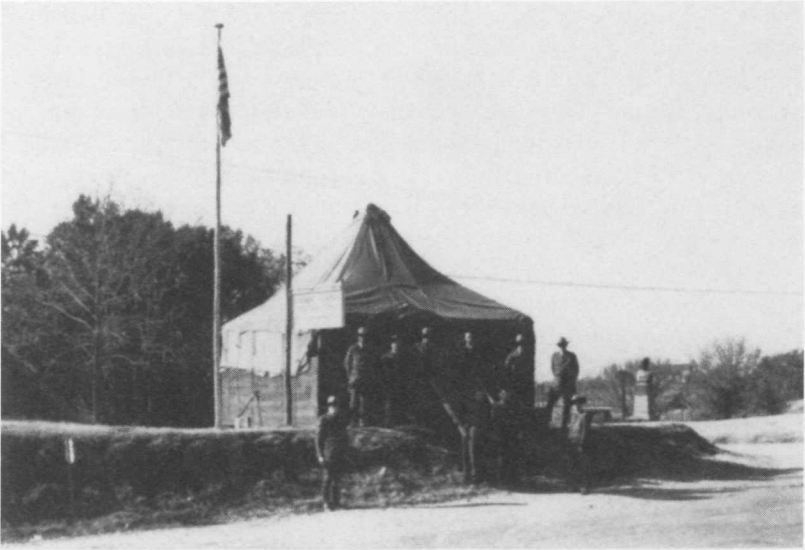


The National Park Service Moves into Historical Interpretation

BARRY MACKINTOSH

THERE WERE FEW historical parks and thus little historical interpretation in the National Park system before the 1930s. Prehistoric human activity was the focus at Mesa Verde National Park and some of the southwestern national monuments, and Indians received secondary attention in several of the large natural parks. But the National Park Service was concerned almost entirely with preserving and presenting to the public outstanding natural areas—Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and the like. Then Horace M. Albright, director of the National Park Service from 1929 to 1933, lobbied actively and successfully to make historical areas a major component of the park system. The system's expansion in this direction—beginning in 1930 with the addition of the Colonial (Jamestown and Yorktown) and George Washington Birthplace national monuments in Virginia and climaxing in 1933 by wholesale transfer of the War Department's historic forts and battlefields and the national capital parks—gave the service a vast new field of interpretive activity.

Generally speaking, historical parks need interpretation more than natural and recreational parks do. Parks encompassing spectacular natural features may be enjoyed aesthetically by most visitors regardless of whether they understand the geologic or biologic phenomena underlying them. Relatively few visitors to parks established primarily for active recreation are receptive to interpretive programs. But although many historical parks have aesthetic appeal and some accommodate active recreation, few can be greatly appreciated without some explanation of who lived or what occurred there. At historical parks, too, altered or missing features are often restored or reconstructed to better "tell the story." In far greater proportion than at parks established for other



Park rangers, historians, and Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees trained as guides stand ready to lead auto caravans touring Vicksburg National Military Park, December 16, 1934. (Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.)

purposes, the Park Service's task at its historical areas—indeed, the basic rationale for its involvement with such areas—is interpretation.

B. Floyd Flickinger, hired in 1931 as one of the service's first park historians, expressed the centrality of interpretation at historic sites thus:

If no other activities were ever contemplated or attempted, our first obligation, in accepting the custody of an historic site, is preservation. However, our program considers preservation as only a means to an end. The second phase is physical development, which seeks a rehabilitation of the site or area by means of restorations and reconstructions. The third and most important phase is interpretation, and preservation and development are valuable in proportion to their contribution to this phase.¹

Superintendent John R. White of Sequoia National Park, who could not be accused of a historian's bias, shared the view that interpretation was most important at historical areas, especially battlefields:

The principal difference is that in a scenic park the visitor has a definite objective: he comes to see the colored canyons, the waterfalls, the big trees, the geysers and the wildlife. Incidental to this he may camp out of doors and be entertained by the nature guide service in walks and talks.

