

Section I

THE ROLE OF REENACTORS AT NATIONAL PARKS

Unlike most other visitors or volunteers at national parks, reenactors occupy multiple roles. They may fill more than one role at once, or move from one role to another. Because of this unusual situation, it is important for both reenactors and parks to clarify how they understand these positions.

Reenactors as VIPs

Most parks consider reenactors to be a part of their Volunteers-In-Parks programs. In the 1998 study, 79% of responding parks reported that they had enrolled reenactors as VIPs.

This status may be quite formal. Some individual reenactors or units are established, long-term volunteers at particular parks. They have ongoing contact with park staff, and may present regular programs or encampments. Often these volunteers act as liaisons between the park and the reenactor community, or form the nucleus of larger groups of reenactors who participate in events at the park.

- At Minute Man NHP, a core group of reenactors presents regular public programs on a volunteer basis. These same volunteers have organized a larger group of “pickets,” who interpret for visitors during larger-scale reenactor events at Minute Man (see page ____).
- His Majesty’s 24th Regiment of Foot acts as the “official park unit” at Saratoga NHP, setting up one or more small encampments each year and participating in many special events at the park.

In other cases, the volunteer relationship may be more informal. When they were asked what activities they had participated in at national parks, only 16% of responding reenactors listed “enrollment as VIPs,” compared with the 79% cited by the parks. What this suggests is that parks are counting all participants at reenactor events as volunteers, while the individual reenactors themselves may not be aware of this status. This reflects the fact that at the great majority of reenactor events, only the “top brass” are involved in making the arrangements with sponsors or hosts, while the “rank and file” are usually quite blissfully unaware of these negotiations, and remain focused on activities on the field and in the camps.

Whether or not the VIP relationship is a formalized one, it is clear that many reenactors come to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment to nearby parks, or to sites with strong historical connections to the history of the group they portray. In some cases, these connections extend to more than one generation in a family of reenactors.

- Two members of the Battle Road Committee at Minute Man NHP began reenacting as boys with their fathers, both of whom were active at the park and in the broader reenactment community during the national bicentennial.

Like many facets of the park/reenactor relationship, this closeness and sense of ownership cuts two ways. It can tremendously enhance the park's interpretive program, but it can also heighten conflicts when they do arise. In many ways, reenactors ask to be treated as peers of the park's interpretive staff, by virtue of their expertise at living history and their dedication to educating the public or assisting a particular park. As one respondent to the reenactor survey put it:

We need to be treated as professionals who are there to enhance the educational opportunities for visitors to the parks rather than being treated as potential vandals who need constant oversight.

Yet no matter how experienced or committed reenactors may be, they are not Park Service employees and are not accountable in the same way that park staff must be. "We always tell reenactors, 'It's a hobby for you, but for us, it's our careers,'" one staff member at Minute Man NHP told me.

Reenactors appear to accept this essential split most of the time. But when conflicts arise, they may try to use their long-term volunteer service as a form of leverage. Several reenactors, like those quoted below, suggested to me that parks should be willing to make an exception to the no-opposing-forces rule for occasional special events (such as anniversaries), in light of the number of hours of skilled and dedicated volunteer service reenactors provide at other times.

I understand the caution and concerns associated with the administration and guidelines from the Government and am willing to work within those parameters. However, for "anniversary" commemorations, I believe that as long as the Public is kept in "safe" spectator areas, attention should be focused on representing the historical aspects of the Battle as closely as possible.

The site is pristine—National Park Service is doing a fine job returning site to its 1775 appearance. They are cautious re. military actions—but can ease up on this in 2000 without violating National Park directions I'm sure.

Reenactors as members of the public

Although parks consider reenactors primarily to be volunteers, reenactors also see themselves in another role: as members of the tax-paying public with public rights of access to national parks. Just as they may be exceptional volunteers because of their level of skill and commitment, many also feel that their passion for history and commemoration strengthens their claims for access based on their rights as citizens.

This feeling came across very clearly in reenactors' comments on the survey form:

The NPS has forgotten who the parks are for, the public.

Park belongs to all of us tax paying citizens of U.S., not government or Park Directors.

I am prepared to tolerate [dismissive] behavior from private enterprises—but certainly not from those representing our government.

