

**REENACTORS IN THE PARKS:
A STUDY OF EXTERNAL REVOLUTIONARY WAR
REENACTMENT ACTIVITY AT NATIONAL PARKS**

by

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for the 225th Anniversary of the American Revolution Planning Committee

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Cathy Stanton
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INTRODUCTION

Origins of this study

This project began in the summer of 1998, when the 225th Anniversary of the American Revolution Planning Committee of the National Park Service recognized that the upcoming anniversary would likely bring larger reenactment events at Revolutionary War parks. Realizing that a better understanding of how parks and reenactors already worked together could help with planning for these larger events, the committee requested a brief survey of what kinds of reenactor activities were currently taking place within the national park system.

Sixteen Revolutionary War parks responded to the survey. Their responses showed that external reenactment groups were becoming an increasingly prominent part of many parks' interpretive programs. The study also revealed that each park had developed its own way of working with reenactors, and that many park staff felt the relationship was highly important—and, in some cases, problematic.

The present study builds on those findings. Its overall aim has been to document both the strengths and the difficulties of the park/reenactor relationship, and to identify opportunities to strengthen it in the future—both in the immediate future of the 225th anniversary years and in the longer term as well.

Framework of the research and researcher

Each weekend, avocational reenactors throughout the U.S. put on the clothing of other eras and attempt to step into the past. They are in search of many things: camaraderie, entertainment, or a sense of experiencing another reality—a reality that often centers around times of war. Although they belong to a community that is just four decades old, in a sense they continue a millennia-old human tradition of ritually or symbolically recreating the past as a way of understanding who we are.

Many observers have tended to compare reenactors with the historical record they try to reproduce. Viewed this way, reenactors inevitably come up lacking, because it is obvious that nothing—no amount of careful hand-stitching, no studying of obscure drill manuals—can actually turn a twentieth century American into a British dragoon or a Continental infantryman.

It should be clear already, however, that my own view of reenactment is somewhat different. From my perspective in the field of anthropology and cultural performance, reenactment appears less as an impossible attempt to step into the past, and more as a complex ritual response that blends past and present realities.

Anthropologists and others have long realized that ritual and public display offer important insights into the workings of human societies. More recently, some scholars in the field of cultural performance have seen that this kind of behavior not only reveals

important cultural information, but also gives people a chance to struggle, negotiate, and articulate differing visions of identity. In the process, many things can change. Public perceptions, cultural allegiances, and power relationships may all be affected by what happens on the stage of public display. (For the theoretical background of this view, see Turner 1974, 1982.)

This study of Revolutionary War reenactment at national parks, then, is more than a survey of how a particular type of volunteers interacts with the National Park Service. I have tried to provide a window into what happens when two groups with passionately held visions of history—visions that sometimes overlap, and sometimes clash—try to interpret the past together.

My own study of avocational reenactment began in 1992, when I was an adult undergraduate at Vermont College. I focused intensively on the Civil War reenactment community during my master's degree work, also undertaken at Vermont College, during which I carried out a two-year participant-observation project among Civil War reenactors in New England.

My fascination for this subject stems in part from the fact that I am not myself American. I lived in Canada until my mid-20s, and since moving to the U.S. in 1983 I have sought to understand national and cultural patterns that in many ways are very foreign to me. Reenactment reveals a great deal about a particular kind of masculine, military, American ethos. At the same time, it shows some of the ways in which many different types of people attempt to come to terms with the complex legacy of American history, and with the equally complex demands of our own time.

Research outline

Beginning in March 1999, I spoke with key National Park Service staff at many Revolutionary War parks to find out how this study could be most useful to them. With their comments, I developed a four-page survey instrument that I distributed to more than 150 reenactor units during the summer of 1999, receiving over 60 responses.

