members that would help to develop and refine each member’s “Dialogue for Democracy” program design. “Dialogue for Democracy” programs are specific strategies at each historic site for engaging visitors in pressing social issues, specific to each local context and need. The meeting offered a variety of formats through which members could exchange practices, discuss the issues they faced in common, and brainstorm ways of addressing them in their programs. “Dialogues for Democracy” Workshops formed the foundation of the meeting and included a 20-25 minute presentation by historic site directors on their latest work, 45-minute facilitated brainstorm on specific strategies the site could use to develop partnerships with human rights and social welfare organizations, urban civic dialogue, fund raise for their project, and address historic preservation issues, demonstration dialogues, and discussion focus groups.

Obtain A Copy of the Conference Report

For a full report of the conference, including descriptions of Sites of Conscience strategies, common challenges, and common solutions, and plans for the future, visit www.sitesofconscience.org/Pocantico2003. And all are encouraged to relate to the lives and histories of others.

The James Dexter Site: A Model for Civic Engagement at Independence NHS

James Dexter, a free African American, lived in a small house in Philadelphia that fronted on North Fifth Street approximately midway between Arch and Race Streets in the years from about 1790 to 1798. This site today lies within the boundaries of Independence National Historical Park on the third and most northerly block of Independence Mall where the National
The redevelopment of Independence Mall called for the construction of the Independence Mall Transportation Center, a bus drop-off area, over the James Dexter site and adjacent historic lots. Once research revealed that James Dexter's house on Block 3 was the site of founding meetings of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, Independence NHP initiated consultation with representatives of St. Thomas Church. At this initial meeting, in October 2002, the church was informed that the James Dexter site had been identified as important in the founding of the church and that the site was slated for development. The NPS intention to preserve the archaeological site was communicated to the representatives of St. Thomas Church and Reverend Leath of Mother Bethel Church. A platform was constructed to allow the public to view the excavation and archeologists were available to discuss the process and findings.

The Dexter Site is an excellent example of how a park can work closely with communities to arrive at meaningful approaches to research and preservation at historic sites. Although in other cases the NPS, making the decision alone, might choose a strictly preservation option for such an archeological site. INDEs engagement with community members from St. Thomas and Mother Bethel Church allowed other points of view to help shape the final decision to excavate.

Standing slave quarters at Hampton NHS provide an excellent opportunity for initiating a civic discussion about interpreting complex or controversial issues at historic sites.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT POLICY, TOOLS, AND TRAINING

National Park Service Director Commits to Civic Engagement Through New Director's Orders

The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program has developed a Community Tool Box for working in and with communities to accomplish shared goals. Focused on the nuts and bolts of improving communication and increasing community involvement, it offers practical suggestions for conducting meetings, convening task forces, and soliciting public input. Many of the strategies and techniques outlined are immediately relevant to the practice of civic engagement, such as active listening, dialogue, consensus building, and the utilization of “open space” as a meeting technique. The tool kit also provides advice on cultivating partnerships, working with stakeholders groups, involving the community in the process of creating a vision. For more information on the tool box, visit the NER’s website at http://www.nps.gov/nero/rtcatoolbox/index.htm

Director Manela invites NPS to Civic Engagement Through Director's Orders 75A

The Director's Order reinforces the centrality of the principles of civic engagement to NPS mission. Superintendents, regional directors, program managers, and agency staff at all levels are invited to initiate the kind of dialogue with the public that will increase the role of the NPS in helping to maintain a healthy civic society.

Civic Engagement - isn't this just a new name for public involvement?

Since the Civic Engagement Initiative was launched in December 2001, many questions have emerged about how Civic Engagement differs from public involvement, a process that has long been at the center of NPS planning. Civic Engagement at its heart is a formal commitment to building long-term, sustained relationships between diverse communities and national parks that goes well beyond the planning process. Public involvement includes techniques of reaching out to communities and is a legal requirement of our planning processes. There are many examples of rich relationships between communities and parks that predate the Civic Engagement Initiative. But more typically public involvement has been perceived as a one-shot deal and has ended once a plan is finalized. Civic engagement reinforces the importance of building communities as on-going decision-making partners in resource preservation, interpretation and education.

Civic Engagement and the National Park Service