Karen Miller and Pamela K. Sanfilippo

From Personal Experiences to Public Actions

Using a Historic Home To Interpret Ulysses S. Grant During the Civil War

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, located near St. Louis, MO, consists of approximately 10 acres of what was an 850-acre estate known as White Haven in the 19th century. Five historic structures remain on the property: the main house, which is a National Historic Landmark; a stone building, housing a summer kitchen; a chicken house; an ice house; and a 4,000 square-foot barn, built to Grant's specifications in the early 1870s. The main house and three outbuildings have undergone extensive restoration, for which the site received the 2002 John Wesley Powell Prize for Historic Preservation.

Grant was associated with the White Haven farm for over 40 years, first as a guest of the Dent family where he met Julia Dent in 1844. Her childhood home served as the setting for their courtship, and later as a home for their own family in the late 1850s. During the Civil War, Grant began purchasing property from his in-laws. Throughout his careers as General of the Army and President of the United States, Grant developed his estate with an eye toward retirement. He changed the focus of the farm from agriculture to thoroughbred horse breeding. Although that dream of retirement never materialized, Grant continued to own the property until shortly before his death in 1885.

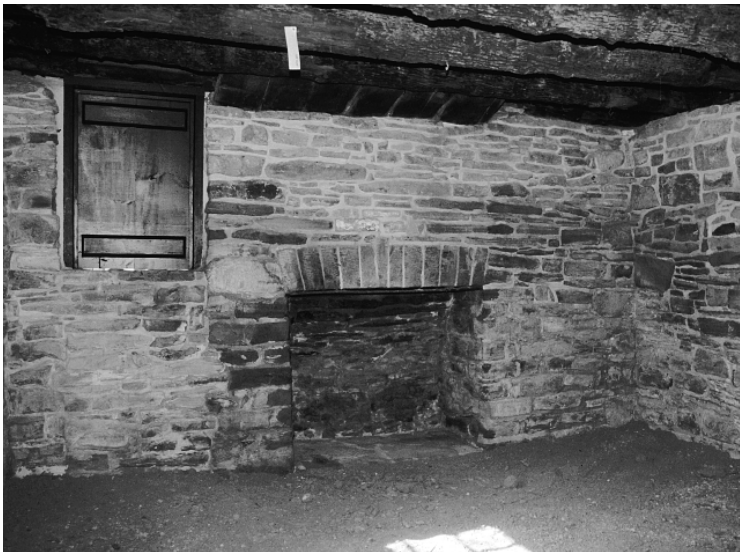
The St. Louis home of Ulysses and Julia Grant, historically known as White Haven. The home and outbuildings have been restored to their 1875 appearance when President Grant owned the property.

The site was authorized in 1989 to "preserve and interpret for the benefit and inspiration of all Americans a key property associated with the life of General and later President Ulysses S. Grant and the life of First Lady Julia Dent Grant, knowledge of which is essential to understanding, in the context of mid-nineteenth-century American history, his rise to greatness, his heroic deeds and public service, and her partnership in them."[1]

As historian Drew Gilpin Faust has noted, "the growing importance of social history in the 1970s and 1980s affected almost every area of the study of the past," expanding our knowledge of those previously excluded from traditional histories — women, minorities, and those of lower socioeconomic classes.[2] With this in mind, the park's enabling legislation was intentionally written to include those themes. The inclusion of "Julia Grant" and the "context of mid-nineteenth century American history" requires us to address themes of agriculture, women's roles, and slavery as well as local, regional, and national cultural and political events as they relate to Ulysses and Julia and their St. Louis home.

The Challenge

The challenge of fulfilling our interpretive mission is daunting since the knowledge necessary to address each of these themes appropriately involves extensive research. The site currently has only a few exhibit panels and a short introductory video available to the visitor and relies heavily on personal interpretation through ranger-led tours of the main house. We are further challenged in our interpretation by the fact that the house is unfurnished. Since most visitors to his-



The antebellum winter kitchen connects the visitor to the experiences of the enslaved who worked in the room and visually reflects the moral dilemma Grant faced while living and working on his father-in-law's slaveholding farm. Proposed exhibits in this space will interpret the lives of the enslaved at White Haven.

toric homes anticipate learning about a material culture associated with the owner of the home, they expect to see the White Haven home furnished as it was during the Grants' ownership. However, the Grants' furniture was destroyed in a fire in 1873, and no description of it exists. The National Park Service has chosen not to put reproduction period pieces in the house, challenging visitors to use their imagination to see the house as it was.