If the NPS wants more re-enactor participation at their taxpayer supported sites they should open their “policy” for review and revision with re-enactor representation in all discussions. If they want us to abide by their rules, we should have a say in their creation. “No taxation without representation.”

It is worth noting here that the reenactment community, by and large, is predisposed to question or resist government regulation.¹ Reenactors frequently link their present-day beliefs with the history they represent. For many, reenactment becomes a way to make statements about individual rights and freedoms, including the right of access to important national historical sites and to forms of commemoration that express their particular visions of what it means to be an American.

- Revolutionary War reenactors in New England led a successful lobbying effort in the spring of 1999 to add an amendment to a new Massachusetts gun control law that would have placed many restrictions on the use and storage of antique and reproduction weapons. Reenactors used their public visibility, and their importance in the regional heritage tourism economy, to promote the amendment. They also made skillful use of the iconic figure of the citizen-soldier, and linked their lobbying efforts with the historical reasons for the inclusion of the second amendment in the U.S. constitution.

Reenactors, then, are members of the public as well as park volunteers. But it is not always clear when they are occupying one role, and when the other. Long-time volunteers may switch to presenting themselves as members of the public when they come into conflict with park policy or personnel. One reenactor, noting what he saw as a contradiction within the Park Service, was indirectly pointing out the multiple roles that reenactors themselves play at parks:

As the Park Service was started to “protect” natural lands, this mentality today seems to translate to “protect from reenactors” at many sites. The Park system seems to have a contradictory policy of protecting lands from the public while providing access to them for the public.

Are reenactors “the public”? Or are they park volunteers? In fact, they are both. And they occupy a third role as well, which further complicates their relationship with the NPS.

Reenactors as traditional users of parks

Reenactors form a small but distinct (and highly-visible) sub-culture within American culture as a whole.² Paying homage to the past, especially to the soldiers who fought in America’s wars, is an integral part of what this culture does. In this sense, they can be considered traditional users of the historic sites in the care of the National Park Service.

This important point requires a deeper look into how reenactor culture has evolved, how it functions, and how it contributes to reenactors’ sense of identity.

➤ **Origins and history of reenactor culture**

As I have already noted, cultures throughout human history have reenacted important events as a way of orienting themselves in time and space. Although Americans have often wrestled with whether their “exceptional” new nation should embrace the past or repudiate it (Kammen 17), they very quickly adopted traditional forms of commemoration, and have continued to practice them ever since. Performance or reenactment has been a part of that tradition almost from the nation’s beginning.

- In 1822, 20 survivors of the fight on Lexington Green helped to reenact the event for an audience. Iconic scenes from the Revolutionary War (epitomized by the “Spirit of ‘76”) have long been a part of patriotic commemoration.
- The national centennial in 1876 saw many types of historical performance and reenactment. Companies of “minute men” were formed in towns throughout eastern Massachusetts, many of which have operated more or less continuously since then. These groups have traditionally participated in Patriots Day events in Lexington and Concord, and they continue to be involved in the “Battle Road” event discussed in Case Study A of this report. In Rome, NY, a spectacular reenactment of the siege of Fort Stanwix was the finale of the town’s centennial celebrations. Featuring a dazzling pyrotechnic display against a night sky, it no doubt involved many Civil War veterans, in the same way that early Civil War centennial reenactments involved veterans of World War II and Korea.

During the first half of the 20th century, **historical pageantry** emerged as an extremely popular form of public commemoration in the U.S. Because it foreshadowed many aspects of contemporary reenactment (including some of the struggles we see in the NPS/reenactor relationship today), it is worth examining briefly here.

Pageant organizers believed that coming together in shared performances of history could help communities and individuals to reach a common understanding of

citizenship in the face of many changes and competing visions of what it meant to be an American. Pageants emphasized local histories, and produced a largely uncritical but very active and deeply-felt connection to local stories and their larger national context. Participating in pageants was seen as a positive alternative to more passive forms of entertainment and education (such as radio and movies).