My original hope was to hear from reenactors with a broad range of opinions about the National Park Service, and from those who did not participate in events at national parks as well as those who did. However, perhaps predictably, the great majority of survey responses were from units who had attended park events in recent seasons. The few surveys I received from non-park-affiliated units contained only partial data, making it difficult to use their information. **Reenactor data and comments included in this report, then, do not reflect the Revolutionary War reenactment community as a whole, but only that part of it currently associated with national parks.**

My initial planning for this study also included making a calendar of upcoming reenactor events at Revolutionary War parks throughout the national park system for spring and summer 1999, from which I chose three events to use as case studies:

- April 17, 1999
“Battle Road” event organized by Minute Man NHP and the Battle Road Committee
- May 21-23, 1999
Encampment at Kings Mountain NMP with the King’s Own Patriots
- June 19-21, 1999
Garrison weekend with units of the Continental Line at Saratoga NHP

Each case study included some advance preparation and contact with key park staff and reenactor organizers, after which I attended the event (and, in some cases, pre- and post-event meetings as well) and conducted brief audience surveys and follow-up interviews with park staff and reenactors. The case study sections were reviewed by the park staff and reenactors who organized the events that I observed.

In addition to these three site visits, I toured several southern Revolutionary War parks, talked with many reenactors and park staff by telephone, and monitored reenactor web sites and listserves on the Internet.

General Comments

While this project addresses specific questions about Revolutionary War reenactors at national parks, these questions arise in NPS interactions with reenactors of any period of history, or, indeed, with any external group seeking access to parks. I have attempted to frame this report so that it will be useful in considering broader issues, including:

- accommodating differing meanings within the same natural or memorial landscape
- reaching different publics with the same interpretation, or the same publics with differing interpretations
- creating partnerships with groups who have complex and evolving relationships with the sites administered by the National Park Service

Definitions

At the outset it may be helpful to clarify my understanding of some terms that will be used frequently in this report:

Encampment

An event at which reenactors set up their tents and remain for some time (usually a Friday evening through a Sunday afternoon), as opposed to an event lasting only a few hours and not involving tents and camp life.

Impression

A reenactor's role or character. For example, a reenactor may choose a military impression, a washerwoman impression, etc.

Living history

This is a somewhat broader term than "reenactment," covering a wide range of professional and avocational costumed historical interpretation. In a more specific sense, a "living history" event is usually centered around non-battlefield activities.

Policy-makers

I use this term to refer to policy-makers at the National Park Service's Washington D.C. offices (specifically, in this case, the Office of History and the Office of Interpretation), rather than to policy-makers at individual parks.

Reenactors

Although there are different types of people who present the past through costumed interpretation, my use of the term "reenactor" is intended specifically to refer to the avocational community that has emerged in the U.S. and elsewhere since the 1960s. Reenactors themselves refer to their activity as "the hobby," but they recognize that reenactment is an extraordinarily demanding and complex activity, far more so than most hobbies. My choice of the term "avocational" is intended to reflect the fact that while reenactment is distinct from most reenactors' everyday lives, it is nonetheless central to their sense of identity and community.

My focus in this report is almost entirely on reenactors who portray soldiers and military life. There are two primary reasons for this focus:

- Avocational reenactment began and continues to be centered around portrayals of battle and military history. The central ethos of the reenactment community is strongly masculine and military.
- The relationship between the National Park Service and the reenactment community has been shaped by ongoing debate about how to portray wars and battles, from the mechanics of weapons handling to the larger politics of commemoration. Because this issue looms so large—indeed, it seems safe to say is the central concern prompting this project—it has been the primary focus of my investigations.

