Interpreting Our Park Heritage
or
Why Is There So Little History of the Parks in the Parks?

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Since I wrote the shorter case summary I submitted for this working group back in the fall, my thinking about what I'd like to focus on has shifted. Especially as I've been reading Freeman Tilden's book, I've become convinced that what I'd like your help thinking about is why interpretive exhibits and presentations in the National Parks rarely tell anything about the *parks' own histories* and what some of the implications of that interpretive gap may be as the National Park Service approaches its Centennial in 2016.

In the past fifteen years, I've spent considerable time studying three very different National Park Service areas: the Blue Ridge Parkway, De Soto National Memorial, and Cape Lookout National Seashore. Implicit in most of the exhibits and interpretation at all three parks – and indeed in almost every discussion I have ever seen of historical interpretation in the National Parks – is at least one major, underlying assumption: that the parks are, in essence, transparent glass cases in which history is bounded, defined, displayed and interpreted. Employing the parks' own terminology, one might characterize the parks as "waysides" that omnisciently tell stories that are "out there" – that is, stories about *other things*. Rarely do those stories include information about how the parks themselves came to be, how they affected or changed or participated in the stories they tell, or how their telling of those histories has changed over time in response to evolving social norms, pressure from stakeholders, or new scholarship.

In their lack of explicit attention to their own creation and perspective, or to the ways their own histories have shaped – and still shape – the histories they interpret, the parks are out of touch with new trends in historical scholarship. And by not talking about their own histories, the parks fail to draw upon a great wealth of new research that could inform innovative, interesting, and important new interpretive directions.

During the past decade, scholars have taken a great interest in the history of the National Parks, generating a flurry of new articles and books, among them my own *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (UNC Press 2006). These books and articles go beyond describing the resources that parks hold and protect to trace the evolution and management of the parks themselves. They remind us that the parks were brought into being by human actions, choices, and plans, and often forged in intense political conflicts – their final form (including their historical exhibits) inscribing on the land decisions that reflect social power relations. Within the Park Service, many parks also now have park administrative histories, also often written by capable scholars, which unpack many of these stories.

As the Park Service moves toward its 100th birthday – and as many parks like my beloved nearly 75-year-old Blue Ridge Parkway, approach signature anniversaries – such studies are particular timely. Amidst battles over federal funding, privatization pressures, a massive maintenance backlog, conflicting interpretive agendas, and perennial land use and resources management issues, the public is asked yet again to make choices about the parks – to protect, preserve, enhance, and extend them, or to allow them to languish, decay, or slowly become captives of private interests.

In this context, it is *vital* that the public understand the parks themselves as historical creations that did not just magically appear and will not just magically continue. Scholars are telling these stories, but for the most part not to the public visiting the parks. Only the parks can do that. Fighting (literally) for their lives as they move into their second century, the parks

need to embrace, acknowledge and tell the story of their first one. As scholars and historians, we should begin to think with them about how this might be done in a compelling, affordable, and practical way that is respectful of the parks' other mandates and prerogatives.

In doing so, we should ask, as well, why the parks have not made self-awareness a normal feature of their operations and why, in many cases, they appear actively to have resisted it. A number of possible reasons leap to mind. Perhaps in the beginning, the parks did not seem very "historical" because they (as institutions) were not that old; thus there developed little tradition of telling park histories onsite. Undoubtedly, naiveté about the possibility of being objective and non-political lingers on, even when these ideals are increasingly understood to be impossible to achieve in practice. And now, after so many years, the existence of expensive infrastructure (interpretive panels, waysides, exhibits) and the lack of sufficient personnel mitigate against undertaking new interpretive initiatives.

Those things aside, though, the parks are surely capable of doing more self-critical and self-reflexive interpretation. Many parks have long done and are doing what amounts to self-reflexive work as they recast exhibits and interpretive programs, but that work (and its importance) are not revealed to the public. Along with old exhibit panels or interpretive films that quietly give way to new ones, it is withheld from public view.

Parks could begin to bring themselves into historical presentations in some simple ways. When interpretive focus changes, exhibits could take note of new directions and show how presentations have evolved. Every park could install a small "about this park" panel or wayside that provides a short chronology of the park's creation, identifies key stakeholders or participants (as well as – dare one suggest – a few illuminating details about negotiations over disagreements), and sketches changes in mission or approach that may have occurred over time. Scholars knowledgeable in these areas could make presentations to rangers and interpreters being trained to go into the field.

The 2001 report “Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century” called the National Park Service America’s “Department of Heritage” and encouraged it to embrace more fully its educational mission. That mission should now include interpretation of park heritage with the view to equipping citizens better to understand and support their priceless but beleaguered parks.