Like living history programs at parks today, many pageants focused on home-front or non-martial scenes when depicting wars. Pageant-master Virginia Tanner, who organized the 1927 sesquicentennial pageant commemorating the battle of Bennington, raised points that resonate strikingly with current NPS policy:

For the battle itself, I have not tried to show two opposed forces deliberately hacking and killing each other, which to all intelligent men must always seem a wasteful and stupid procedure. Rather have I tried to paint a vivid series of war strategies, and battle heroisms, gathered from local traditions, against a grim background of war's clamor and din. (Bennington pageant program, 1927, p. 7)

At the same time, pageant organizers were aware that the spectacle of battle could make for riveting theater, and that the public often wanted to see it. Percy MacKaye, a prominent pageant-master, recognized the carnivalesque attraction of battle scenes, which combined the appeal not only of “collective service, but color and rhythm.” Admitting that people seemed to crave this kind of experience, MacKaye wondered whether it was possible to create equally stirring spectacles of peace. Perhaps pageants, if they were inspiring and colorful enough, might even function as a “substitute for war” (Glassberg 208).

As the 20th century progressed, this kind of thinking came to seem painfully naïve, as did pageantry’s optimism about the present and future flowing in a progressive, orderly way from the past. Pageants became increasingly nostalgic in character, focusing more on visual spectacle and historical authenticity than on moral lessons. By the time of World War II, pageantry as a popular form of cultural performance had all but disappeared.

- Pageantry’s surface similarities to contemporary reenactment can be seen in records of the immense sesquicentennial pageant held on the Saratoga battlefield in 1927. Newspaper photos show hundreds of uniformed men (albeit with modern rifles and cartridge belts) in scenes that might almost be found in any present-day reenactor “mega-event.”

At the same time that pageantry flourished, a separate sub-culture of historic weapons enthusiasts was forming in the U.S. Groups such as the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association (founded in 1933) and the North-South Skirmish Association (founded in 1950) were dedicated to the restoration and use of black-powder weapons. (Both groups remain active today.) Eventually, some of these men began

to pursue an interest in the broader historical context of these weapons, focusing mainly on frontier “mountain men” or on the Civil War (Anderson 136-8).

The **Civil War centennial** (1961-65) provided the catalyst for the formation of today’s reenactor community. Despite a cool response from the federal Civil War Centennial Commission, many organizations (mostly at the local level) held reenactments of Civil War events. The North-South Skirmish Association, which was already reenacting the war in a limited sense, found itself prominently involved in many of the larger “national” events during these years.

- The **centennial of the first battle of Manassas** was commemorated in 1961 with about 3,000 reenactors, half from the North-South Skirmish Association and the rest from the National Guard. The event attracted about 35,000 spectators, and set the tone for NPS/reenactor relations for many years to come.

The 1961 Manassas event looms large in the oral history of reenactment for both reenactors and staff. Anderson (143) quotes a *New York Times* report of many cases of heat stroke and two minor injuries during the “fighting.” Many reenactors, though, have spoken to me of this and other Civil War centennial events as being much bloodier, with many serious injuries and even (in some reports) deaths.

While these reports are not accurate, they do reflect an awareness that in the early days of avocational reenactment, safety standards were lax, and many on the field were just there to “play soldier” and have a good time. Many of what I will call “first generation” reenactors were veterans of World War II or Korea, who seemed to be recreating their own military experiences of combat and camaraderie, rather than events from the more distant past.

Immediately following the Manassas centennial, NPS policy-makers began to take a hard look at reenactment, and to write policies to regulate it on national park land.

Between the end of the Civil War centennial in 1965 and the start of the **national bicentennial**, interest in reenactment dwindled. Most Americans were not eager to watch or participate in reenacted battles when the nation was involved in a costly and controversial real war in Vietnam.

By the start of the bicentennial, the Vietnam conflict was over. But it had raised troubling questions for many Americans about national ideals, policies, and history. These questions were linked with widespread reassessments of many aspects of American culture, including power relationships based on race and gender. The younger men who entered “the hobby” during the bicentennial years had come of age during this turbulent time, and it shaped their views—and the reenactment community—in very important ways.

For these “second generation” reenactors, reenactment was not just a game. Many were children of World War II veterans, who grew up expecting someday to serve their country in war and to experience the kind of national pride and purpose that their parents had shared. The national experience during Vietnam had shaken that expectation, and left many men and women of this generation (even those who did serve in the military) with unresolved doubts about their national identity.

