The National Park Service and the Civil Rights Movement: Remembering a Difficult Past

Dwight T. Pitcaithley

The National Park Service manages a number of places that witnessed major events during the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, places that represent a difficult time in this nation's history. To understand the importance of these historic sites to the National Park Service and System, I would like to discuss them, a bit later, through the context of an evolutionary Service and its maturation over the past several decades. As an employee of the National Park Service for three decades, I have watched it change markedly over that time and especially over the past fifteen years.

The federal agency that manages your national parks is far less insular and far more professional than it was when I joined in 1976. Partnerships with professional organizations abound, as do cooperative agreements with colleges and universities. The

Woodrow Wilson Fellow Lecture, February 3, 2005

National Park Service developed a cooperative agreement with the Organization of American Historians in 1994 which has resulted in closer ties between NPS historians and scholars throughout the nation. There is a new thematic framework for thinking about the nature of history and how potential historic sites are evaluated for inclusion. The original framework from 1936 created an elaborate matrix consisting of themes, sub-themes, and facets of themes all designed to create little boxes into which parks could be categorized. When every "box" was filled, the National Park System would be complete. Because of the political manner in which historic parks are created by Congress and our own evolving perceptions about the past, we no longer talk about "completing the system." In the new thematic framework, there are no little boxes.

Since the early 1990s, NPS interpreters have developed an entirely new training program for interpreters in parks. The new curriculum still includes direction for the teaching skills needed by interpreters, but now pays much more attention to the historical content necessary at historic sites. The new curriculum prepares interpreters to deal with difficult historical subjects such as slavery, Japanese internment, and the modern Civil Rights era; it teaches them to interpret controversy. Interpreters now present different and multiple voices and perspectives rather than interpreting from a single, omniscient point of view. Some regions insist that parks develop interpretive programs on women, minorities, labor – the largely untold stories at historic sites. The National Park Service is becoming more expansive in its thinking about the past and is finally embracing the "New American History" that scholars have been producing for the past thirty years.

An example of how far the NPS has come is found in its interpretation of the Civil War at several dozen battlefields across the country. Until the mid-1990s, the NPS made a conscious effort to avoid all discussion of causes. If one does not talk about the causes of the war, one does not have to talk about slavery, a sensitive issue at best, a controversial one at worst. But in 1998, the battlefield superintendents decided that it was time the National Park Service began presenting the causes of the war as introduction to the battlefield story. How else, they argued, could anyone make sense of the carnage at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg? Up until then, the closest the NPS came to discussing the coming of the war

was in the Fort Sumter park brochure which began, "On December 20, 1860, after decades of sectional conflict, the people of South Carolina responded to the election of the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, by voting unanimously in convention to secede from the Union." Visitors were left wondering just what "after decades of sectional conflict" really meant. The brochure's message was uncomplicated by the fact that over one half of the "people of South Carolina" were enslaved African-Americans. The new brochure quotes from South Carolina's Declaration of Secession which clearly states that South Carolina was leaving the Union because of perceived Northern (especially Republican) threats to the institution of slavery. While the National Park Service has been criticized for discussing the "politically correct" subject of slavery, the interpretive programs at the battlefield parks have been significantly strengthened through the presentation of historical context. In 1994, Yale Professor of History Robin Winks wrote:

> Education is best done with examples. These examples must include that which we regret, that which is to be avoided, as well as that for which we strive. No effective system of education can be based on unqualified praise, for all education instructs people of the difference between moral and wanton acts and how to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable. If this premise is correct, we cannot omit the negative lessons of history.[1]

Although it seems highly unlikely, Congress must have been thinking the same thing, for beginning in the early 1990s it passed legislation that forced the National Park Service to intellectually engage the darker side of the American past. In 1991, Congress directed the NPS to develop a more balanced interpretation of the battle along the Little Bighorn River in Montana and to build a memorial to the Indians who fought and fell there. Up until that time, the interpretive focus was almost entirely on George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. A label in the visitor center reputedly stated, "There were no survivors!" To emphasize its insistence that visitors receive a less biased account of the battle, Congress changed the name of the park from Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National

Monument. Pleased with itself, Congress, over the next several years established additional parks that can be described as "sites of conscience," places like the Monroe School in Topeka, Kansas, one of five schools involved in the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education,* that declared school segregation unconstitutional. In quick succession, Congress established Cane River Creole National Historical Park in Louisiana; Nicodemus National Historic Site, a black town in Oklahoma settled by African-Americans fleeing the violence of Reconstruction in the South; and Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, scene of the 1957 confrontation over school desegregation. The Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, one of the most powerful historic sites in the country, was also established during this period. The Selma to Montgomery Trail commemorates the 1965 voting rights march and the violence of "Bloody Sunday" which prompted quick passage of the Voting Rights Act of that year. More about that later.

