

USS Monitor



John Ericsson

By Mark Weaver. American Civil War Story

The *USS Monitor* was born in a time of great uncertainty. In the summer of 1861 fear was spreading through the North. News had arrived that the Confederates had raised the old *USS Merrimac*, and were refitting her as an ironclad warship. This new ship would be called the *CSS Virginia*, and it was feared that it would be able to tear through the Union's wooden navy with impunity. Something had to be done...

Finally, in August, the U.S. Congress approved funding to form a Navy board to oversee the construction of ironclads for the Union. The board immediately advertised its interest in seeing what designs inventors might come up with for, "*One or more ironclad steam vessels of war... for either sea or river service...*"

By the fall of 1861, the board had approved three designs for construction. One of those designs was an innovative design for an entirely new type of vessel, and it was only approved because of the insistence of Abraham Lincoln.

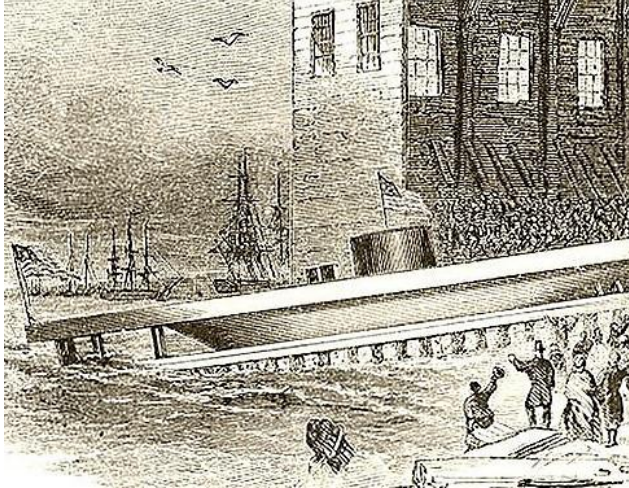
The design came from John Ericsson, a Swedish-born inventor who was not well liked in the Navy. In his design, Ericsson called for a very shallow draft, raft-like, ship with a revolving gun turret in the middle. Many people doubted that with such an innovative design could even float, and the idea of guns on a revolving turret seemed dubious at best. The design was finally accepted as an experiment however; because, due to its small size, Ericsson's ship (which would soon be named the *USS Monitor*) could be built more quickly and less expensively than the other designs.

Building The Monitor

On October 4 of 1861, Ericsson signed a contract with the Union Navy to build the *Monitor* for \$275,000 (roughly \$7.4 million in 2014), with Ericsson being liable for a full refund if the ship did not prove to be a success.

The *Monitor* was built in the dockyards of the Continental Iron Works in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York; and her keel was laid on October 25th. While Continental built the hull, Ericsson contracted with DeLamater Iron Works of Manhattan to build the engines and machinery, and he contracted with Novelty Iron Works, also from Manhattan, to build the *Monitor's* distinctive turret.

When she was launched on January 30, 1862, the *Monitor* was a completely revolutionary ship. Her design included more than forty inventions patented by Ericsson. Ericsson could have made a small fortune from his ownership of those patents, but he donated them all to the U.S. Government. Due to her strange appearance, it was said that the new ship looked like a, "*cheesebox on a raft.*"



She ran her first sea trials on February 19th, but due to some minor engine problems, they didn't go too well. The ship had to be towed to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The engine problems were quickly sorted out, and the *Monitor* was commissioned on February 25, 1861, with orders to leave for Hampton Roads, Virginia the next day in order to defend the Union Blockade against the new Confederate ironclad, *CSS Virginia*.

On departure, however, more problems were discovered. The steering mechanism had been improperly installed, and the ship had to be towed back to the Navy Yard from repairs. Finally, she was ready to go, and left New York on March 6, 1862, headed to Hampton Roads, Virginia. Little did the ship and crew know they would arrive just a few hours too late...

In Action



On March 8, 1862, the *Virginia* steamed out to meet the Union blockade, and wreaked havoc in Hampton Roads. She sank two Union ships, the *USS Congress* and *USS Cumberland*, and ran a third ship, the *USS Minnesota*, aground. As night fell, the *Virginia* withdrew, intending to return in the morning to finish off the *Minnesota*.

That evening, under cover of darkness, the *Monitor* slipped into Hampton Roads and took up a position alongside the helpless *Minnesota*. On the morning of March 9th, when the *Virginia* returned, the *Monitor* went out to meet her, and the historic first battle between two ironclads was underway.

