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Haunted History *Slavery and the landscape of myth at america's civil war sites*

by joe baker *photographs by david andrews*

"I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crises. The great point is to bring them the real facts." *Abraham Lincoln*

On a summer day, maybe the best way to tour the Gettysburg battlefield is on the saddle of a bicycle. If you get up very early, before the town's busy streets and stores fill with their daily measure of some 1.8 million annual visitors, you can peddle along more or less by yourself. This muggy July dawn, just a few days after the annual frenzy of the great battle's anniversary commemoration, I am seated atop a stone wall with my bike leaning next to me. I'm not far from the visitor center and the

Left: **Fort Sumter.**

What really happened is part of our national epic, our Iliad, a long and complicated tale now 142 years old. Like every national epic, it is many stories woven together in a fabric whose warp and weft knots all of us to each other and to our ancestors.

Cyclorama building, very close to the place where, it can be argued, the war's bitter tide turned. At this early hour all I see below me is a fog-shrouded slope, a couple of deer, a jogger; nothing to belie what happened on this spot.

OF COURSE, EVEN THE MOST CASUAL CIVIL WAR BUFF KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED. It was here that a few impossibly brave men from Pickett's division briefly reached the Union lines during the afternoon of July 3, 1863. But that's just a sentence, and what really happened is part of our national epic, our Iliad, a long and complicated tale now 142 years old. Like every national epic, it is many stories woven together in a fabric whose warp and weft knots all of us to each other and to our ancestors.

There are so many questions, so much to think about. What motivated men to acts of suicidal valor and murderous violence? What did the largest land battle in continental history do to a little country town? Why did we throw ourselves against each other in a four-year bloodbath that we have yet to see the like of again, even after two world wars? What should we learn from places like Gettysburg, what sort of story is it? Military history? Morality tale? Sociology lesson? All or none of these things?

Many visitors to Civil War battlefields pose these questions, and the answers are not simple. Because so many of the sites are managed by the National Park Service, it has become the steward of the saga, and holds the weighty responsibility for giving voice to its people, events, ideas, and places. In 1989 and 1990, Congress directed the agency, in reauthorizing legislation for the Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania, and Gettysburg battlefields, to place the battles "in the larger context of the Civil War and American History, including the causes and consequences of the Civil War [for] all the American people." The exhibits and other interpretive media were badly in need of updating to reflect current scholarship. Many displays dated to the 1960s or earlier.

Early memorials to the war were erected by veterans and by people who lived through the conflict. They didn't have to have the war explained to them. They were motivated to honor the sacrifice of their fallen brothers, to do what they could to heal the wounds the war left on the "more perfect Union."

It was during the first 50 years that followed that the myth of a noble "Lost Cause," for which the South fought, took root. It gave white southerners a way to cope with defeat, honoring the sacrifice of the fallen while adapting to the radically changed social and economic order. It also sugarcoated some of the antebellum South's harsh realities. However it came to be, the "Lost Cause" led to a romanticized depiction of Confederate history, reducing the conflicted and complex motivations of southern troops to the defense of a chivalrous way of life redolent of "Gone with the Wind."

Photographs of the first commemorations show Union and Confederate veterans shaking hands next to the monuments. There is sadness in their eyes. They wanted to think that all the horror had been for some honorable purpose. And they did not want this to happen again. Slavery was forgotten as the root of the conflict.

Of course, no modern visitors remember this. Yet they keep coming by the millions, sensing that these places are important, even sacred, but many don't perceive the events clearly. Some of their ancestors came long after the war, or they are themselves immigrants or foreign visitors. While they know the event was a watershed, its lessons can seem uncertain.

Right: Charleston's Liberty Square Visitor Center—departure point for Fort Sumter—four years after inauguration. "We will be back to protest the size of that flag," said a young woman darting in for a quick photo on opening day. The 20-by-36 foot specimen is a replica of the fragile original that flew over the fort, in a display case nearby. "Since the September 11 attacks, no one has complained about the size," writes Superintendent John Tucker in the *George Wright Forum*.

The First Shot

What brought the nation to civil war at Fort Sumter?