Reenacting was a way for them to feel connected to a version of America’s military and social heritage that they could be proud of. At the same time, it allowed them to create present-day communities that helped to soften many of the sweeping social changes taking place in everyday life. In my view, reenactment in its current form is essentially a product of the social conditions that shaped the “baby boom” generation.

Reenactors of this generation were much more serious about standards of safety and authenticity. For the first time, women began to become involved in reenactment, reflecting changing gender relationships outside “the hobby.” Continuing an overall trend throughout reenactment’s history, reenactor performances reflected ever-broader social contexts, including more civilian “impressions.” The central emphasis, though, was still on military life and history. While camp life and community have always been the social center of the reenactor community, battle reenactment remains its performative centerpiece.

As with the Civil War centennial, many of the Revolution’s major events were recreated during the bicentennial years. NPS regulations prohibiting opposing forces and simulated casualties were by now in place, restricting the kinds of reenactor activities that could take place on national park land. NPS bicentennial events tended to be less theatrical than those held elsewhere, the major exception being the culminating encampment at Yorktown.

➤ The **Yorktown bicentennial** was commemorated at a five-day encampment that attracted 180,000 visitors (including American and French heads of state). 2,500 reenactors and more than 1,000 camp followers from 23 states participated (Anderson 146-7). The success of the Yorktown event was aided by the historical facts of the battle. A static encampment was a logical way of portraying the siege at Yorktown, and the battle’s most striking moment—the British surrender—could be reenacted without violating the NPS “no opposing forces” policy. Although lasting hard feelings were created by other NPS restrictions—notably on artillery firing—the 1981 Yorktown event is still cited by many reenactors as one of the most memorable moments in reenacting.

➤ A “**civil religion**”

Reenactors frequently joke about their own dedication, referring to reenactment as being less of a hobby than a religion or an addiction. Like most reenactor jokes, though, this one has an undercurrent of truth.

Reenactment *does* function in many ways like a religion—perhaps what Robert N. Bellah (1988) has called a “civil religion.” Its many components work together to give reenactors a sense of their own identity as Americans, as interpreters of history, and as living connections to a venerated past. These components include:

- ◆ a sense of a spiritual connection with ancestors or forebears who are seen as models for present-day behavior
- ◆ a strong connection to sacred sites, particularly battlefields
- ◆ a set of performative conventions for expressing this veneration
- ◆ a sense of guardianship for the stories of the American past, and for the sites associated with those stories
- ◆ a way to revisit times of origin (for example, the founding of the nation, or its rebirth during the Civil War)
- ◆ a feeling of being connected to collective history and values
- ◆ a social network that provides support and community extending far beyond the time spent at weekend encampments
- ◆ a link to other civic, historical, and memorial organizations

Access to significant historical sites is an important part of the kind of homage that reenactors pay to the soldiers of the past. As one reenactor put it, explaining to me why reenactors needed to find creative ways to work with their hosts, “Ultimately if the public doesn’t support it, museums and parks won’t invite reenactors, and we won’t have places to play.” He added that encampments in farmers’ fields and other private property do not resonate with reenactors in the same way that battlefields and other important sites do. Many reenactors talked to me about their search for “compelling” sites and scenarios. Original sites, by their nature, are far more compelling to reenactors than places with no historical pedigree. “It has to be the site that makes the most difference,” wrote one respondent to the 1999 survey.

In this desire to recreate historical events on the sites where they actually occurred, reenactors are continuing a very longstanding tradition of public commemorative performances at “sacred” sites. This fact, along with reenactors’ tremendous personal investment in their community, and their sense that they are acting as their historical models would have wished them to, mean that their position at parks goes beyond their role as members of the public or as park volunteers. They are, in addition, **traditional users of the park’s ethnographic resources.**

The NPS’s Cultural Resources Management Guideline for ethnographic resources defines traditional users as those who view park resources as “traditionally meaningful to their identity as a group and the survival of their lifeways” (p. 160). For Revolutionary War reenactors, Revolutionary War parks are ceremonial sites where they celebrate significant events that “carry considerable symbolic and emotional weight” (157) and where reenactors can test themselves against the examples of revered ancestors.