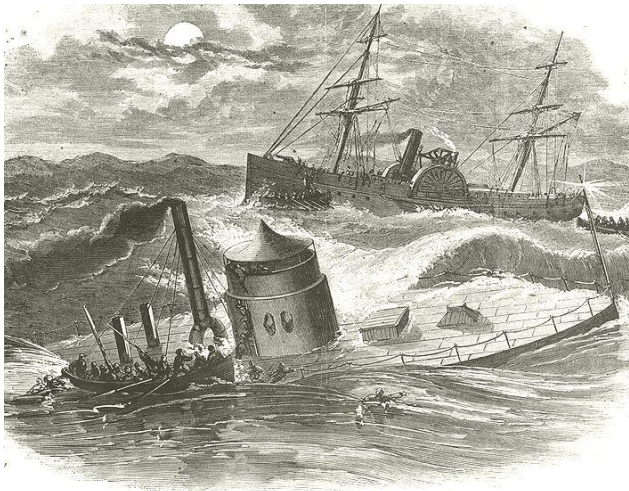
The two ships hammered away at each other continuously but ineffectually for several hours, before the battle ended in a draw. The *Virginia* returned to Norfolk, and the *Monitor* remained in Hampton Roads to protect the Union blockade. You can find extensive first-hand accounts of the Battle of Hampton Roads from men on board both the *Monitor* and the *Virginia* in my new book *War Stories*.

The *Monitor* remained with the blockade, and helped keep the *Virginia* bottled up until her crew was forced to destroy her in May 1862 to keep her from falling into Union

hands. After the destruction of the *Virginia*, the *Monitor* was freed up to take part in other activities for the Union Navy.

During the summer of 1862, she took part in the Battle of Drewry's Bluff, but did not play much of a part due to the inability of her crew to elevate the guns because of her small gun ports. Throughout much of the rest of the summer, she patrolled the James River, supporting McClellan's Army of the Potomac during the Peninsular Campaign against Richmond. In September she was taken into the Washington Navy Yard for a refit and some repairs.

The Monitor's Demise And Legacy



In late December, the *Monitor* was ordered south to take part in the blockade off Charleston, South Carolina. She left Washington on December 29, traveling down the Potomac River, and reached the open sea on December 31.

There she was taken under tow by the *USS Rhode Island*. That night they were caught in a severe storm off of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, and the *Monitor* began to take on water. Her officers and crew worked furiously to save the ship, but eventually the

pumps could no longer keep up with the incoming water and they had to abandon ship.

Lifeboats from the *Rhode Island* succeeded in taking off 47 survivors before the ship sank. However, 16 hands (including officers) were lost when the *USS Monitor* slipped beneath waves 16 miles southeast off Cape Hatteras.

While the *Monitor* was gone, the Union Navy built many more "*Monitor*" style ships throughout the war, and they played a large part in the naval warfare of the Civil War, especially on the rivers.

The wreck of the *Monitor* was discovered in 1973, and parts of the wreck have been recovered. The recovered portions of the wreck are being conserved at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia. You can see live webcams of the *Monitor's* engine, turret, and guns at the Mariners' Museum *USS Monitor* Center.

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Allstadt's Corner, important to John Brown's Raid, donated to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park



Speakers from the dedication ceremony pose with the signed ceremonial deed.
NPS Photo/A. Cook

August 17, 2019

Autumn Cook (NPS) & Jim Campi (ABT),

13-acre site also played major roles the 1862 Battle of Harpers Ferry and in early 20th century regional industrialization

Nearly 160 years after John Brown raided the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, the National Park Service (NPS) today celebrated the addition of 13 acres that help tell his story. The American Battlefield Trust purchased property known as Allstadt's Corner, which includes Allstadt's Ordinary, and transferred it to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The donation comes during the park's yearlong 75th anniversary celebration.

"The events at Allstadt's Corner shaped our nation," Superintendent H. Tyrone Brandyburg said. "This generous donation to the American people allows the National Park Service to preserve this important place, its lessons and its stories forever. It's an honor to be entrusted with its care."

Allstadt's Ordinary, built circa 1790, played an important role in John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal arsenal, and the surrounding farm saw action during the 1862 Civil War Battle of Harpers Ferry. The Ordinary later stood witness as industrialization and mining transformed the landscape in the 1900s.

"The donation of Allstadt's Corner is just the latest example of the Trust working alongside Harpers Ferry National Historical Park to protect the critical landscapes involved in some of the most dramatic

chapters of American history," American Battlefield Trust board member Lt. Gen. Richard Mills said. "Since 2002 we have joined together with fellow conservation groups to add 342 acres associated with the 1862 battle to the park."