When the Civil War finally exploded in Charleston Harbor, it was the result of a half-century of growing sectionalism. Escalating crises over property rights, human rights, states rights and constitutional rights divided the country as it expanded westward. Underlying all the economic, social and political rhetoric was the volatile question of slavery. Because its economic life had long depended on enslaved labor, South Carolina was the first state to secede when this way of life was threatened. Confederate forces fired the first shot in South Carolina. The federal government responded with force. Decades of compromise were over. The very nature of the Union was at stake.

Colonial Roots of the Conflict

Ambiguities of the Constitution

Antebellum United States

Charleston in 1860

South Carolina Declares Its Independence

Fort Sumter Countdown to Conflict

Some African American visitors feel they don't have a stake in this story, despite slavery's central role . . . Most of the war was fought in the South, and some southern visitors can be sensitive, even defensive, about the honor of their ancestors . . . This diverse and sometimes conflicted visitor base presents an enormous challenge.

Above: Interpreter Michael Allen. Right: Visitors to the fort. The bombardment's centennial saw another secession—at the Charleston meeting of a commemorative group established by Congress. When the meeting hotel denied a room to a New Jersey representative, an African American woman, the President moved the event to a nearby naval base. The South Carolina members bolted, "almost as if they had read the stage directions from a script written in 1860-1861," writes Thomas Pressly in *Americans Interpret Their Civil War.*

Some African American visitors don't feel they have a stake in this story, despite slavery's central role in causing the war, and the part their ancestors played on both sides. Most of the war was fought in the South, and some southern visitors can be sensitive, even defensive, about the honor of their ancestors. Many veterans, military historians, and the large community of reenactors are intensely interested in military minutiae and the day-to-day lives of soldiers. This diverse and sometimes conflicted visitor base presents an enormous challenge. How do you explain these sites to a complicated world that can't remember the war but still feels drawn to it?

In part due to the needs of these visitors, in part due to the Congressional directive, and in part due to a new generation of NPS managers with academic backgrounds, the last decade has seen a revolution in the way the National Park Service tells the story of the war.

New exhibits have been installed at Fort Sumter in South Carolina, at Corinth in Mississippi, at Richmond in Virginia, and a few other sites. New exhibits are planned for a visitor center at Gettysburg slated to open in 2007. These form the vanguard of the attempt to put these places "in the larger context of the Civil War and American history." But as with all revolutions, there has been turmoil.

In 1998 and 2000, NPS-sponsored conferences in Nashville and at Ford's Theater brought park superintendents and scholars together to shape the future of Civil War interpretation. Critics ranging from Pat Buchanan to the Sons of Confederate Veterans expressed concerns that the battlefields were going to lose their importance as hallowed ground.

MOST OF THE DISSENTERS AIMED TO KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE BATTLEFIELDS AND the soldiers who died there. As part of a wide-ranging campaign, the Sons of Confederate Veterans stated that "to attempt to change the way a battlefield is interpreted to include social issues of the day does a great disservice to the soldiers who sacrificed their all." Ultimately, what most of the criticisms seemed to reflect, either obliquely or directly, were concerns that southern veterans would be dishonored by addressing the subject of slavery.

This says much about us as a people. The ugliness of that institution is part of who we are. Historians agree it was the prime cause of the war, yet we remain reluctant to confront it. No doubt, the valor of both armies was the equal of that displayed at Valley Forge and Omaha Beach. Yet the Civil War, now nearly a century and a half behind us, still makes us uneasy.

As I get up to resume my ride, a car pulls up. A young couple emerges, with a German language tour book in hand. They gaze out over the wall, and read the entry in the book, speaking quietly to each other as though they're in church. I know what's on their minds. In this moment, Pickett's doomed men, a lot of them just kids in their late teens and early 20s, lay dead or maimed below them in the same straight ranks in which they advanced, torn to pieces by the rifles and cannon from up here behind the wall. The couple stands and looks on in silence for awhile, and then the young woman sees me and nods, feeling the need to say something.

"We should not forget this."

Having nothing to add, I nod in affirmation, mount the bike, and ease back onto the road.