The park/reenactor continuum

There is no absolute dividing line between what parks do and what reenactors do. Rather, there is an area of considerable overlap between the two communities.

- Many Revolutionary War reenactors work or have worked in the fields of historic preservation, interpretation, or education.

The King's Own Patriots, whose encampment at Kings Mountain NMP forms Case Study B in this report, is made up almost entirely of people in history-related professions, with many collective years of experience in interpretation and preservation.

The current and recent past leaders of the Brigade of the American Revolution, the oldest reenactor umbrella organization, work in the field of historic preservation.

- Many National Park Service staff have participated in "living history" activities in some way. Many have worked as costumed interpreters at national parks or elsewhere. Still others are or have been avocational reenactors themselves.

In the 1998 study, 63% of responding Revolutionary War parks reported one or more reenactors among their staff (Stanton 17). Many of these park-employed reenactors are extremely active in the reenactment community and in liaison relations between avocational reenactors and other organizations.

- Several Revolutionary War parks sponsor their own reenactment units.

Minute Man NHP works closely with a group called Prescott's Battalion, comprised of reenactors from several local units.

Colonial NHP has organized a park-sponsored artillery unit, Lamb's Artillery.

Saratoga NHP has created a group called the 2nd New Hampshire, whose members are full-time or seasonal rangers. The seasonal rangers I spoke to in June 1999 were also avocational reenactors in other units. One was a high school history teacher as well, illustrating the many possible layers of overlap in history-related fields.

It is difficult to draw clear lines between a National Park ranger who is also a reenactor, and a reenactor who is also a professional museum interpreter, or between a reenactor group that volunteers regularly at a park and is considered a "park unit," and a "park unit" made up of seasonal rangers who reenact with other groups as well. Clearly, Park

Service employees have a greater level of obligation to the National Park Service than do non-employees. But in terms of expertise and knowledge, techniques and goals, the differences are far less distinct.

Nor is either community—reenactors and the NPS—completely unified in its opinions. In the following section we will see that there are certain underlying value systems that characterize each group. But even there, it is possible to see shades of gray. Although reenactors on the whole are enthusiastic about reenacted battles, it is possible to find those who admit to feeling somewhat troubled about the effect that these performances have on audiences. And some park staff spoke to me about their concern that the NPS itself sometimes sends mixed messages to visitors—for example, portraying stylized battle scenes in its orientation films yet refusing to allow reenactors to present their own style of battle portrayal.

A shared public

The public is an important and complicating part of the park/reenactor relationship. For both parks and reenactors, it is essential that people should come and witness what they do. For parks, this is a central part of their mandate as public agencies. But reenactors, too, need the public.

As a form of cultural performance, reenactment has its “backstage” as well as “onstage” aspects. Many of the satisfactions of reenacting come from the social life that takes place behind the scenes, particularly around campfires at night when camps are closed to visitors. And reenactors do occasionally hold events (usually tactical exercises or other types of training) that are not open to the public. But these aspects in themselves would not draw people into “the hobby.” For reenactors, public performance is always the main event.

It is important for several reasons.

- As it does for parks, the presence of an audience validates what reenactors do. Public attendance confirms that reenactors’ performances and beliefs matter to the culture at large.
- Reenactors recruit from among the spectators who come to see them, replenishing their ranks.
- The public’s affirmation becomes a way of pleasing the absent but vividly-imagined ancestors reenactors are seeking to honor. Reenactors worry that important stories and heroes are being forgotten; public attendance at reenactor events is a way of ensuring that they are not.

Answers to the survey question “Would you consider [your most recent national park event] a successful event?” revealed how important the public’s response is to reenactors. 60% of the reasons cited by reenactors involved public reaction:

Visitors expressed satisfaction and attendance despite 100+ degree heat indices was good.

This was a successful event because we were able to interact and share with a large number of visitors from a variety of countries.

