

**Conference Proceedings**  
**Holding the High Ground**  
**II**

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# ***Interpreting the Civil War Through the Sites of the National Park System***

## **The Problem**

Having identified the need to expand and improve the Service's interpretation of the Civil War at the inaugural Holding the High Ground conference in 1998 and the Ford's Theater conference in 2000, there remains the problem of actually doing it. The National Park Service, however, lacks the funding and organizational resources, and organizational commitment to initiate a large-scale effort to upgrade interpretive media in Civil War-related parks—to fulfill the vision endorsed in the initial Holding the High Ground proceedings and endorsed by Congressional mandate in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of visitors to Civil War sites, and especially battlefield areas, are completely reliant upon media to describe and derive the significance of the park—to ascribe meaning to what are often visually undistinguished landscapes.<sup>2</sup> Yet in many parks, investment in media to reach of visitors has been woefully insufficient—a fraction of the funds invested in personal services. Funding for media has consistently proven to be among the most difficult funding to secure.

The media that does exist—museum exhibits, wayside exhibits, and audio-visual programs—varies widely in quality and content. Many parks have media dating to the 1960s (or earlier); most have been unable to secure funding to make improvements. Other parks have more modern offerings, but have not taken into account the goal of a more expansive approach to interpretation contemplated by Holding the High Ground I. While the decision to broaden interpretation at Civil War battlefields has received much attention within the NPS and Congress, that attention has not translated into the resources necessary to overhaul the media that provides the core message for 80% of our visitors. We have talked but not delivered.

There is also great concern that a broader scope of interpretation will come at the expense of more traditional themes, and that a new approach will lead the NPS away from its tradition of resource-based interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the last decade several programs (Natural Resource Challenge, Ranger Careers) have been highly successful because of the individual leadership displayed by division heads. An effort should be made to review program responsibilities within the Interpretive division to position the NPS to pursue an upgrade of our interpretive product across the board.

<sup>2</sup> At Gettysburg, for example, 88% of visitors are totally reliant on media to receive the park story; at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP, the figure hovers around 80%. The same general figure likely applies at most battlefield sites. At non-battlefield Civil War sites (Lincoln Home, Hampton, etc.), the figures are probably significantly lower.

## **The Questions**

What is the best strategy that will simultaneously provide the NPS, Congress, and other parties a context within which to allocate funding for interpretive media on Civil War Battlefields while at the same time fulfilling the applied principles agreed upon at the Holding the High Ground I conference? Does the NPS have in place the organizational mechanisms and talent to make a comprehensive and vivid program a successful reality? Moreover, how do we deliver on a broader mandate without sacrificing our core commitment to resource-based interpretation? Can it be done?

## **The Plan**

Absent a ready Service-wide structure and mechanism that could plan and accomplish the wide-scale upgrade of interpretive media at Civil War sites, the superintendents of Civil War-related sites have concluded to undertake the effort themselves. Superintendents of Civil War-related areas--working with HFC, WASO, and stakeholders--will develop an Interpretive Concept Plan to tell the comprehensive story of the Civil War using the sites in the NPS system.<sup>3</sup> The final product will provide a mechanism and context that will allow for large-scale funding to upgrade permanent media at Civil War sites in time for the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Mindful of the central (indeed exclusive) role media plays in the experience of most visitors to Civil War sites, this plan will address the 2000 Congressional mandate to broaden the NPS approach to interpreting the Civil War.

This will be a true interpretive plan; it will do more than simply establish thematic connections between sites and a media prescription or a list of projects. The plan will identify the major themes and stories that need to be conveyed by the National Park Service at large; it will reflect the NPS commitment to telling the whole story. While each battlefield will remain committed to its core mission of battlefield interpretation, the plan will indicate how each site can contribute to the objective of telling a comprehensive story service-wide.<sup>5</sup> This approach will relieve individual parks from the unrealistic (and redundant) responsibility of telling the whole story itself. Instead, it will allow each park to play to its strengths by viewing the larger story through the lens of local resources or

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<sup>3</sup> Sites will include non-battlefield sites like the Lincoln Home, Frederick Douglass, Arlington House, Hampton, and many others.