However, it is important to note that there is a substantial minority of women among Revolutionary War reenactors, along with many men who take civilian roles. In many ways they are given short shrift in this report, for which I apologize in advance. These non-military reenactors often add valuable elements to the interpretive programs in parks as well as at general reenactor events, and their capacity for broadening reenactment's appeal and range should not be underestimated, despite my own lack of emphasis on it here.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 225th anniversary of the American Revolution presents an opportunity for national parks and reenactment groups to reassess a relationship that is both close and problematic. Some possible areas for exploration that have arisen from this study are:

- What do parks and reenactors really want from one another? What are they willing to do to achieve their goals? When disagreements arise, do they reflect underlying issues of safety, authenticity, preservation, values, or communication style? Clarifying these points is an important step toward improved relations.
- How can parks and reenactors work together to find alternatives to simulating battle on NPS lands? Innovative “amenities,” imaginative use of park history and resources, and use of off-park sites for battle reenactments are all strategies that have been used successfully at Revolutionary War parks.
- The increasing effectiveness of reenactor umbrella organizations may offer an opportunity for the Park Service to form a new type of partnership with the reenactment community.

Section I

The Role of Reenactors at National Parks

Reenactors occupy multiple roles at national parks. Are they primarily park volunteers, with attendant responsibilities? Or are they members of the public, continuing a longstanding tradition of public commemorative performance? In this latter sense, they are “traditional users” who utilize parks for ritual purposes central to their construction of individual and group identity.

It is also important to note that there is no absolute dividing line between parks and reenactors. Many Revolutionary War reenactors are experienced educators or interpreters, while many National Park staff have participated in “living history” activities at parks or as reenactors themselves. They share many techniques and concerns, and they strive to reach the same public.

Given this multiplicity of roles, it is important for everyone involved to clarify the basis for reenactor participation in events at parks.

Section II

Values and Perceptions

Despite their many shared interests, reenactors and the NPS differ significantly in their ideas about the appropriate commemoration of battles and wars. NPS policies prohibiting simulated warfare are the major bone of contention. Both groups seek to honor the memory of those who fought in the American Revolution, and share many of the same

interpretive techniques. But the value systems underlying their commemorative strategies are often very different.

As a result of these conflicting value systems, visitors to reenactor events at parks sometimes receive inconsistent interpretive messages. Most of the surface disagreement between parks and reenactors is expressed in terms of words such as *safety* and *authenticity*, which can carry various interpretations and which are often used to mask differences in values.

The battle over battle reenactments has become the central focus for many in the park/reenactor relationship. But this study, along with recent research in the field of conflict resolution, suggests that the two sides are not as polarized in reality as they perceive themselves to be. While their differing value systems do exist and must be taken into account, this is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to improved park/reenactor relations.

Section III

Performance, Preservation, and Communication

Successful park/reenactor relationships focus on three important areas:

- **Performance:** Looking at concrete issues of presentation creates a common language that allows parks and reenactors to negotiate their respective agendas. Some of the ways that this language can be used include:
 - recognizing that “authenticity” is a highly variable term for both park interpreters and reenactors
 - recognizing and utilizing differing levels of performance skill among reenactors
 - using physical and other park resources to create innovative interpretive scenarios
 - recognizing existing interpretive strategies that are shared between reenactors and parks, and jointly understanding how these work as performances
- **Preservation:** Reenactors and parks are more likely to find common ground if park policies and concerns are clearly linked to preservation of park resources.
- **Communication:** Strong park/reenactor relationships incorporate several communicative strategies, including:
 - ongoing communication
 - clear and consistent communication within as well as between reenactor units and park staffs
 - an understanding among park staff of reenactors’ improvisational style
 - a park atmosphere that is welcoming to reenactors

Section IV

Reenactor Organizations

Park-by-park and unit-by-unit relationships do not take into account the growing importance and influence of reenactor umbrella groups. Reenactors are increasingly in demand at historic sites, and reenactor organizations are increasingly skillful at organizing events and negotiating with sponsors and hosts. Some parks are beginning to build relationships with umbrella organizations as a way of streamlining communications, recruiting larger numbers of reenactors, and ensuring that park events are considered by reenactment groups whose calendars become busier each year. The Park Service may want to consider building on these relationships on a wider basis, perhaps as part of a system-wide dialogue on some of the areas outlined above.