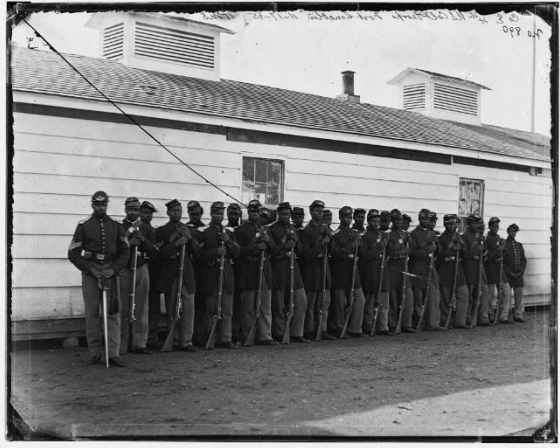
The American Battlefield Trust purchased Allstadt's Corner with an exceptional gift from Elliotsville Plantation, Inc., a grant from the NPS American Battlefield Protection Program and private donations from individuals. The National Park Foundation, the State of West Virginia Division of Culture & History and the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission provided additional support.

"It was particularly rewarding to work with the NPS and the American Battlefield Trust to preserve this unique and fascinating historic structure," Roxanne Quimby, co-founder of the Elliotsville Plantation, Inc., said. "I learned a great deal about the era and the story of Allstadt's Ordinary, and enjoyed having the opportunity to admire the beautiful landscape of the region. It's gratifying to see the culmination of our efforts come to fruition."

The American Battlefield Trust has protected 542 acres at Harpers Ferry, much of it along Schoolhouse Ridge. Of those 542 acres, 342 acres have become part of the national park and the rest serve as viewsheds protected through conservation easement.

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Monocacy National Battlefield Commemorates 400 Years of African American History



4th U.S. Colored Troops from Company E photographed at Fort Lincoln. A recruiting station for U.S. Colored Troops opened at Monocacy Junction in 1863. W.M. Smith. Library of Congress

August 19, 2019 Jana Friesen McCabe,

FREDERICK, Md.: Join the National Park Service and community partners in honoring the first Africans to land in English-occupied America and in remembering 400 years of African American history. On Saturday, August 24 at 10:00 a.m. at the Best Farm, Monocacy National Battlefield will host an event titled Enslavement in the Free State: The Story of L'Hermitage. On Sunday, August 25 at 3:00 p.m. the public may join park rangers at the Visitor Center to participate in ringing a bell and reading the names of the enslaved people who lived and worked on the six historic properties of Monocacy National Battlefield, as well as the U.S. Colored Troops who enlisted at Monocacy Junction. Both programs are free.

The events are part of a nationwide commemoration of the landing of the first enslaved Africans at Virginia's Point Comfort, now part of Fort Monroe National Monument, in August 1619. Monocacy National Battlefield will join Fort Monroe National Monument and other organizations across the country in simultaneously ringing

bells on August 25 at 3 p.m. for four minutes—one minute to honor each century of African American history. Visitors to Monocacy may also join in reading the names of African Americans who lived and worked on historic farms that form the battlefield.

Slavery was legal in Maryland until November 1864, when voters passed a new Maryland Constitution. During the Battle of Monocacy on July 9, 1864, both the Thomas and the Worthington families took refuge in their cellars with some of their enslaved workforce. Researchers have documented the presence of enslaved laborers at all five of the historic farms of the battlefield. The average slaveowner in Frederick held 5-7 people. In 1863 a U.S. Colored Troops recruiting station was opened at Monocacy Junction.

Scholars and volunteers continue to research the lives of African Americans associated with Monocacy National Battlefield. Historic documents like censuses and wills frequently only recorded gender and ages of enslaved individuals. Advertisements for runaways often included names and physical descriptions. Historians must piece together information to identify individuals.

Join Monocacy National Battlefield in commemorating 400 years of African American history on August 24 and 25. Enslavement in the Free State: The Story of L'Hermitage is at the Best Farm on Saturday, August 24 at 10:00 a.m. The bell ringing and reading of the names is at the Visitor Center on Sunday, August 25 at 3:00 p.m. Both programs are free.

www.nps.gov

Monocacy National Battlefield preserves, protects and commemorates the landscape,

historic structures, archeological sites and monuments that contribute to the national significance of the Battle of Monocacy. The park also provides opportunities for visitors to understand and appreciate the significance of the Battle of Monocacy within the full context of the Civil War and American History. For more information, visit www.nps.gov/mono.