But the visitor to a Military or Battlefield park comes to visit the place where a great event in our history occurred. With due respect to historians all battlefields look much alike and there is monotony in lines of overgrown trenches or battery sites; as there is in museums with exhibits of arms, bullets, and records. Only a student or historian can pretend to be deeply interested in the details of each battle. For the average visitor it is necessary to compress the event into a comprehensive whole, and if possible to color and dramatize it to create interest and make lasting impressions.²

Likewise, Dale S. King, a service archaeologist, distinguished between the great scenic parks, "recreational and inspirational in character," and both the scientific and cultural monuments. In the former, "appreciation is conditioned by vision, and not necessarily knowledge." In the latter, "the intellectual response receives greater stimulation," requiring understanding for appreciation.³

Anthropologist Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History, appointed by the Secretary of the Interior in 1929 to an advisory board on national park educational activity, foresaw archaeological and historical sites as vehicles for presenting the whole sequence of

1. Paper before American Planning and Civic Association, January 1936, quoted in Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, *Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s* (Washington: National Park Service, 1983), 168.

2. Memorandum to Director, December 6, 1941, History Division, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

3. "Scope and Function of the Interpretative Program of the Southwestern National Monuments," in Report of Meeting of Custodians, Southwestern National Monuments, February 14–16, 1940, History Division.

American prehistory and history. In a report to the board that year he wrote:

In view of the importance and the great opportunity for appreciation of the nature and meaning of history as represented in our National Parks and Monuments, it is recommended that the National Parks and Monuments containing, primarily, archaeological and historical materials should be selected to serve as indices of periods in the historical sequence of human life in America. At each such monument the particular event represented should be viewed in its immediate historical perspective, thus not only developing a specific narrative but presenting the event in its historical background.

Further, a selection should be made of a number of existing monuments which in their totality may, as points of reference, define the general outline of man's career on this continent.⁴

In 1930 Director Albright established a new branch of research and education in his Washington headquarters. The following year he enlarged the branch by hiring Verne E. Chatelain to oversee the service's nascent historical program. The youthful Chatelain, the bureau's first chief historian, had headed the history and social sciences department at Nebraska State Teachers College. As befitted his new position, he was a strong advocate of communicating history to the public via historic site interpretation. "Historical activity is primarily not a research program but an educational program in the broader sense," he declared at a history conference he held in November 1931. Calling for park historians "to disseminate accurate information in an interesting manner," he asked them to prepare brochures for their areas and monthly publications like the "nature notes" issued by park naturalists.⁵

Following Wissler, Chatelain regarded interpretive potential as paramount in selecting historical additions to the National Park system. "The sum total of the sites which we select should make it possible for us to tell a more or less complete story of American history," he wrote in April 1933. "Keeping in mind the fact that our history is a series of processes marked by certain stages of development, our sites should illustrate and make possible the interpretation of these processes at certain levels of growth." The criteria he drafted for site selection qualified "such sites as are naturally the points or bases from which the broad aspects of prehistoric and historic American life can best be presented, and from which the student of history of the United States can sketch the larger patterns of the American story."⁶

4. *Reports with Recommendations from the Committee on Study of Educational Problems in the National Parks, January 9, 1929, and November 27, 1929* (n.p., n.d.), 24.

5. Historical conference record, November 27, 1931, History Division.

6. Letter, Chatelain to Arthur E. Demaray, April 21, 1933, cited in Unrau and Willis, *Expansion of the National Park Service*, 166; John D. McDermott, "Breath of Life: An Outline of the Development of a National Policy for Historic Preservation" (typescript), History Division, 1966, 32.

In a paper on “History and Our National Parks” prepared for delivery to the American Planning and Civic Association in 1935, Chatelain summarized his outlook:

The conception which underlies the whole policy of the National Park Service in connection with [historical and archaeological] sites is that of using the uniquely graphic qualities which inhere in any area where stirring and significant events have taken place to drive home to the visitor the meaning of those events showing not only their importance in themselves but their integral relationship to the whole history of American development. In other words, the task is to breathe the breath of life into American history for those to whom it has been a dull recital of meaningless facts—to recreate for the average citizen something of the color, the pageantry, and the dignity of our national past.⁷