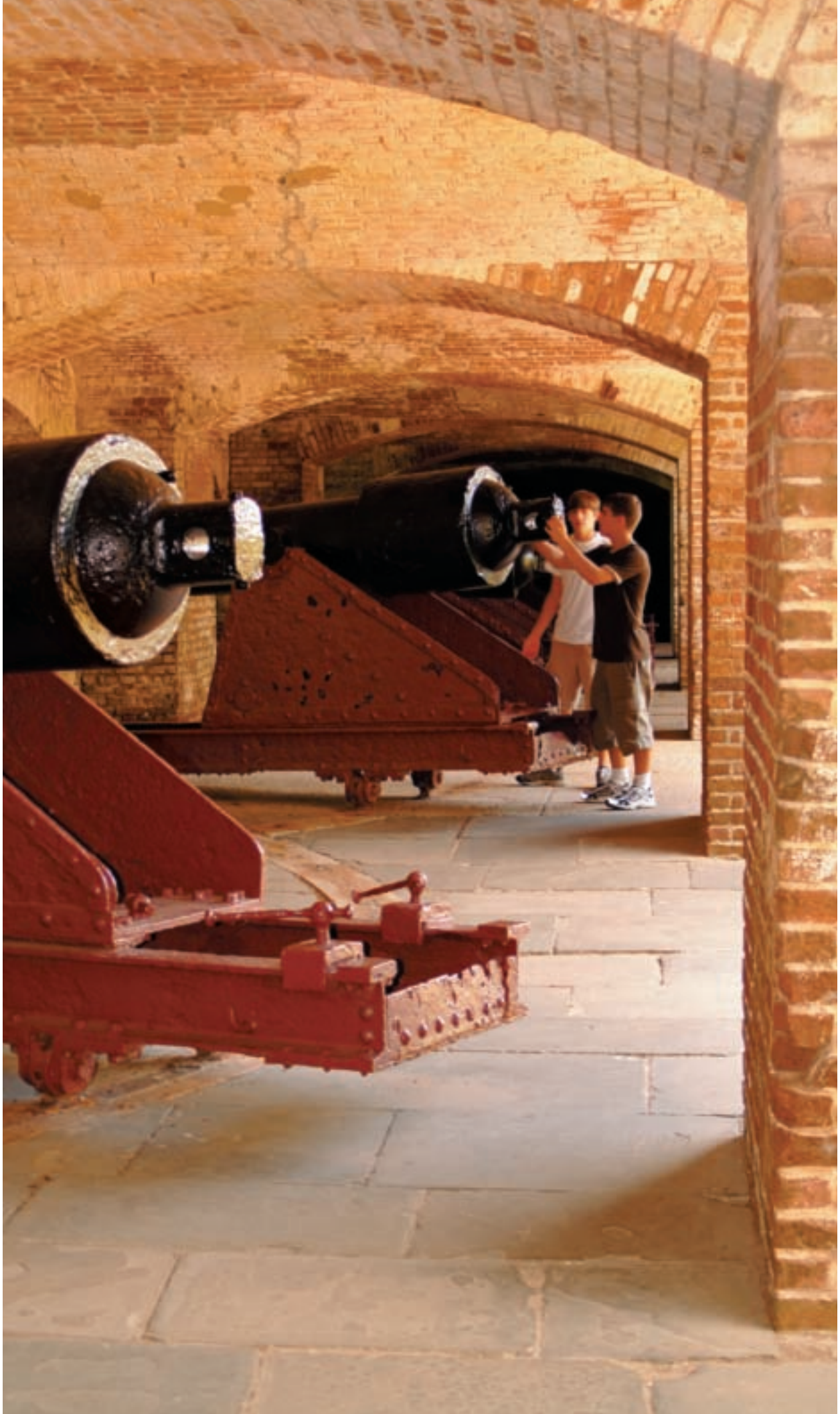
AT FORT SUMTER ON THE SOUTH CAROLINA COAST, THAT THOUGHT FINDS SIMILAR resonance. Opened in 2001, the education center at Liberty Square is where visitors depart by ferry to the fort. There, exhibits updated in 1995 interpret the military history. But the bombardment's context is explained on the mainland.

Fran Norton, chief of interpretation, Carlin Timmons, a park interpreter, and Rick Hatcher, park historian, talk with me enthusiastically about the goals and results of the expanded exhibits and facilities. "Context is the key," says Fran. "To answer the question, 'Why did the war start here?' you have to introduce the economic and social history."