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Hidden Gettysburg: Exploring the Battlefield's Secret Stories

When 93rd Pennsylvania veterans put up their monument in October 1888 along the John T. Weikert farm lane, masons leveled a boulder previously used for the 93rd's smaller 1884 monument. The rubble from that renovation is nearby, complete with remnants of carving. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)



By Dana B. Shoaf

Get off the tourist path and appreciate hidden spots that illuminate America's most significant battle

Thousands of visitors flock to Gettysburg National Military Park every year, drawn to the rolling fields and rocky hillsides where

the harrowing three-day Battle of Gettysburg transpired July 1-3, 1863. Naturally, travelers feel compelled to visit many of the dozens of iconic structures, monuments, and battlefield positions made recognizable in popular retellings of the engagement, such as the movie *Gettysburg* or Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Crowds are always present at Little Round Top, the High-Water Mark, and Devil's Den. But for every 20th Maine monument or Virginia Memorial, there are myriad overlooked hidden gems on the battlefield, representing neglected stories of heroism or quirky tales of lesser-known history—such as the Vermont officer who barreled into Pickett's Charge with a camp ax. Ever pay your respects to the John Page Nicholson monument? Where did the Iron Brigade end up after its bloodbath on July 1? Also, dinosaurs once roamed central Pennsylvania, and there is evidence of them on the battlefield if you know where to look. You can also leave the battlefield proper and see a picturesque covered bridge that both armies used. So, if dense crowds and diesel fumes are disturbing your time on Little Round Top, here are some other options. Not every hidden or overlooked spot on the battlefield is listed, but the locations that follow are worth your time to seek out, whether it's your first, second, or third day to visit. —Dana B. Shoaf



The 9th Massachusetts Battery nicknamed its cannons after some of the wives left behind at home. A vestige of that practice remains on one of the Napoleon cannons at the battery's Trostle Farm monument. Go behind the guns, and you'll find the name "Cora" in weathered paint on a breech. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)



Iron Brigade monument at Culp's Hill. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)

Bent Iron

The famous Iron Brigade suffered a staggering 1,153 casualties during fighting on July 1. The Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan regiments

were later moved to a "quiet" area on Culp's Hill, where small monuments and restored earthworks mark their line. From that location, battered but not broken, they fired at Confederates attacking Cemetery Hill on the evening of July 2. "Dident we give them hell," wrote Captain Henry Young of the 7th Wisconsin.



Tribute to Sallie the pit bull terrier, mascot of the 11th Pennsylvania. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)

Loyal Pittie

Regimental mascot Sallie the Dog forever rests on the 11th Pennsylvania monument along Doubleday Avenue on Oak Hill, facing the fields over which Confederates attacked her regiment. The pit bull terrier reportedly barked ferociously during the fight. She died during an 1864 battle.

Ax Man



*Lieutenant Stephen Brown and his ax.
(Photo by Melissa A Winn)*

Lieutenant Stephen Brown of the 13th Vermont had to turn in his sidearms before the battle when he was disciplined for disobeying orders. He carried a camp ax during Pickett's Charge, and the unusual weapon can be seen lying at his feet on his bronze monument along Hancock Avenue on Cemetery Ridge.

Calling Card

A cannonball remains in the Schmucker House on the grounds of the Lutheran Theological Seminary on Seminary Ridge. Look under the porch roof on the south side of the house. A Confederate battery blasted the shot that hit the home on July 1.



Park at the pink granite 43rd North Carolina monument along East Confederate Avenue at the base of Culp's Hill, and walk through the woods back to Rock Creek. You'll find the remnants of an old park boundary fence and a bucolic scene at the location where troops of Maj. Gen. Edward Johnson's Division crossed during their attacks on Culp's Hill. (Photo by Melissa A.

Winn)



Dinosaur tracks can be found on the capstone of the Plum Run branch bridge on South Confederate Avenue. On the south side, they are on the sixth stone from right as you face south, and on the north side, they are on the fifth stone from the right as you face that direction. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)

Veteran in Charge

John Page Nicholson fought on Culp's Hill at Gettysburg as a lieutenant in the 28th Pennsylvania. After the war, he became active in veterans' affairs and later served as the chairman of Gettysburg National Military Park from 1893-1922, overseeing increases in battlefield acreage and monumentation. He is also responsible for the *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg* series of books familiar to many researchers. Stop by and pay your respects to him at his monument along Hancock

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Fort Point hosts Civil War re-enactment in San Francisco

Lauren Hernández, San Francisco Chronicle.
Aug. 18, 2019 Updated: Aug. 18, 2019
4:22 p.m.



