



Home Front Walking Tour of Civil War Woodstock: A Dialogue on the Causes and Consequences of the Civil War From One Community's Perspective

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park

In the fall of 2003 the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park began a series of walking tours through historic Woodstock Vermont focused on the Civil War "home front," encouraging a broader examination and dialogue on the causes and consequences of the war.

Due to the nearly complete preservation of 19th century Woodstock, sites associated with the Underground Railroad, abolition meetings, the town's free African-American community, and Woodstock's pivotal role in the Union war effort in Vermont, are preserved within an extraordinarily intact setting. Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP preserves resources connected with conservationist George Perkins Marsh, who as Lincoln's ambassador to Italy, vigorously represented the Union cause in Europe, and Frederick Billings, who worked to rebuild Vermont's rural population depleted by war losses and agricultural collapse.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, as the first National Park offering a tour devoted to the Civil War home front, adds value to the efforts of Civil War sites throughout the National Park Service, to provide a much broader context to public interpretation of the Civil War. Woodstock's free African-American community played an outsized role in the conflict. The second largest free black community in Vermont, it sent twelve of its citizens to fight with the famed Massachusetts 54th Regiment (Vermont's black population was not large enough to field its own military units.) Using first person accounts and real places, the "Home Front" program specifically explores the impact of race and slavery on antebellum American social and political institutions, the evolution of anti-slavery resistance and the nation's spiraling descent into civil war. The program encourages a dialogue on the nature of a democracy and the role of compromise and tolerance in maintaining civil society.

The "Home Front" tour concludes at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP examining the park's special connection to the Civil War and the ways the terrible struggle also provided an opening for "a new birth of freedom" including seminal thinking on stewardship of natural resources and guaranteed public access to great landscapes like Yosemite. It was in 1864, in the darkest, most desperate days of the war when Sherman was besieging Atlanta and Grant was on his Overland Campaign in Virginia, that George Perkins Marsh described a global vision of postwar stewardship in his landmark book, Man and Nature and California associates of Frederick Billings persuaded the Lincoln Administration to protect the lands of Yosemite in perpetuity.

Frederick Law Olmsted in his report to the Commissioners of Yosemite 1865:

"It was during one of the darkest hours, before Sherman had begun the march upon Atlanta or Grant his terrible movement through the Wilderness...that consideration was first given to the danger that such scenes [speaking of Bierstadt and Watkin's art of Yosemite] might become private property..."

Robin Winks in his biography of Frederick Billings, "Frederick Billings: A Life":

“The creation of a park in far away California was a statement about national unity, continental status, and hopes for an optimistic future in the midst of a devastating civil war: Yosemite was a monument to union, democracy, and long-term goals for the nation, the product of a great national need.”

The “Home Front” program encourages thought and discussion about the social roots of American conservation and the role of national parks as enduring symbols of democracy and national unity.