Charleston's importance as a market and shipping center for rice and cotton, slavery's crucial role in the region, and the wide societal differences between then and now are all interpreted at Liberty Square. Military history isn't ignored, either. "Charleston's war didn't end with the bombardment of Fort Sumter," Rick notes. "It was under siege from 1863 to 1865, the longest siege of the Civil War!"

The history of nearby Morris Island, scene of the near suicidal assault on a Confederate redoubt by African American volunteers (depicted in the film *Glory*), is part of the story. Carlin developed a school program about it, which students participate in at the site in the springtime.

Visitors are the chief beneficiaries of the new approach. Nearly a million a year pass through Liberty Square, and about 300,000 ride the ferry out to



Charleston has a long, complex history with critical roles in the slave trade, secession, and a turbulent post-war reconstruction. The exhibits and interpreters shy from none of it. "At Sumter, we can make anybody mad," says the interpretation chief.

the fort. They come from all over the United States, from many foreign countries, from all segments of society.

"When we first opened, there was some negative reaction to our interpretation of the war's causes, but that was always a minority view," Fran says. "Right now the reaction is almost entirely positive."

Some of that minority viewpoint was expressed when the Union flag was exhibited at Liberty Square. The staff fielded some tough comments from a few visitors angry that the Confederate flag wasn't displayed as well. The Union flag was exhibited alone simply because it's in the park's collections, and none of the Confederate banners are.

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But they also inform, challenge, and deepen understanding of some of our country's most perilous times.

Charleston's experience pretty well sums up what's happened at other sites with updated exhibits and interpretation. Woody Harrell, superintendent of Shiloh and Corinth battlefields in Tennessee and Mississippi, is responsible for interpretation at both the Shiloh visitor center at Pittsburg Landing, renovated and updated in 1990, and the brand new Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center.

Woody explains to me that the Shiloh center is "for the most part about objects. The topics we interpret include battlefield medicine, weapons, and munitions; the story of the 1862 military campaign; the battle of Shiloh."

A late 1950s film detailing the battle, one of the longest running in the parks, spools continuously. While there are plenty of anachronisms, the story is essentially accurate. And as Woody notes, "A lot of local folks and regulars are deeply attached to that film!"

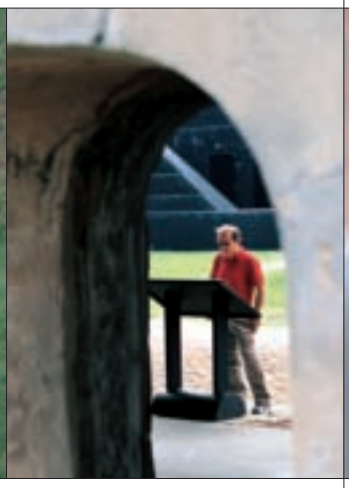
At Shiloh, the park continues to interpret the strategic details of one of the war's most climactic battles. At Corinth, the war is the focus, with the causes, including slavery, discussed in detail.

Exhibits, which include the fiery, unequivocal language of the Articles of Secession, explain the significance of the rail crossroads, and the Union's aggressive attempts to capture it, setting the stage for the furious battle at Shiloh Church 23 miles north.

The exhibits also focus on the enormous contraband camp for escaped slaves, established after the town fell to the Union. The camp, a model for others operated by the northern army, included a school, church, commissary, housing, and medical facilities for a community of at least 20,000. Two regiments of African American troops were raised here before the camp closed in 1864.

In the first year of operation, visitors have responded with great enthusiasm. "Maybe two in a thousand have anything negative to say," Woody says. "So far it's been an overwhelming success."

He says that the center fulfills a critical need. "Today's secondary school graduates aren't as well versed in the nation's history as their grandparents. Competing against a broad curriculum, the



Above left: History you can touch at Fort Sumter. **Above center:** The fort's interpretation focuses on the battle, with the context set by the exhibit at the harbor visitor center.

Above: Rounding up stragglers for the ferry back across Charleston harbor. **Right:** Bombarding the fort, below; on the receiving end, above.


Fort Sumter National Monument
South Carolina
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Epilogue

"Since these exhibits went in I'm seeing inner-city, African American teachers and classes visiting here in large numbers for the first time," says the interpretation chief . . . More Union colored regiments fought here than in any other theater of war, winning 14 Medals of Honor in the assault of New Market Heights in 1864.