Exhibit design has proven to be no less of a challenge than the interpretive goals. The design challenges are threefold. First, staff members are working with limited space for the new exhibits since most of them will be placed in the historic structures. Second, placing the exhibits in the structures requires special attention to the design in order to maintain the historical integrity of the buildings. Finally, the main house adds another layer to the challenge since our goal there is to retain the atmosphere of the home. Exhibits are being carefully designed not to institutionalize the space with traditional exhibit panels or display cases.

Determining how to provide a complete experience that encompasses all interpretive and exhibit challenges without confusing the visitor entails constant reassessment. Park staff members at all levels are working closely with the exhibit design firm and with academic historians to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the finished product. Public participation in the process has been encouraged through meetings and interviews and will continue as the plans become reality.

The Opportunity

The challenges faced at the site are also opportunities to develop interpretation and exhibits along a different line in order to fulfill our mission. Interpreting unfurnished structures became an opportunity to avoid talking about the "stuff" and focus on the people and events. Similarly, the challenge of developing exhibits was also an opportunity to seek new ways to achieve our goals. Traditionally, historic homes become a venue for a chronological biography of the primary resident. We have consciously chosen not to approach the interpretation and exhibits in this way and to focus on the personal experiences of the Grants as a basis for understanding their public actions.

The Plan

The exhibits planned for the site will demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Grants' private lives at White Haven with significant events of the 19th century. Developing exhibits that reflect the private basis for Grant's public actions demonstrates that a single cultural resource (a historic home) carries with it a wider body of knowledge. The resource gains further importance as a link to understand the historical events that have shaped our nation's history. One way to accomplish this at the Grant site is by linking the historic home to national events such as the Civil War. Specifically, Grant's experiences at White Haven had a direct influence on his actions as a general during the Civil War.

Helping visitors make that connection is accomplished through interpretive programs and tours, but exhibits will also address this issue. For example, as visitors tour the house, one of the stories they will learn about the Grants addresses the issue of slavery. In the dining room, visitors will come to understand that debates about slavery created political and cultural tensions that affected family life and the relationship between Grant and Colonel Dent, Julia's father. In the new museum, an exhibit will take that experience at White Haven and directly tie it to Grant's actions as a general during the Civil War. One panel will present Grant's view, stated privately at the beginning of the war and publicly in his "The Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant"[3] written near the end of his life, that the cause of the Civil War

was slavery. His marriage into a slaveholding family and his involvement with slavery at White Haven provides context for understanding Grant's opinion. Another section of the same panel will present Grant's military policy of recruiting and utilizing African American combat soldiers. By examining his relationship with the enslaved at White Haven, we are able to extrapolate that he was influenced in his attitude toward blacks and the institution of slavery, and that, in turn, influenced Grant's actions as military commander in regard to African Americans.

The Result

In the area of Civil War history, social historians began exploring the lives of the common soldier, the meaning of their experiences, and according to Faust, "to look beyond the battle at the world behind the lines, at the experiences of civilians white and black, male and female, as they found themselves caught up in the maelstrom of war."[4] Battlefield sites are responding to this scholarship through interpretation and exhibits that are more inclusive. Similarly, the Grant site places the residents of White Haven within the larger context of 19th-century history to understand Ulysses and Julia Grant as individuals, their relationship with one another and their families, and their role in our nation's history. Individuals such as Grant, like battle sites, cannot be placed in a vacuum as if the events and people around them had no influence or bearing on their individual actions.

Connecting Grant's personal life to his public service, with all the challenges and complexities of the 19th century, connects the visitors to their personal lives as well. Just as experiences and events shaped Grant's actions, we, too, are shaped by the day-to-day happenings in the world around us. Making that connection helps us bridge the gap between the past and the present, enriching our understanding of the nation, the individuals who have shaped our history, and ourselves. The result is a complete visitor experience that will be "for the benefit and inspiration" of all visitors, as addressed in the site's legislation.

Notes

1 Public Law 101-106.

2 Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Homefront," *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), 81.

3 John Y. Simon, editor, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), v. II, 3-4; letter from U.S. Grant to his father-in-law, Frederick Dent, April 19, 1861; Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles A. Webster, 1885), reprint New York: *Literary Classics of the United States,* 1990, 773.

4 Faust, op cit.

Karen Miller is the museum technician at Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site in St. Louis, MO.

Pamela K. Sanfilippo is the site historian at Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site and guest editor of this issue of CRM.

Photos courtesy Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site.

CRM

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW–350NC
Washington, DC 20240

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE $300

VOLUME 25 • NO. 4

FIRST CLASS MAIL
Postage and Fees Paid
U. S. Department of the Interior
G-83