1 of 5 The Civil War re-enactment in San Francisco. Photo: Lauren Hernández / The Chronicle



2 of 5 Wayne Mabie, 77, of San Martin, shows visitors how durable hardtack was for soldiers who consumed the tough, cracker-like food during the war. Photo: Lauren Hernández / The Chronicle



3 of 5 Men dressed as soldiers participate in a Civil War re-enactment at Fort Point in San Francisco. Photo: Lauren Hernández / The Chronicle

Infantrymen gripped polished muskets, slung leather pouches decorated with gold “US” pendants over their shoulders and lifted swords in the salty air of San Francisco’s Fort Point on Saturday as part of the annual re-enactment commemorating the American Civil War era.

Dozens of men dressed as Union infantry and artillerymen marched into Fort Point and lined up in the open-air fort, the Golden Gate Bridge stretching just over the fort tower above their blue-capped heads. Onlookers lined the entrance of the fort and watched in silence as re-enactors raised the American flag on a flagpole visible from the bay.

Visitors strolled along the length of a series of wood tables where items such as tobacco, smoking pipes and bricks of tea were displayed. Some people picked up bricks of hardtack — a thick cracker-like food that kept soldiers’ bellies full — and tapped the rocky food on a piece of wood, generating loud thunks.

They peered through dusty green bottles of “Wizard Oil” and other high-alcohol-content liquids that were consumed as beverages and used as home remedies for ailing soldiers. Others opted to take selfies in front of the cannons on display and followed volunteers with the National Park Service on a guided tour of the grounds.

John Gee, an Army veteran, was one of dozens of people who slipped into a Union uniform. He portrayed Col. René De Russy, who commanded the defense of Fort Point and other “local fortifications of San Francisco Bay.”

“I’m kind of a history enthusiast, and I think the past is infinitely fascinating and the past has a whole lot to do with the way we are now,” Gee said. “The Civil War made the United States. The war united us, like it or not.”

While Fort Point never saw battle during the Civil War, Gee and other re-enactment participants said the San Francisco base is the ideal location for teaching people about how Union soldiers lived during the 1860s when they were battling Confederate troops in the war that ended the enslavement of African people in the U.S., and how the war changed the course of the country’s history.

Dawn Wilson, 46, dressed in a purple, ankle-length skirt, white-collared blouse decorated with a brooch and black lace gloves, stood behind a long wooden table meant to be a sutlery, which were Civil War-era merchants that sold anything from sewing kits, candle holders that doubled as cups, cutlery, soaps, tobacco and even condoms to soldiers. She peered down beneath a black-brimmed hat and encouraged children to play with wood spinning tops and other toys strewn about the table.

In 1986, when Wilson was a teenager, she said she joined her family at a Civil War re-enactment at Roaring Camp in Felton (Santa Cruz County), where the whole family fell in love with portraying life in the 1860s. The family — including Wilson’s mother, father, husband and other relatives — have participated in various “living history” events for several decades.

She joked that her 19-year-old daughter has participated since she was in utero. Wilson’s husband, Tom Wilson, 47, said he “married into” Civil War re-enactments.

“It’s a family thing. You don’t have a choice,” Wilson joked, gesturing to the rest of her family running the sutlery with her. “But of course we’re not trying to glorify war or glorify the Civil War in particular, but we’re trying to show that it wasn’t that long ago and to look at how far we’ve come.”

Wilson’s mother, Judy Mabie, 75, said the family has participated in re-enactments around California, including in Felton, San Jose, Milpitas, Fresno, Murphys (Calaveras County) and Mariposa.

“I think we need to educate the public not only how there was a Civil War, but the things that went with it,” Mabie said. “The Civil War was just not about slavery, it was about people.”

San Jose resident Andrew Crockett, 34, said he’s been participating in re-enactments since 2008, when his wife introduced him to living history events. On Saturday, he was dressed as an artilleryman, with light blue pants, dark blue coat with red lining and gold buttons, and a leather belt wrapped around his waist. Slung on his back, he wore a “1852 edition knapsack, the forerunner to backpacks.”

“I had always been ... into the idea of dressing the part and interacting with the public and talking about history in unstructured and direct manner. In school, everything is issued by a bureaucracy trying to satisfy all the interests involved to make sure that no one complains,” Crockett said. “There is a lot of history that gets left by the wayside that is increasingly relevant in our modern era.”

