

MISSION STATEMENTS

Where We Need to Go—Lessons from Septima Clark

Dwight T. Pitcaithley

I am deeply honored to have been asked to speak today as we dedicate this fountain, this plaza in the name of liberty and Septima Clark. It is altogether fitting and proper that we dedicate a fountain in memory of a civil rights soldier of the twentieth century in a park dedicated to America's Civil War of the nineteenth century. The connections between the two are many and direct. The threads of history tightly bind the Civil War and this country's search for civil rights.

The Civil War ended, as every school child knows, with the passage and ratification of three constitutional amendments that profoundly changed the face of democracy in this country. None would have predicted on the occasion of South Carolina's leaving the Union that only a few years later, slavery would be abolished and former slaves would become citizens and given the right to vote. Neither side in the conflict, observed Lincoln in his second inaugural, "anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding."

It was astounding, indeed, and difficult for this country to absorb the expansion of freedom these amendments represented. Neither side was prepared, neither side was ready to

embrace and defend this "New birth of Freedom." The flowering of American citizenship for black Americans was, as we also know, short lived. After only a decade during which freedom and citizenship were exercised, the darkness of Jim Crow and black codes and debilitating segregation descended upon the country.

The racism that Septima Clark fought against had its roots in the American institution of slavery. And while the Civil War was able to abolish slavery, it was unable to abolish its underlying motivation. Septima Clark's contributions to this country were bound up in her belief that the United States Constitution had meaning for *all* the people of the country, that the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution meant what they said and should not be ignored and subverted.

It is also fitting and proper that we dedicate this monument to Septima Clark in this place because the National Park Service has, over the past ten years, reaffirmed its responsibility as an educational institution and as a publicly funded agency, one that needs to respond to and reflect *all* the people of the United States. To that end, it has become more inclusive in the stories that it tells at these special places and more expansive in its thinking about what constitutes American history, what voices should be heard, how histories are constructed. It has moved away from presenting park stories from only one perspective and begun using different voices, different views in developing interpretive narratives. At Devils Tower in northeast Wyoming, for example, the National Park Service until only a few years ago interpreted the volcanic monolith as a geologic phenomenon and as a great place for rock climbing. The traditional and religious relationship the park held for several tribes of Plains Indians was ignored. Today, the National Park Service embraces the Indian narrative in its interpretive programs as it continues to present the geologic story.

Perhaps no other field of NPS effort better represents this expansion of thinking than Civil War parks. Beginning five years ago, the superintendents of the Civil War battlefields decided that telling only the story of the battle, while important, limited public understanding of the war and its significance to the country today. They launched an effort to include the causes of the war in their interpretive programs; to discuss the role communities played in the war effort

(Petersburg, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg); to present the contribution of women, black and white, and the contributions of the United States Colored Troops. These efforts have produced several new publications and exhibits. One of the finest, in my estimation, is the exhibit on the coming of the war which stands behind you in the Fort Sumter visitor center.

For too long this country has avoided public discussions about the causes of the war. Writing from the perspective of the 1980s, Gaines Foster, a professor of history at Louisiana State University, argued that as Americans glorified the war, they failed to address the underlying causes of the war and to recognize the war's relationship to basic human freedoms. "Rather than looking at the war as a tragic failure and trying to understand it, or even condemn it," he wrote, "Americans, North and South, chose to view it as a glorious time to be celebrated. Most ignored the fact that the nation had failed to resolve the debate over the nature of the Union and to eliminate the contradictions between its equalitarian ideals and the institution of slavery without resort to a bloody civil war. Instead, they celebrated the war's triumphant nationalism and martial glory." This exhibit, and others like it, will encourage visitors to confront the causes of the war through the social, political, and economic context of *those* times. Additionally, we hope, through this effort, to prompt a discussion of the connections between then and now, to understand the consequences of the war and of the failed Reconstruction. To that end, the changing/evolving

nature of freedom in this country is not only an appropriate subject, but an essential subject if we are to understand the overpowering role the Civil War played in shaping the social and political environment in which we exist today.