With the Park Service heavily in the historic site business, new legislation was deemed necessary explicitly to authorize much of what it was already doing to care for these areas. The Historic Sites Act of August 21, 1935, met this need. Previously, the Park Service had legally based its educational programs on general language in its 1916 enabling act, which included instruction “to provide for the enjoyment” of the parks. The 1935 act was considerably more specific. Among several provisions, it directed the Secretary of the Interior, through the service, to “establish and maintain museums” in connection with historic properties, to “erect and maintain tablets to mark or commemorate historic or prehistoric places and events of national historical or archaeological significance,” and to “develop an educational program and service for the purpose of making available to the public facts and information pertaining to American historic and archaeological sites, buildings, and properties of national significance.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s letter to Congress supporting passage of the legislation (prepared by Chatelain) claimed that patriotism would be stimulated by these activities: “The preservation of historic sites for the public benefit, together with their proper interpretation, tends to enhance the respect and love of the citizen for the institutions of his country, as well as strengthen his resolution to defend unselfishly the hallowed traditions and high ideals of America.”⁸

The new role of history was recognized in the Park Service organization when the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings was split off from the Branch of Research and Education in July 1935. Verne Chatelain became acting assistant director in charge of the new branch, a position filled (with different titles) by Ronald F. Lee beginning in 1938. Functions of the branch included “the general leadership in, and guidance of,

7. American Planning and Civic Association file, History Division.

8. 49 Stat. 666; Roosevelt to Rep. Rene L. DeRouen, April 10, 1935, in U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Public Lands, *Preservation of Historic American Sites, Buildings, Objects, and Antiquities of National Significance*, House Report 848, 74th Congress, 1935, 2.

the park educational program for all historical and archaeological areas.”⁹ Historical interpretation thus attained organizational parity with natural interpretation and enjoyed the clearer legal mandate.

The influx of historical areas to the National Park system from the 1933 government reorganization coincided with the beginnings of the New Deal programs for Depression relief. Funds from the Works Progress Administration, the Public Works Administration, and the Emergency Conservation Work program enabled the Park Service to build museums at Aztec Ruins and Scotts Bluff national monuments, Colonial and Morristown national historical parks, and Vicksburg, Guilford Courthouse, Shiloh, and Chickamauga and Chattanooga national military parks during the 1930s. Many historians, styled “historical technicians,” were hired with Civilian Conservation Corps money to conduct research for exhibits and site development, prepare publications, and give talks and tours for the visiting public.

Like their naturalist counterparts, Park Service historians sensed that scholars in academe questioned their professionalism. Chatelain sought academic respectability for their field of work by promoting historic sites as research and teaching tools. “An historical site is source material for the study of history, just as truly as any written record,” he told the American Planning and Civic Association in 1936. “There is no more effective way of teaching history to the average American than to take him to the site on which some great historic event has occurred, and there to give him an understanding and feeling of that event through the medium of contact with the site itself, and the story that goes along with it.”¹⁰

In fact, historic sites were incidental if not irrelevant to the research concerns of most academic historians, and the Park Service’s focus on the “average American” suggested a sub-professional level of presentation. Some park historians sought to build or maintain their scholarly standing by carrying on research at the expense of public contact duties. This tendency was attacked in a 1937 memorandum from Horace Albright’s successor, Arno B. Cammerer, on the responsibilities of field historians:

Their first and most important duty is interpretation of the history represented in their respective areas. It should be kept in mind that the ultimate objective of the Service in its administration of historical areas is the teaching of history to the public through the physical sites of its enactment. Research is important and essential, but it is undertaken to make possible the realization of the ultimate purpose which is interpretation. Any tendency to disparage the importance of handling

9. Memorandum, Historical, No. 1, “Organization and Functions, Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings,” July 30, 1936, cited in Unrau and Willis, *Expansion of the National Park Service*, 199.

10. American Planning and Civic Association file.

park visitors as a duty of a highly trained historian should be discouraged. Park Superintendents should do their utmost to place public contact work in the hands of their best personnel and to utilize all personnel resources for conducting an effective, sound interpretive service.¹¹

Historical research nevertheless continued to shortchange interpretation in some parks until 1966, when it was centralized in Washington.

To the extent that the historians did focus on interpretation, their efforts were sometimes criticized as overly technical. This was especially true at the battlefield parks, disproportionate among the service's historical areas after 1933.