Crockett, a self-proclaimed “history buff,” said he hopes his involvement in recent years has taught people that it wasn’t just white Americans fighting to end slavery in the United States — Mexican Americans in California also joined the effort.

“They don’t know the fact that Spanish-speaking Californians enlisted in the Union military in the First Battalion cavalry and fought to end slavery. They fought for the cause of the Union, for the cause of a free nation,” Crockett said. “These ideas simply are not common parlance. So much of that history simply gets left out of the picture, and I want to make sure that they get the full breadth of the picture.”

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ARKANSAS SIGHTSEEING: Civil War history marked along trail

by Jack Schnedler. Arkansas Democratic Gazette.



A cannon is displayed at Reed's Bridge on the Little Rock Campaign Tour, where fighting took place on Aug. 27, 1863, with Confederates holding the line. (Photo by Marcia Schnedler, special to the Democrat-Gazette)

A sign along U.S. 165 near the busy intersection with U.S. 70 in North Little Rock marks the rarest of casualties among the 620,000 or more Civil War deaths. It's the location where one Confederate general fatally shot another Confederate general in a duel.

This site in the Rose City neighborhood is one of eight stops on the Little Rock Campaign Tour, which begins in MacArthur Park, where the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History displays extensive Civil War material. The itinerary, which can be downloaded online, visits places involved 156 summers ago in fighting that ended with the occupation of Arkansas' Confederate capital by Union troops.

The historical tour's most extensive displays, including replicas of Civil War cannons, are along Arkansas 161 on the southern fringe of Jacksonville. Intense combat occurred here on Aug. 27, 1863, at the Reed's Bridge crossing of Bayou Meto. Confederates held

the line that day against a larger Federal force.

But the campaign's most unlikely and fascinating story is told at the site where the brigadier generals dueled. An illustrated plaque shaded by a magnolia tree gives a detailed account:

"As Union forces advanced to capture Little Rock, Confederate Generals John S. Marmaduke and Lucius Marshall Walker fought the last duel in Arkansas near here at 6 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 6, 1863. The duel grew from Marmaduke's allegations that Walker had failed to support him at the July 4, 1863, Battle of Helena and the Aug. 27, 1863, battle at Reed's Bridge.

"The two West Point-educated [brigadier] generals met here at the old Lefevre home, which stood about 100 yards east of the present intersection of state highways 70 and 165. At the command 'fire,' they simultaneously discharged their weapons without effect. Marmaduke fired again, striking Walker in the right side and mortally wounding him.

"Walker was transported by Marmaduke's ambulance to the home of Mrs. Ellen Lofton Cates, in Little Rock, where he died the next morning. His last request was for someone to tell his wife, Cellie, that 'this meeting was unavoidable' and that 'the preservation of my honor demanded it.' He was buried at Little Rock's Mount Holly Cemetery on Sept. 8. Marmaduke led the unsuccessful Confederate defense of Little Rock, which fell to Union forces three days after Walker was buried."

The ferocity of the Aug. 27 combat around Reed's Bridge, one of the battles that provoked Marmaduke's complaints against Walker, is suggested by a comment posted

there from Confederate Maj. John Newton Edwards:

"The enemy charged down the road in splendid style, as if to save the bridge, but it would have been better had more of them never been born. The dense cloud of smoke from the crackling, burning bridge, like sorrow's veil, hung between them and Bledsoe's battery. When the head of their long lines had nearly reached the bridge, these noble old guns sent shell and shot, winged with fury, screaming and hissing up their lines, scattering the mangled fragments of men and horses like chaff before the wind."

An extra attraction at Reed's Bridge is a replica ensemble of five farm buildings from the Civil War era. There's also a sign that gives the prices back then for crossing Bayou Meto on the local ferry, the cheapest being 3 cents for a pedestrian.

Among other stops on the campaign tour is Brownsville Cemetery, an 1863 battle location just north of Lonoke; Ashley's Mills, scene of heavy fighting at the edge of Scott Plantation Settlement; and Willow Beach Lake at Baucum, where Union troops built a pontoon bridge.

Two markers in Little Rock's Riverfront Park denote the end of the victorious Union campaign on Sept. 11, 1863. One carries an exultant quotation from Union Pvt. A.F. Sperry: "That hour of our arrival ... was one of the most stirring and poetic of our military life."

Words both hopeful and doleful are attributed to Confederate Lt. William W. Garner: "I am not discouraged, for I do think we will gain our independence sooner or later. ...But I acknowledge that I have never

until the fall of Little Rock felt the sting of being an exile."

