



How We Got Here: An Overview of the Development of the Civic Engagement Initiative at NPS

In a report published in 2001, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, the National Park System Advisory Board called on the agency to fulfill its promise in the 21st century. The board asserted that, "in many ways, the National Park Service is our nation's Department of Heritage.... Parks should be not just recreational destinations, but springboards, for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment.... [We] must ensure that the American story is told faithfully, completely, and accurately.... Our nation's history is our civic glue." (To view this entire report, see www.nps.gov/policy/report.htm)

This report strongly influenced the thinking of NPS Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust, who conceived the agency's civic engagement initiative. In response to a number of critical challenges in National Park Service sites and programs, she asked that superintendents, educational and interpretive specialists, and resource professionals of the Northeast Region organize a workshop focused on civic engagement and the agency.

That meeting was held in New York City in December 2001. The meeting brought together park managers, resource specialists, public historians, scholars, and museum professionals to discuss how national parks can become centers for civic engagement. Out of that workshop the agency developed the 2002 report, *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement*, which serves both as a summary of the workshop and an outline for further steps. During the workshop sessions, participants sought to pursue the recommendations of the National Park System Advisory Board and to build on similar concepts articulated in NPS policy, as well as on changes in interpretive programming that have been developed during the past decade.

The National Park System Advisory Board report stated the matter succinctly: "The study of our nation's history, formal and informal, is an essential part of our civic education. In a democratic society such as ours, it is important to understand the journey of liberty and justice, together with the economic, social, religious, and other forces that barred or opened the ways for our ancestors, and the distances yet to be covered." At the NPS Discovery 2000 conference, John Hope Franklin, chair of the National Park System Advisory Board, elaborated upon this idea in his keynote address: "The places that commemorate sad history are not places in which we wallow, or wallow in remorse, but instead places in which we may be moved to a new resolve, to be better citizens.... Explaining history from a variety of angles makes it not only more interesting, but also more true. When it is more true, more people come to feel that they have a part in it. That is where patriotism and loyalty intersect with truth."

Although furnishings of historic houses and troop movements of a specific battle are critically important to a place, the value of a particular site goes far beyond the details of that site. Civil War-era parks that fail to address slavery as being a chief cause of the war tell a terribly flawed story. They also fail to provide an environment wherein visitors can have a civic engagement experience that teaches the entire truth about the past and allows them to make linkages between that past and contemporary America. A 1998 report from the superintendents of Civil War battlefields, *Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes*, provided direction for placing battlefield stories within the social, economic, and political context of the period. In 1999, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., inserted important language into the fiscal year 2000 Department of the Interior appropriation legislation,

which concluded, in part, that "Civil War battlefields are often weak or missing vital information about the role that the institution of slavery played in causing the American Civil War." The Secretary of the Interior was directed to encourage NPS managers at Civil War sites to "recognize and include in all of their public displays and multi-media educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War and its role, if any, at the individual battle sites." There has been significant change at NPS Civil War sites—and also resistance to broadening the story.

One could easily substitute "national park" for "museum" in the following: "Civic engagement occurs when museum and community intersect— in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing business. The museum becomes ... an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change." The National Park System Advisory Board's 2001 study concluded: "As a nation, we protect our heritage to ensure a more complete understanding of the forces that shape our lives and future. National parks are key institutions created for that purpose, chapters in the ever expanding story of America.... By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth." In this sense, national parks are implicitly centers of civic engagement.