Most of the Civil War battlefields had been developed and marked by the War Department with the active participation of veterans, who originally constituted a large segment of their visitors. In line with their interest, numerous markers installed on the fields emphasized the composition of involved units and their tactical movements. When the Park Service inherited the battlefields, their staffs—some also inherited from the War Department—were slow to recognize that contemporary visitors were more likely to appreciate the overall significance of the battles than detailed accounts of their participants and tactics. At a 1940 conference of eastern park historians, Regional Director Minor R. Tillotson faulted the Park Service's battlefield interpretation for being slanted to the specialist rather than to the layman. The conference responded with a series of recommendations aimed at reducing and simplifying battlefield markers.¹² But dissension would persist on the underlying issue: whether NPS interpreters and interpretive media should communicate in depth to the relative few receptive to such presentations (in which significance was sometimes buried in factual detail) or hit only the highlights digestible by the lowest common denominator (giving something to everyone but risking scorn for superficiality).

Another problem of historical interpretation was the fact that historical parks often bore little resemblance to the way they had appeared during their historic periods. Features once present had vanished or changed; new features intruded. The extent to which altered sites and structures should be restored or reconstructed was regularly argued, with some leaning to the Williamsburg approach of rebuilding and others favoring exhibits, labels, and other methods to depict the bygone scene graphically and verbally. Because the Park Service inherited many of its historic sites from other agencies and organizations, its work was frequently complicated by previous efforts at development and interpretation.

11. Memorandum to Field Historians and Superintendents of Historical Areas, November 24, 1937, cited in Unrau and Willis, *Expansion of the National Park Service*, 202–03.

12. Minutes, Historical Technicians Conference, Region One, April 25–27, 1940, History Division.

One of the Park Service's first acquisitions in the 1930s exemplifies these problems. George Washington's birthplace in Westmoreland County, Virginia, lacked both the house in which Washington was born and any good record of its appearance. A well-connected private association was already committed to replicating the house, however, and proceeded to build something that Washington might have been born in on the supposed foundations of the original. Although the reconstruction was conjectural and its site was soon disputed by the archaeological discovery of a larger foundation nearby, the Park Service was reluctant to be forthright about the bogus birthplace. As late as 1956 its historical booklet on George Washington Birthplace National Monument called the foundation beneath the so-called Memorial Mansion "traditionally the one [of the house] in which George Washington was born in 1732." Not until 1975 did the park brochure tell the public what service archaeologists and historians had known for forty years: the other foundation was that of the birth house.¹³ The Memorial Mansion remains to challenge park interpreters and confuse visitors, who find it hard to understand why an old-looking house at Washington's birthplace is not his birthplace or even a facsimile.

Among the service's legacies from the War Department in 1933 was the Kentucky birthplace of another great American president, Abraham Lincoln. There an old log cabin of dubious pedigree was preserved in a neoclassical stone structure. Service interpretive publications dodged the issue of its authenticity, referring to it as "the traditional birthplace cabin" long after researchers had failed to document any link to Lincoln. A historian chronicling the park's development in 1968 chided the service for its lack of candor:

Most visitors come to the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site to see the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln; when they are presented with a log cabin of appropriate humbleness and antiquity, enshrined in a granite memorial, no protestations of its "traditional" nature really suffice to inform the visitors of its doubtful authenticity. The delicacies of the situation are acknowledged. Nevertheless, an agency of the United States Government should not engage in patriotic fulfillment.¹⁴

But the 1984 park brochure still equivocates, referring to "the birthplace cabin" and calling its past "the subject of much interest and speculation."

After the Washington's birthplace fiasco, the service adopted and generally pursued policies for historic building restoration and reconstruction stressing accuracy. At Morristown National Historical Park, New Jersey, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) reconstructed huts

13. J. Paul Hudson, *George Washington Birthplace National Monument, Virginia* (Washington: National Park Service, 1956), 21; *George Washington Birthplace National Monument, Virginia* (NPS brochure, 1975).

14. Gloria Peterson, *An Administrative History of Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site* (Washington: National Park Service, 1968), 98.

of the type used there by Washington's troops during the Revolution. At Hopewell Village (now Hopewell Furnace) National Historic Site, Pennsylvania, the CCC restored and reconstructed several buildings of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ironmaking complex. The work at Hopewell, begun in 1936, was an early effort to present a "typical" element of the American past.

Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, Virginia, like Washington's birthplace, lacked its most important feature: the McLean House, where General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant. In this case there was good evidence of the building's location and appearance; many of its dismantled bricks even remained on site. In 1939 the park superintendent advocated reconstruction of the house and other community buildings to better interpret the society of rural Virginia during the Civil War.¹⁵

Chief Historian Ronald Lee, mindful of the Washington's birthplace experience, was opposed; he favored displaying the McLean House foundations and "possibly a model of the building exhibited in a museum on the area." But in the "second surrender of Lee at Appomattox," he yielded to strong local sentiment, and the service reconstructed the house after the war. Later it reconstructed the courthouse to serve as the park's visitor center and museum. It stopped short of adopting Sequoia Superintendent John White's proposal to reconstruct Lee and Grant in the McLean House parlor, however.¹⁶

At the Jamestown end of Colonial National Historical Park, antireconstruction sentiment prevailed. The foundations of the colonial town were excavated during the late 1930s, and the probable appearance of the buildings they had supported was interpreted to the public via on-site exhibits. Archaeologist Jean C. Harrington arranged for visitors to watch the excavations in progress and tour his laboratory and artifact storage building. Interpretation thus extended from the historic settlement to the practice of historical archaeology.¹⁷

In natural park interpretation, the present features—often scenic and spectacular—were the focus of attention; an understanding of what had occurred in the past to form those features might increase public appreciation of them but was usually not essential to a rewarding visit. In historical park interpretation, the present resources were more often unspectacular; their value derived largely or solely from what had occurred in the past. The interpretive focus thus had to be on the past—on subjects that were not always fully understood, whose significance was not always closely tied to or illustrated by the sites in either their past or present state.

15. Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 624-25.

16. *Ibid.*; memorandum, White to Director, December 6, 1941, History Division.

17. Ralph Lewis, "Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service," draft manuscript, 1983, 32.

Soon after George Washington Carver's death in 1943, his Missouri birthplace became the third birthplace of a prominent American and the first site honoring a black added to the National Park system. It had no structural remains reflecting Carver's few years there as a slave child, nor was it associated with his career as a scientist. Further complicating interpretation was a lack of solid data on Carver's scientific contributions. To resolve this shortcoming, the service contracted with two University of Missouri scientists in 1960 for a review and assessment of his work.

The study concluded that the accomplishments for which Carver was most widely credited—his discovery of hundreds of peanut and sweet potato products, transforming the economy of the South from dependency on cotton—could not be substantiated. Fearful of stirring racial sensitivities, the Park Service's regional office overseeing the birthplace urged that the study be kept under wraps:

While Professors [William R.] Carroll and [Merle E.] Muhrer are very careful to emphasize Carver's excellent qualities, their realistic appraisal of his "scientific contributions," which loom so large in the Carver legend, is information which must be handled very carefully as far as outsiders are concerned. To put it plainly, it seems to us that individuals or organizations who are inclined to be rather militant in their approach to racial relationships might take offense at a study which superficially purports to lessen Dr. Carver's stature. . . . Our present thinking is that the report should not be published, at least in its present form, simply to avoid any possible misunderstandings.¹⁸

Interpretation at George Washington Carver National Monument did ultimately play down Carver's "discoveries," stressing instead his inspirational qualities and his role as a teacher and humanitarian. The 1984 park brochure reflected the new tone: "It is not so much his specific achievements as the humane philosophy behind them that define the man."

Custer Battlefield National Monument, transferred from the War Department in 1940, presented a different challenge. Interpretation at the site of "Custer's Last Stand" long tended to stress if not glorify Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer at the expense of his Sioux and Cheyenne adversaries. As the Indian viewpoint became more militantly expressed in the sixties and seventies, the Park Service moved to a more balanced presentation. A quotation from a Sioux battle participant, "Know the power that is peace," was prominently installed on the park visitor center wall in time for the 1976 centennial observance. Some advocated changing the park name to "Little Bighorn National Battlefield," which would further shift the commemorative focus while bringing the desig-

18. William R. Carroll and Merle E. Muhrer, "The Scientific Contributions of George Washington Carver," unpublished report, 1962; memorandum, Regional Director Howard W. Baker to Director, February 21, 1962, History Division.

nation into line with those of other historic battlefields named for places rather than participants.