Route details for the Little Rock Campaign Tour can be downloaded as a pdf and printed at arkansas.com/little-rock-campaign-driving-tour.

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Are Tourists Falling Out of Love with Civil War Battlefields? Public Historians Respond

By Nick Sacco | August 20, 2019 | The Journal of the Civil War Era.



Two monuments at the Gettysburg Battlefield. The one on the left is General Alexander Hays, and the one on the right is dedicated to the 126th New York Infantry Regiment. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Last year I published a post on this website about visitation trends to Civil War historic sites within the National Park Service (NPS) during the Civil War Sesquicentennial from 2011 to 2015. After looking at the numbers I concluded that visitation to these sites remained relatively strong, but not everyone feels the same way. Two recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Politico* argue historic sites throughout the United States

are losing both visitors and their general relevance as tourist attractions. The *Wall Street Journal* article focused specifically on Civil War battlefields and painted a bleak picture of the future; no more battle reenactments or living history performances, gift shops going out of business, and a generation of young people who lack “respect” for history.[1]

While it is fair to discuss the future of Civil War battlefields and historic sites more broadly, these articles fall short in one crucial way: they leave out the perspectives of the public historians who make their living interpreting history at these sites. Curious to learn more myself, I put a call out on social media asking for comments in response to three of my own questions about visitation to Civil War sites. A few public historians who work at these sites responded and their comments are summarized below.[2]

1. What do think about visitation trends to Civil War battlefields today?

Almost everyone who responded warned that visitation numbers needed to be placed into context. Eric Leonard pointed out that NPS historic sites experienced a forty-year decline in visitation from roughly 1976 until the mid-2000s. “The Civil War Sesquicentennial and ‘Find Your Park’ campaigns have helped buck that trend,” argues Leonard. Jake Wynn pointed out that non-military historical sites have something new to offer visitors. He cited the National Museum of Civil War Medicine as an example of a site that has experienced tremendous growth over the past ten years. Stephanie Arduini gave a thoughtful answer, stating that “All history sites are trying to understand the larger decline in numbers, but [I] suspect it’s a combination of competition for limited time/funds,

disconnect with older narratives not relevant to contemporary audiences or are too nostalgic at the expense of accuracy, and even aspects of design/platform for how visitors want to engage.” And Chris Barr reminded me that people visit historic sites for a range of reasons not necessarily connected to history education. “A lot of our parks that are near relatively large urban areas have growing visitation. Runners, hikers, joggers, etc.... Those people are every bit as much visitors as anybody.”

It seems that the bigger question, as Leonard suggested in his comments, is how to make *all* historic sites more relevant in the future.

2. Do children have a lack of respect for history?

A common talking point I’ve seen online suggests that young people are glued to their cell phones and not interested in visiting historic sites. At the same time, I have also seen articles contending that nature sites such as the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone are “being loved to death” because of record visitation and young people who will stop at nothing to get the perfect image for Instagram.[3] In both cases alleged visitation trends are unfairly blamed on young people. In reality, the primary drivers of historic site visitation are currently older Americans (Generation X and Baby Boomers, for example) who have more time and disposable income to travel. Ultimately young people are shaped by the environment around them, and they are more likely to be interested in history if they are exposed to it early in life. The comments I received from others echoed my own sentiments.

Barr suggested that young people respect history as much as previous generations and that “one day [in the future] today’s young people will grumble about kids not

respecting or caring.” He also pointed out that the history curriculum in K-12 education has evolved and the Civil War simply isn’t given much emphasis as it used to. “If you’re 70 years old right now the Civil War Centennial hit when you were in middle or high school,” said Barr. “The conflict loomed large and took up a huge part of the curriculum you studied. Your grandparents may have been alive in the 1800s and there’s a chance you may have even met an elderly Civil War vet when you were a little kid. You definitely knew children of Civil War soldiers and the conflict was still in living memory.” But today “somebody in an 11th grade US History course right now was born in 2003, the same year the US invaded Iraq. Your curriculum has to run all the way up through probably 9/11.” It isn’t so much that students don’t respect history, Barr argued, but that they might “feel a stronger connection to eras other than the Civil War.”

Several commenters spoke to the need of finding new ways to hook students into Civil War history using more primary source documents and interactive activities. Arduini spoke to the larger challenge of building an environment—both at historic sites and elsewhere—in which “learning is built based on their curiosity and inquiry instead of rote memorization, and also where the adults in their lives feel both comfortable and confident supporting their learning.” That challenge partly means finding ways to deal with decreased field trips for students amid increased time for standardized tests in the classroom. Leonard asserted that blaming young people for visitation declines is “lazy and stupid” and cited the National Park Service’s Junior Ranger program as an effective example of providing students the chance to learn and “speak to their experiences.” Finally, Andrew Druart offered an optimistic take on the future.