Civil War seems to get precious little time." Woody points to new exhibits at Stone's River and Chickamauga as other noteworthy examples of the interpretive trend—sites that, like his, are trying to close the education gap.

THE SUMMER HEAT HERE ALONG THE JAMES RIVER IS BREATHTAKING, EVEN WELL BEFORE NOON. I'm in the former Confederate capital to have a look at the visitor center at Richmond National Battlefield Park, housed in the remnants of an old industrial complex. Viewed from the parking lot along the riverfront, the building is an imposing red brick structure that retains the muscle of its original identity. This was once a great iron works and munitions factory, which cast over a thousand cannon along with making small arms, ammunition, and plating for ironclads.

The Tredegar Iron Works was the beating heart of the South's war effort, a heart that kept pumping up to the mid-20th century as one of city's principal industries. In this place, the reality of the war was not the shriek of battle, but the din of trip hammers and the grit of foundry labor. Interpretive signs explain the foundry process and Tredegar's role in Richmond's long history before, during, and after the war.

Inside are three floors of insightful exhibits, opened in 2000. The first floor offers a history of Richmond and the battles around it in 1862, 1864, and 1865, with a video and displays of armaments and munitions, some made here. The second floor has maps and visiting suggestions for the battlefields. Yet it's the third floor that really captures the city in time of war.

A wealth of objects and photographs resonates with the ambiance of distressed floors and rough-hewn rafters. An audio called "Richmond Speaks" echoes off the worn brick walls, spinning the city's tale of conflict with a transporting narrative. Images appear and fade, with voiced excerpts from letters and diaries evoking life in the besieged capital. A clerk, too old to go to the front, surmises what must be happening in the trenches while the wounded and amputees walk the streets. A soldier from a Union colored regiment enters the conquered city and for the first time since infancy encounters his mother. A nurse at the Chimborazo Hospital loses her squeamishness at death and suffering, and wonders at the transformation. A Georgia captain writes to his wife, pouring out longing and loneliness and rage at an unknown thief who made off with his only photograph of her.

Left, right: Exhibits at Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works reflect the ruinous reality just outside. Above: Students learn the war chapter and verse thanks to a guide by Ranger Pat Ferrell, keyed to the site; the reward: becoming a Junior Ranger.

There is great power here. These aren't bronzed heroes, they're folks like you and me, with the hot breath of war swirling around them.

After my tour, I spend a little time with Dave Ruth, the chief of interpretation and assistant superintendent. He's been here for 14 years. When I ask about the changes, he says the evolution has been one of addition rather than replacement. "We're still interpreting the details of battlefield history and strategy as we always did. But the story of the war here is very complex. We're telling more of it than ever before, in our exhibits and through our interpreters."

Through the conflict, Richmond remained a city of civilians, and their stories are as compelling as those of the sol-

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—John Latschar, Superintendent, Gettysburg National Battlefield

Visitor Voices

Richmond exhibit-goers speak up on what the war means to them

"The Civil War was fought to defend the rights of all human beings. Slavery has been around since the beginning of time and still is today. You can capture and restrain the body of a man, but you can never contain his soul."

"History is essential. Ignorance is dangerous."

"How could it seem so right then and so wrong now. What a waste of young lives."

"I am proud to be a southerner. The slaves should have been freed and the South should have seceded. Freedom should have been given to all who wanted it, slaves and southerners alike."

"These men had the tenacity and perseverance to go through anything for their viewpoint . . . as an African American, I understand wanting no man to force me to do anything, but I don't know many who stand firmly in their beliefs today . . . freedom [is a] right of choice, but they could not see that for black America."

"Madness and arrogance override reason."

"The Civil War means freedom to me. I am the granddaughter of a fourth-generation freed slave from North Carolina."

"It is amazing that it all occurred with such devastation and that a strong nation has emerged. Unbelievable!!!"

"A vicious, catastrophic war, but one that had to be fought, or most likely the United States would not be the great nation it is today."

"Visited on election day 2004. In the midst of a divisive election often called 'the most important of our lives,' it is good to reflect on the unfathomable divisions and consequences that we have survived as a nation . . . God Bless America."