The proposed retitling stalled, but interpretive revisionism proceeded otherwise. Some of the large cadre of "Custer buffs" voiced indignation, drawing parallels with Soviet efforts to rewrite history. The Park Service recognized the perils inherent in reinterpretation under pressure and to its credit pursued a factual and evenhanded course. Responding to continued criticism, in 1984 it commissioned a group of outside authorities representing the various viewpoints to appraise the park's interpretive media. The committee concluded that the exhibits and publications were balanced—an evaluation still disputed by the most vocal Custer enthusiasts.

When it came to interpreting national park history factually, the Park Service was its own worst enemy. For decades, at evening campfire programs and elsewhere, its interpreters presented the "national park idea" as having originated at a campfire of the 1870 Washburn-Langford-Doane expedition to the Yellowstone region. Although sentiments favoring establishment of Yellowstone National Park may have been expressed at such a campfire, the occasion was inadequately documented, and national park advocacy considerably predated it.

Investigations from the 1930s on cast doubt upon the "campfire story," but it was already firmly entrenched in service tradition and continued to be retailed in publications, museum exhibits, and public programs. In 1964 Edwin C. Alberts, chief of interpretation in the Park Service's Midwest Region, courageously dissented to his regional director: "It is obvious that the frequent attribution, with respect to 'birth of the National Park idea,' to the participants at this nineteenth-century campfire are based on very tenuous grounds and in view of current curiosity about the matter by more than one non-Service historian, we'd be wise to pull back on our approach to avoid embarrassment." The story could still be presented, argued Alberts, as a legend.¹⁹ His recommendation was gradually heeded, but old customs and myths die hard, and as with the Lincoln birthplace cabin, the subtlety of qualifying something as "traditional" is often lost on audiences.

Occasionally interpretive personnel constituted interpretive challenges. When the Park Service inherited Gettysburg National Military Park from the War Department in 1933, it inherited the private guides licensed by the former park administration to accompany visitors around the battlefield. Some lacked a high school education, and their interpretation was not always up to professional standards. Although the service was empowered to review the qualifications and performance of the guides in renewing their licenses, weeding out the incompetents proved

19. Memorandum of August 27, 1964, Midwest Region file K1815, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Suitland, Md.

difficult in practice: the guides had community ties and political influence that could present difficulties for a park superintendent bent on cleaning house.

An extreme case came to light in 1953, when Superintendent J. Walter Coleman wrote his regional director:

We have recently had two serious complaints regarding the ability of Guide J. Warren Gilbert.

Yesterday Charles J. Lantz of E. Cleveland, Ohio, a member of the faculty at Case Institute, took the trouble to call on us and report that his trip over the Park with Mr. Gilbert was a complete failure. He stated that the Guide could not speak fluently and was incoherent. They could hardly understand anything that he said.

A second group of visitors recently employed him and made a second trip with Guide Kenneth Johns. They told Mr. Johns that their Guide could not be understood and that he fell asleep on the trip four times.

According to his card, Mr. Gilbert has been guiding sixty years but that is presumably out of date. He was born four days after Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address and is therefore in his 90th year. While he would not normally guide very much longer and we have never taken any action such as this, I suppose that in the interest of the public we should discontinue his license.²⁰

In the mid-1950s consideration was given to bringing the Gettysburg guides under civil service for better control, as had been done with private guides at Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site and Mammoth Cave National Park. Coleman recommended against doing so: it would be harder to meet the flexible public need for guides with full-time employees, and some of the better guides with other jobs would leave. He foresaw the less effective old-timers departing through attrition, with younger guides better equipped by education and personality taking over.²¹

While Gettysburg could be toured at leisure, with or without a guide, the situation at Fort Sumter National Monument in Charleston Harbor was different. Visitors had to arrive and depart via a commercial Gray Line boat tour and had only half an hour at Fort Sumter. Conducting every boatload through the fort in 1955, Wednesday through Sunday, was park historian Rock L. Comstock, Jr. On the weekends there was no separate transportation for Comstock, so he had to arrive with the passengers on the first tour boat and depart with those on the last. Of this arrangement a regional office evaluator reported:

This means that the guide must leap off the boat when it docks, rush up to the fort on a dead run, start the generators, turn on the lights, unlock the doors, get out literature and the post card machine, get