<sup>4</sup> In order to be true to our commitment to addressing causation and context, for the NPS the Sesquicentennial rightly ought to begin in 2008, with recognition of Bleeding Kansas, Lincoln-Douglas debates, and extend through the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the John Brown Raid and the secession crisis.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Antietam is ideally suited to interpret the interrelationship of military events and emancipation; Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania to illustrate the changing impact of war on the Southern populace

events. This in turn will guarantee that we avoid a dye-press approach to interpretation; it will allow visitors to encounter issues of causation, context, and results in varying forms—depending on how those themes are reflected locally. The plan will include the following components:

- 1) Using existing studies, assess visitor needs (what they do and don't know) and expectations (possibly expand this data through a full-blown study later)
- 2) Identify national themes and objectives: the stories the NPS needs to tell
- 3) Identify the pieces of the puzzle: the role of individual parks in telling the larger story
- 4) Establish goals for the visitor experience at Civil War sites
- 5) Critical assessment of existing media and messages offered in Civil War-related parks
- 6) Assessment of the role of personal services
- 7) Establish standards for media at Civil War sites (including cost estimates for various types of media produced at various levels of sophistication—Chevy vs. Cadillac).
- 8) Fulfilling the vision: media needs at Civil War sites
- 9) Beyond the parks: media at the national level (multi-park materials, posters, internet systems, curriculums, etc.)
- 10) Identify the human resources necessary to implement the plan (COTR, HFC)

The project may include—if funding allows—the results of various focus groups or studies, perhaps including an assessment of visitor perceptions, needs, and satisfaction, and the efficacy of various forms of media. This will be a living document, incorporating the results of park-level interpretive planning as those studies become available, as well as other studies the bear on the issues addressed by the plan.

## **The Process**

Responsibility for completing the plan will reside with a park-level staff person charged with identifying and bringing to bear all the necessary intellectual resources from both inside and outside the NPS. The project manager will act as liaison between the superintendents and HFC and WASO staff and will be responsible for generating draft and final documents.

The superintendents will appoint a Core Team to review and advise as the project moves along. This Core Team will consist of representatives from:

- Eastern theater parks
- Western theater parks
- WASO
- Education field (curriculum)

- Harpers Ferry Center
- Non-battlefield interpretive parks
- An at-large member

We will also identify key academic staff that will provide input and review of the plan.

The Core Team will make recommendations on methodology, provide data and editorial direction, and review and comment upon drafts. Superintendents and other conference attendees will receive drafts for review and comment at appropriate intervals.

Work will commence immediately. Target completion date: 12/31/01

### **Implementation of the Plan**

The plan will be the skeleton upon which a comprehensive interpretive program for the Civil War is built. The final package will be used as a mechanism to secure resources to develop and install the media necessary to fulfill the vision articulated in the Holding the High Ground document. Strategies for doing so will be developed as the Interpretive Concept Plan nears completion.

# ***Managing Non-Interpretive Uses of Battlefields***

## **The Problem**

The value of the park is often perceived differently by different constituencies. As open space around the battlefields diminishes, more users look at the battlefields dominantly as recreational open space. State or local jurisdictions sometimes (unconsciously or unconsciously) rely on NPS-owned battlefield areas to satisfy local recreational demands. Some (though by no means all) therefore fail to adequately plan sufficient recreational facilities to satisfy the needs of the local population. While some types of non-interpretive uses may be appropriate, some uses clearly threaten the ability of the NPS to fulfill its mandate to sustain these sites as evocative and educational cultural landscapes. The pressure on NPS superintendents to accommodate an ever-expanding menu of recreational uses is intensifying—uses ranging from “thons” to kite flying.

Decisions by one park to restrict specific uses are rarely cited as precedent to justify restrictions at other parks. But decisions by one park to **allow** certain uses are constantly cited as precedent to justify additional uses at other parks. Elected officials occasionally intervene on the issue of recreational use (“just this one time won’t hurt”) without understanding the context and implications of decisions made at the park level. The result is that the “purpose” of battlefield areas is being diffused—interpretive settings are being impaired—with profound implications for the traditional core missions of interpretation and preservation.

## **The Questions**

Can and should parks agree that there exists universal interpretive and preservation values that are susceptible damage or diminution by non-interpretive uses?

Can and should parks agree when the threshold to damage or diminution is crossed? Can a broad-based, proactive, consistent approach to managing non-interpretive uses be implemented? What should that approach be?

## **The Results**

### ***Guiding Principle***

Visitor uses shall not adversely affect the integrity of park resources or the ability of visitors to understand and appreciate the mission/stories of the park.