Coincidentally, the Congress realized that the aggregate of national parks should also become more inclusive and represent more aspects of the American past. During the decade of the 1990s, Congress expanded the collection of *your national parks* by adding Manzanar, a Japanese internment camp during World War II; and Washita Battlefield, the site of a massacre of Cheyenne Indians by George Armstrong Custer. It also added sites associated with the modern civil rights movement, places such as the Monroe School in Topeka commemorating the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision; Central High School in Little Rock, to commemorate the 1957 desegregation of that school; Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta; and the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, which includes the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Along with the North Bridge in Concord and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the Edmund Pettus Bridge is arguably one of the most powerful icons to freedom and liberty this country has to offer.

Septima Clark sought, in her words, "simple justice." Freedom, equality, liberty, and justice are words that have defined this nation from its inception, growing from those powerful phrases penned by Jefferson in 1776. "We hold these truths to be self-

evident," he wrote, "that all men are created *equal*, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness." The Constitution of the United States, which followed the Declaration by a decade, began with similar intentions, but could not sustain them. "We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish *justice*, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence" and welfare and the blessings of *Liberty*, it begins. The Constitution was unable to provide justice and liberty to all the people of the United States. Its recognition of slavery in three places (without mentioning the word), established a fundamental contradiction between the ideals of the nation as represented in Jefferson's Declaration and the legal framework of the nation as represented in the Constitution. That contradiction would ultimately be settled by 620,000 deaths and the emancipation of 4,000,000 slaves.

With the conclusion of the war, liberty, justice, and equality existed in this country for one brief shining moment before the "Great Reconciliation" of 1877 refocused federal interest away from implementing the three amendments designed to create that "more perfect Union." For decades, white America was satisfied with a status quo that excluded a large percentage of American citizens from enjoying even basic human and civil rights taken for granted by the rest of the population. And then slowly and gradually a mighty army gathered itself and launched a thousand fronts:

against unequal schools, against bias in public transportation and accommodations, against long odds, and for the right to vote. Septima Clark and Bob Moses and Myles Horton and Virginia Durr and Rosa Parks and countless others forced this country to face the inequality that had come to define life in America. Collectively *they* changed the meaning of citizenship, *they* redefined equality, *they* created “a more perfect Union.” This country is not where it wants to be in the area of civil rights, it is not where it should be, but it has come so much closer to realizing Jefferson’s vision of equality, and it has done so because of the efforts of warriors like Septima Clark.

We are gathered today to dedicate this place in the name of liberty. As we do this, let us not forget that freedom and equality and liberty, in spite of the pledge our children make each morning that concludes, “with liberty and justice for all,” will not and do not expand naturally. Freedom in this

country often contracts and has repeatedly over the course of its history. We must be ever mindful that the maintenance of the high ideals we live by takes effort, takes constant effort. We must also understand our *history* and how it has shaped and continues to shape our lives. We must understand the relationship between past and present. John Lewis, Congressman from Georgia and another veteran of the modern Civil Rights movement, understands this. He concludes his wonderful memoir, *Walking with the Wind* (as I will conclude my remarks), by writing, “Know your history. Study it. Share it. Shed a tear over it. Laugh about it. Live it. Act it out. Understand it. Because for better or worse, our past is what brought us here, and it can help lead us to where we need to go.” This place, this fountain, these exhibits serve as reminders of the journey this country has made from then to now, and will help lead us to where we need to go.

Dwight T. Pitcaithley is chief historian of the National Park Service and a member of the Board of Directors of the George Wright Society. He delivered these remarks on June 14, 2003, at the dedication of the Septima Clark Fountain, Liberty Square, Fort Sumter National Monument, Charleston, South Carolina.

“MISSION STATEMENTS” is a new occasional column that presents compelling statements of values and ideals that are important to the people, places, and professions that the Society serves. We are looking for inspirational and insightful writings that touch on close-to-the-heart issues that motivate us to do what we do as park professionals. We invite readers to submit their own Mission Statements, or suggest previously published essays that we might reprint in this column. Contact GWS executive director Dave Harmon at dharmon@georgewright.org, or by phone at 1-906-487-9722.