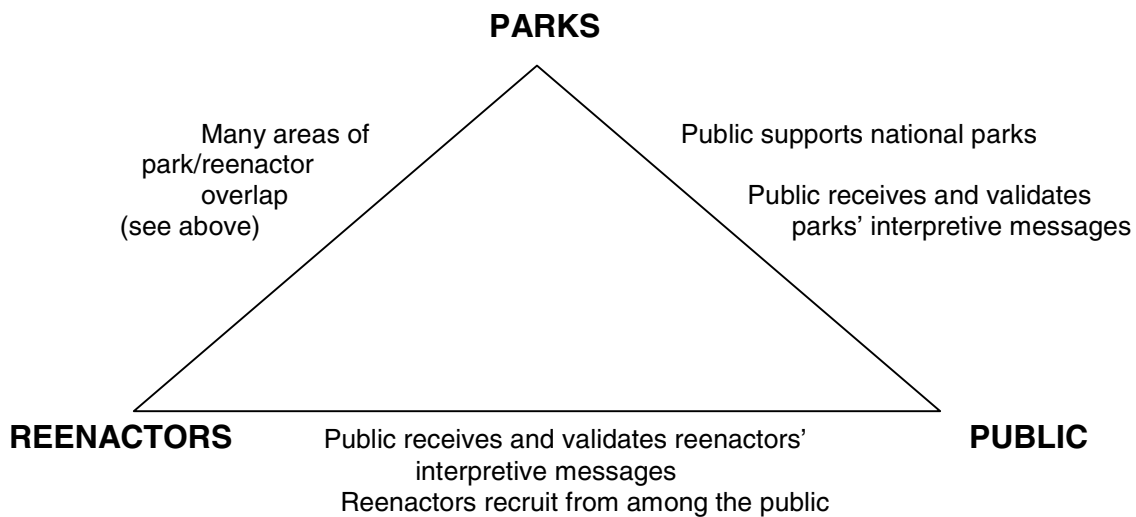
The weather provided a large turn-out and we recruited two new families totalling eight members.

Good participation by the public, even in very cold weather.

Visitors went away with a better understanding of period.

Conclusion

There are many areas of overlap in the three-way relationship among national parks, reenactors, and the public, as the diagram below shows:



There are many gray areas between parks and reenactors, and also between reenactors and the public. And parks and reenactors share a public, which serves as an audience for interpretive messages that sometimes overlap, and sometimes conflict.

Given the complexity of the relationship, everyone involved needs to clarify the basis for reenactor participation in events at parks. Currently, most parks seem to view reenactors primarily as volunteers. However, all organizations that rely on volunteer labor know that high-quality volunteers, while they are not paid, *do* involve certain costs. These costs may be tangible (for example, staff time spent coordinating reenactor/volunteer activities). Or the exchange may be more subtle, involving intangible rewards and satisfactions.

In the NPS/reenactor partnership, where so many Revolutionary War parks rely heavily on reenactors in their interpretive programs and where reenactors themselves play several different roles, it is crucial for the NPS to try to understand what motivates reenactors, and what they are looking for in exchange for the time they donate to the park. As the following section will show, it is when park staff do not understand reenactor motivation—and when reenactors do not understand the reasons for park policies—that conflicts arise.

¹ There are some distinct differences among reenactors of different time periods. My research suggests that most Civil War reenactors, for instance, are politically more conservative than their Revolutionary or French and Indian War counterparts. However, the community as a whole tends toward a *laissez-faire* approach, and actively resents or resists any imposition of what they perceive to be “political correctness,” especially involving gun control or military displays.

² Because of the decentralized nature of the reenactor community, it is difficult to know the total numbers of reenactors in the U.S. Civil War reenactors often estimate their community at about 40,000 people; *Travel Holiday* magazine put the figure at 20,000 in 1989 (Cullen 186). About 25,000 Civil War reenactors participated in the 1998 135th anniversary commemoration of the battle of Gettysburg, a figure which certainly represented a great majority of the community, according to anecdotal evidence. A guess of 30,000 for Civil War reenactors, then, seems reasonable. The Revolutionary War reenactment community is much smaller. Based on evidence collected during this study (primarily from census figures gathered from the major Revolutionary War reenactor umbrella organizations), it seems likely that there are currently 5-7,000 Revolutionary War reenactors in the U.S. Allowing for a smaller number of reenactors of other periods, and not counting the other types of historical recreation I have already defined as outside the scope of this study, the total reenactor community is probably 35-40,000.