20. Memorandum of August 11, 1953, Gettysburg file K1815, WNRC.

21. Memorandum, Regional Director Daniel J. Tobin to Director, January 26, 1956, Gettysburg file K1815, WNRC.

back to the flagpole and raise the flag before the visitors arrive there. Often he does not have time to raise the flag. When the last group leaves in the afternoon, he goes through all this in reverse, and leaps on the boat as it pulls away. It calls for nothing less than an Olympic decathlon champion. Not only is this inefficient and undignified, but it contributes to the feeling of haste that permeates the whole place while visitors are there, and which does so much to detract from the visitor's enjoyment and getting the "supreme experience" he should from his visit to Fort Sumter. Worst of all, this goes on during the days of heaviest visitation.²²

Fortunately, Comstock survived this harrowing duty for a distinguished career in interpretation.

Beyond the specific problems confronted at particular parks, historic site interpretation as a vehicle for communicating American history to the public posed more subtle, less-easily-overcome difficulties. Despite early hopes that historical additions to the National Park system might be selected "to tell a more or less complete story of American History," in Verne Chatelain's words, park acquisitions proceeded on no such rational basis. Local public and political pressure behind particular sites far outweighed considerations of thematic balance and sometimes produced national historical parks of less-than-national significance. As it evolved, therefore, the system was better equipped to tell some aspects of the American story than others.

In fact, this imbalance is inherent in the medium with which the National Park Service deals. Extant physical resources susceptible of being preserved and interpreted to park visitors are not equally dispersed among the major themes of history, nor are all themes equally well conveyed via such resources. Much of military history is intrinsically site-related and can be appreciated by visiting battlefields and forts; thus there is value in maintaining and presenting those resources within parks, as the service does with great sufficiency. The history of such topics as philosophy and education, on the other hand, is not so readily communicated by sites, structures, and objects, and the system is weak in these areas. Similarly, the many facets of prehistoric culture in America vary greatly in the prominence of remains illustrating them. The Indians of the Southwest left impressive cliff dwellings and pueblos—splendid for parks and monuments—while much less is apparent from many eastern cultures.

As Ronald A. Foresta has noted, the service is not the keeper of the nation's history but of some of its major historic resources: "[O]nly part of the past lends itself to interpretation through physical remains and . . . this part . . . is the proper realm of the Park Service."²³ The park system is indeed imbalanced, but this is not necessarily bad. The prob-

22. J. C. Harrington, "Study of Visitor Needs and Interpretive Service, Fort Sumter National Monument, South Carolina," June 6, 1955, Fort Sumter file K1815, WNRC.

23. *America's National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington: Resources for the Future, 1984), 274.

lem lies less with the imbalance than with those who either deny it—pretending the service is telling the whole story—or deplore it and urge expansion into subject areas better communicated by other media.

Another pitfall is a tendency to focus on the site and its story at the expense of context and proper evaluation. An interpreter at a historical park established by act of Congress and maintained and staffed at public expense is entitled to assume that the place is nationally significant. Whether it is or not, the interpreter's presence there gives him or her a vested interest in its historical importance. Visitors, too, like to hear how important the site is; they may not want to be told that they have gone out of their way to see something that played a secondary role in this war or that series of events. The very act of telling and retelling the single site's story—in contrast to the classroom teacher surveying the sweep of history—tends to magnify its significance.

There may also be a reluctance to accept and incorporate in one's interpretive program evidence that suggests a site was less important than once thought. Sites established for historical figures—in fact to “honor” those figures—present special problems when their subjects undergo scholarly devaluation: the service feels committed to positive portrayals and tends to dismiss criticism. Because “honoring” to some degree has motivated the establishment of most historical parks, units of the system focusing on wholly negative aspects of America's past are virtually nonexistent.

If historical interpretation by the National Park Service has faced challenges and displayed shortcomings, its overall influence has been positive, making many Americans aware of important aspects of their heritage that they had long forgotten or never learned about in school. Visitors to historic sites have gained a sense of presence and immediacy with past events that has often stimulated the most latent interest in history. It is safe to say that park presentations have been a good deal better than most other popular treatments of history, and correctives to their biases and omissions are available to the interested public from other sources. The service may not tell the whole story, but it has told most of its part of the story well.