These parks forced the National Park Service to think differently about its role in American society and its role as a federal agency. It was forced to confront contentious historical issues head-on. There is no way to sugarcoat the racism that drove white citizens of Little Rock to protest the desegregation of their Central High School. Indeed, the National Park Service embraced the challenge of interpreting places with a difficult past, places that do not represent "happy face" history. The National Park Service embraced these sites of conscience because these places have much to teach us about ourselves and our past. Because of the importance of this work, the NPS joined with the American Association of Museums, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils to develop civic engagement programs, programs which encourage us to use park stories as frameworks for discussing the nature of American democracy, social justice, how the past relates to the present, and how we are who we have been.

Civic dialogue is important in every age, from George Washington to George Bush. It is important today, and the National Park Service and other managers of historic places and public programs have important roles to play. Public spaces should serve as public forums for the discussion of the past's unfinished business,

common ground for the exploration of what Barbara Kingsolver calls “the spaces between,” those cultural divides that separate us – northerners from southerners, east from west, urban from rural, men from women. The issues that are ripe for public discussion are often controversial precisely because they are important to our national psyche; quite often they have deep roots in the past. Understanding the depth of those roots allows us to discuss our common problems with a much better chance of crafting a better future for all Americans.

Civic dialogue also has international dimensions. Last month I had the opportunity to attend a conference in Ghent, Belgium, on memory and identity. There were panels of scholars and museum managers speaking on topics such as the Holocaust and Apartheid in South Africa. I was paired with the Deputy Minister of Culture from the Republic of Vietnam. He spoke about war memorials in his country; I spoke on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and the hold that war still has on our society. Unjust pasts are common to many countries, including Belgium’s. The public airing of that history is both necessary as an educational tool for the current generation, but it is also socially therapeutic.

The confluence of the new parks Congress has created and the growth of civic engagement among museums and historic sites have forced the National Park Service to think differently about its function in an increasingly divided society and how it might contribute to greater understanding and participation in this evolving democracy of ours. As Congress was directing it to broaden its vision of what historic sites should be and what they should say, the agency itself was questioning traditional approaches to interpretation and historic site management. The distance the National Park Service has come in a few short years is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than at the entrance of the new visitor center for Fort Sumter National Monument. Built as a docking facility for the boats that transport visitors to the island fortress and as an exhibit space to introduce visitors to the Civil War and Fort Sumter, the center also possesses a large entry plaza officially labeled “Liberty Square.” Liberty Square was designed to remind entering visitors that the Civil War, in the final analysis, led to an expansion of liberty and justice throughout the country. Its focal point is the Septima Clark fountain, an architectural testament to the continu-

ing quest for civil rights as exemplified by Ms. Clark, a Charleston native and warrior in the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Its presence prompts all of us to remember that the pledge our children recite every morning about "liberty and justice for all" is not an empty collection of words, but a powerful call to action.

To emphasize the connection between historic sites and our perceptions of the past, especially in the areas of equality, Congress has directed the National Park Service to prepare studies on the Civil Rights Movement to determine the existence of additional sites that might be added to the National Park System. This has already resulted in two studies: *Racial Desegregation in Public Education in the United States* (2000), produced jointly by the National Park Service and the Organization of American Historians, and *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites* (2002), which examines the history of denied civil rights for many groups of citizens, including African-Americans.

I would like to conclude by returning to Selma, Alabama, one of my favorite historic sites. It also seems appropriate to end there because of John Lewis's presence on your campus last fall. Selma represents both the worst and the best of the American character – the former because of the brutality visited upon Congressman Lewis and others by the Alabama State Police as they sought nothing more than what other United States citizens took for granted – the right to vote. It represents the latter because the attack upon those several hundred marchers galvanized the federal government to address a wrong that had festered for generations. The savageness of the assault prompted President Lyndon Johnson to introduce voting rights legislation days later with strong and unambiguous language. "At times history and fate meet at a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom," he began. "So it was at Lexington and Concord," he continued. "So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama." Congress responded to Johnson's plea to "overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice" and passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act less than five months after the President's eloquent acknowledgment that "their cause must be our cause too." In his memoir, *Walking with the Wind,* John Lewis concludes by reflecting on the nature of the relationship between past and pres-

ent, and how one rightfully informs the other. “A people united, driven by a moral purpose, guided by a goal of a just and decent community,” he observed, “are absolutely unstoppable. We proved that a generation ago. There is no reason it cannot continue, today and on into the dawn of the coming century. 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.”[2]

NOTES

[1] Robin Winks, “Sites of Shame: Disgraceful episodes of our past should be included in the park system to present a complete picture of our history,” *National Parks* (March/April 1994): 22-23.

[2] John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1998), 353, 500.