## ***Applied Principles***

Battlefield areas possess universal spiritual, interpretive, and preservation values that are susceptible to damage or diminution by non-interpretive uses.

In managing uses of battlefield landscapes, NPS management must recognize and emphasize the national values that reflect the reasons the parks were established and the national nature of the constituency for whom the park was set aside. Neither the values nor the experience of the national constituency should be diminished by inappropriate uses.

Where non-interpretive uses have become traditional and expected, managers shall use established planning processes to bring them in line with the guiding principle set forth here. This effort may take years.

Battlefield managers recognize that many passive types of non-interpretive uses are appropriate and may not degrade the resource or visitor experience.

Battlefield managers shall consider the cumulative, incremental impacts of non-interpretive uses on the resource and visitor experience.

## ***Action Items***

A working group appointed by superintendents will identify the thresholds where uses begin to diminish the universal spiritual, interpretive, and preservation values of a site. The goal: bring consistency to compendiums of units that manage battlefield landscapes by setting criteria for determining impacts on resources, values, and the visitor experience.

NPS managers and staff must promote the intrinsic value of battlefield areas (“hallowed ground”) with local governments and the articulate the rationale for NPS practices with respect to non-interpretive uses.

NPS managers should work proactively with partners and adjacent communities to find appropriate locations—preferably outside the park—for recreational facilities intended to serve recreational uses that adversely affect the spiritual, interpretive, and preservation values of the site.

NPS managers should perform public scoping (through the GMP process) or survey visitors (local, regional, national, and international in origin) to determine their views on non-interpretive uses and determine the real impact of such uses on the visitor experience.

# ***The NPS Role in Preserving Non-Adjacent Related Lands***

## ***The Problem***

The interest of the National Park Service in **adjacent** lands is obvious—we have the same responsibility as any adjacent land owner to protect the value of his or her land.

Our interest in non-adjacent lands is far less clear-cut and far more complex.

The Civil War Sites Advisory Commission calculates that fewer than 5% of the nation's principal battlefields are owned primarily by federal, state, or local governments. Of the battlefields in public ownership, often only a portion of the core or extended battlefield area is protected. Vast and numerous tracts—occasionally larger than the publicly owned area—lie unprotected, subject to development. And indeed, it is inevitable that in the next 100 years virtually all of these lands will be developed in some form.

Some of these unprotected lands (for example, at Stones River and Petersburg) are critical to the park's core interpretive story; most are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Yet they are often beyond what is considered to be (by both the public and some superintendents) the Park Service's acceptable sphere of influence. On the other hand, a large portion of the public **expects** us to work for the preservation of these lands.

## ***The Questions***

What is the proper role—if any—of the National Park Service in determining the fate of non-contiguous battlefield lands? What mechanisms, if any, are available to the NPS to affect the preservation of these lands? Do we participate only when a mechanism to invite our participation exists (for example, as a consulting agency to another federal agency undertaking an action subject to Section 106)? Should our involvement go beyond the regulatory and into the political (advocacy) realm?

## ***The Results***

### ***Guiding Principle***

Working with local communities, partners and other agencies, NPS battlefield managers shall actively seek to protect non-adjacent resources related to the mission of the local park.

### ***Applied Principles***

The NPS recognizes its responsibility as an important, revenue-producing stakeholder and shall, as good corporate citizens, participate in local and regional land use decisions that may affect non-adjacent related lands. The NPS will work to enable communities to make informed decisions.

Non-adjacent battlefield lands can be protected using strategies that are incentive-based and supportive of local economic development objectives.

### ***Action Items***

Park managers will actively work to develop the relationships that will ensure that the NPS will be invited to consult on projects that will affect non-contiguous related resources.

The NPS will seek legislation that permits NPS battlefield units to accept and hold easements on non-contiguous lands, when such easements are offered through donation.

The National Park Service at both local, state and national level will cultivate stronger working relationships with other federal agencies implementing NEPA and Section 106 reviews for projects affecting related lands.

The National Park Service—through both local parks and the ABPP—will work with State Historic Preservation Offices and local communities to identify significant related resources and to consider those resources at the earliest possible point in the land-use planning process.

The National Park Service should advocate through the NLC for full implementation of the recommendations of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission.

Seek an update of the work of the CWSAC—assessing areas overlooked or under-emphasized in the original work and revising boundaries inward and outward to reflect the latest scholarship and levels of integrity.