Druart, who leads the “Civil War Kids” initiative for the American Battlefield Trust, cited Pamplin Park in Petersburg, Virginia, as an example of a site that emphasizes youth education by “finding personal connections and reading diaries from those who lived it help kids better understand the human perspective.”

3. What new, dynamic ideas can sites implement to achieve relevance?

All commenters stressed the importance of finding new strategies for meeting young people where they are. Several emphasized the importance of audience-centered education and facilitated dialogue techniques in educational programming. Barr explained the challenge to me in a straightforward way: “Many of us who choose to work in these sites are ‘buffs’ to varying degrees. Where we fail is when we try to come up with something to force our interests on somebody else.” Understanding what visitors bring to the table (and why other people choose not to visit at all) is a crucial aspect moving forward. “We all have this idea that building relevance or connection is still going to be a ranger-centered or historian-centered endeavor. [But] relevance and audience building won’t come from a cool new topic to talk about, or a new subject to emphasize on a tour. It’s going to come from us being facilitators for the public to make their own connections and experiences,” said Barr.

Arudini and Wynn both highlighted the importance of using historical artifacts and documents in education programming. Arudini suggested that part of the challenge is using “contemporary design that helps people feel like the stories are contemporary and relevant.” She cited the new American Civil War Museum’s efforts to use colorized photos in their permanent exhibits and a

larger effort to build partnerships with organizations not previously associated with Civil War history sites as two different ways to create a culture of honesty, accuracy, and inclusion in the museum’s historical interpretations. And Leonard differed slightly from Barr’s arguments by stressing the importance of more explicitly interpreting the Reconstruction era as a relevant and crucial historical moment in U.S. history. “All [Civil War sites] have Reconstruction stories,” he asserted. Leonard would also like to see a reevaluation of living history programs, both in content and methods. “Are we doing living history because visitors have come to expect it, or because it’s the most effective means for communicating a subject?”

Should Civil War battlefields and related sites be worried about future visitation trends? I believe that the *Wall Street Journal* article painted too gloomy a picture that almost implies a crisis is at hand. I also reject the notion that young people are to blame. Nevertheless I fully agree with the various commenters that new ideas for innovative outreach, programming, and interpretation are crucial moving forward. There are no easy answers, but we need to keep placing the perspective of public historians working at Civil War historic sites front and center as this conversation continues.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this essay reflect the personal views of those who were willing to be interviewed. They do not reflect the views of their previous or current employers.

[1] Cameron McWhirter, “Civil War Battlefields Lose Ground as Tourist Draws,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2019, accessed

May 30, 2019,
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/civil-war-battlefields-lose-ground-as-tourist-draws-11558776600>; M. Scott Mahaskey and Peter Canellos, "Are Americans Falling Out of Love with their Landmarks?," *Politico*, July 4, 2019, accessed July 7, 2019,
<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/07/04/are-americans-falling-out-of-love-with-their-landmarks-227258>.

the Republic published in the Indiana Magazine of History entitled "The Grand Army of the Republic, the Indianapolis 500, and the Struggle for Memorial Day in Indiana, 1868-1923" (December 2015). Nick also runs a personal blog about history, "Exploring the Past," at <https://pastexplore.wordpress.com/>.

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[2] Most of these conversations took place on Twitter through Direct Messaging on July 7 and July 8, 2019, between Jake Wynn (@JayQuinn1993), Chris Barr (@cwbarr), Stephanie Arduini (@ACWMuseum), Andrew Druart (@AndrewDruart), and myself (@NickSacco55). The conversation between Eric Leonard and myself took place on July 7, 2019, through Facebook Messenger.

[3] John Coski, "Whither Public History?," *The Civil War Monitor*, June 25, 2018, accessed June 26, 2019,
<https://www.civilwarmonitor.com/blog/whither-public-history>; I responded to Coski on my personal website. See Nick Sacco, "The Times Are A Changin'," *Exploring the Past*, July 9, 2019, accessed July 9, 2019,
<https://pastexplore.wordpress.com/2019/07/09/the-times-are-a-changin/>; See also National Public Radio, "Instagramming Crowds Pack National Parks," *National Public Radio*, May 28, 2019, accessed May 28, 2019,
<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/28/726658317/instagramming-crowds-pack-national-parks>.

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