

A Sense of Connection

BY CINDY MACLEOD

PARK INTERPRETERS HAVE A PROUD TRADITION of engaging audiences with stories and conversation about places and events. My goal as a superintendent is to ensure that these places, recognized by Congress as nationally significant, have true meaning and importance for their owners, the American people. Meeting that goal for all is a challenge. To reach a wide audience—and encourage new ones—interpretation must be broad and deep, as well as unimpeachably accurate. **I WAS FORTUNATE TO COME TO** Richmond National Battlefield Park at a time ripe for the infusion of energy and funds. I came as an outsider, an architectural historian who knew more about the houses used as hospitals during the Civil War than about the battles that caused soldiers' injuries. **THE PARK WAS ROOTED IN** the tradition of private tours tracing troop movements, tours led by military historians for veterans and their descendants. Once that generation passed—and when funds were sufficient—the emphasis was on living history highlighting the life of the soldier (an activity now criticized as more entertainment than education). Agency leaders seemed content that Gettysburg told the most powerful Civil War story. Richmond idled along, visited mainly by the most faithful of military history devotees. By 1995, the exhibits were old and abbreviated; it was time for a change. **WE WROTE A PHILOSOPHICAL BLUEPRINT** that aimed neither to glorify nor denigrate. We wanted a moving and eloquent place where visitors could find the war's meaning for themselves. We would not only explain the strategy of the battles, but also how the Confederate capital's industrial, economic, political, and social fabric merged with that of a war zone. Visitors would see both the complexity of the past and the strengths and shortcomings in our collective heritage. **IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AN ARRAY OF GROUPS**, we built a visitor center at the Tredegar Iron Works, a war-era site that invites telling stories about the conflict's industrial requirements, slave and female labor, and transport systems. The location next to Belle Isle, a former prison camp for Union soldiers, and Hollywood Cemetery, a resting place for Confederate officers and unknown soldiers, facilitates storytelling too. We designed the exhibits with an eye to engaging all kinds of visitors, including those new to the battlefield parks. **THE MOST RECENT ADDITION IS A STATUE OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN AND HIS SON**, who visited Richmond right after its fall in April 1865. That event—one

of “the most unforgettable scenes of this unforgettable war,” says a prominent historian—was largely forgotten. Pulling that visit from history's dustbin evoked strong opinion, which I consider positive. Since we aim to make these places meaningful, hearing from our visitors is a way to gauge the success of the connection.

SO WE ASK FOR COMMENTS. Here are a few excerpts:

“Two of my ancestors fought with the Union and one with the Confederacy. I tend to agree with the idea that states should have more power and the federal government less. If only the South had defended other rights than the right to own slaves.”

“There are so many other layers that, as one learns about the other side, you come to realize that what you are taught is not always the only way.”

“We consider the Civil War as a turning point for our nation and its people. Your center is critical for the youth of today to help them learn the story of Independence and then the story of the Civil War—two powerful stories.”

“We wrote a philosophical blueprint that aimed neither to glorify nor denigrate. We wanted a moving and eloquent place where visitors could find the war's meaning for themselves.”

“The Civil War was fought over me, an African American woman. More blood was shed over the lives of black Americans than in any other war. I am a proud American. I pray that our wounds will *finally* heal.”

“Long live the South.”

“It is with deep sorrow that I view these scenes about the Civil War . . . a period of great tragedy, massive loss of life, cruelty of all sorts. I do so wish we could all feel some degree of peace at last. We have so much in the present day to solve.”

WOW, I SAY WHEN I READ THESE NOTES. People really want to talk to us about their visit. That's success. During my tenure, my own interests have given way to a broader understanding of the connectedness of the American experience. I am still learning and I wish the same for all my countrymen.

Cindy MacLeod is Superintendent of Richmond National Battlefield Park and Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site.