Right: Richmond's war-era works on a warm August evening along the James River, with the statue of Lincoln and his son, below.

diers and political leaders. The city was home to Chimborazo, the largest Confederate hospital for the wounded. All this history is woven into the new approach, the goal a comprehensive picture.

"In general, reaction to the new exhibits, and to the work of our interpreters, has been overwhelmingly positive," Dave says. "Annual visitation is running about 66,000, and we've had very few complaints." Almost a third of visitors are Virginia school kids and their teachers. That's a point of pride for the park. "Since these exhibits went in I'm seeing inner-city, African American teachers and classes visiting here in large numbers for the first time," says the interpretation chief.

The foundry workers were a mix of slaves and white immigrants. More Union colored regiments fought here than in any other theater of war, winning 14 Medals of Honor in the assault of New Market Heights in 1864.

The public reaction is perhaps best expressed at an unobtrusive comment box near the entrance, where the question is posed: "What does the Civil War mean to you?" There is a persistent minority of strident comments about some of the exhibits, but most are thoughtful and often moving [see sidebar]. Surely the proof of effectiveness is in that box.

As I leave, I stop to view the most controversial addition. In 2003, a statue of Abraham Lincoln was erected just outside the entrance. Before its unveiling, there were threats of protest and vigorous complaints from southern heritage organizations. They may have feared a depiction of Lincoln, who toured the city with his young son Todd just a few days after it fell, as a conquering hero with his foot on the neck of a defeated South.

On a bench before me is a life-size bronze that captures a moment of contemplative serenity that any father would recognize instantly. There is no conqueror here, only a quiet man and a small boy.

There's still the occasional complaint, but in general the anger melted away.

"The Civil War was fought to defend the rights of all human beings. Slavery has been around since the beginning of time and still is today. You can capture and restrain the body of a man, but you can never contain his soul." —Visitor Comment, Richmond National Battlefield Park

JOHN LATSCHAR USHERS ME INTO HIS OFFICE ON AN afternoon full of thunderstorms to talk about the challenges of implementing the 1990 legislation that defined the interpretive mission at Gettysburg. John, superintendent since 1994, is a combat veteran with a palpable empathy for the soldiers who fought in the battle. He also holds a doctorate in history. He's a thoughtful, informed, and eloquent advocate for the park. Given the controversy that inevitably accompanies any attempt to change holy ground, it's helpful that John has a thick skin and a droll sense of humor.

The legislation, and the park's more recent general management plan, have guided efforts to tell Gettysburg's story. These efforts led to a set of themes, which include the reasons for the war and its consequences. John received emails urging him not to "dishonor the memory" of the fallen "in the pursuit of political correctness and revisionist history."

The efforts also led to the decision to replace the historic Cyclorama building with a new visitor center. Many long-time visitors, apprehensive of changes, are attached to the venerable structure. The preservation community has been vocal in opposition.

John seems to be taking it in stride. "You always seem to get more negative reaction to what's proposed than to what's actually implemented. I'm pretty confident that when the new facilities are open in 2007, people will like what we've done."

He has ready explanations for the changes. While the park will continue to interpret battle tactics, interpretation doesn't stop there now and won't stop there in the future. "To paraphrase John Keegan, the pre-eminent British military historian, 'An army is an expression of the society from which it issues,'" John says. "There's no way to understand the battle front without understanding the home front."

If the decision to expand interpretation was straightforward, the decision to demolish the Cyclorama building was tough. The structure has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Three factors led to the decision: inadequate climate control for the painting, which has been moisture damaged; not enough space to properly hang it; and the location on Cemetery Ridge, atop the Union position that repulsed the Confederate assault on July 3, 1863, one of the nation's most significant pieces of landscape. As John noted in a letter to a concerned citizen, "the preservation of the battlefield itself is our highest and most important priority."

Ground has been broken for the new center, away from the battle site. Developed with the nonprofit Gettysburg National Battlefield Museum Foundation, it will be large enough to properly display the painting, as well as greatly expand space for exhibits and collections. Much of the battlefield is being restored to 1863, to help visitors understand the conflict's ebb and flow and give a feel for south-central Pennsylvania of the day.

NEAR THE END OF THE INTERVIEW, I FOUND MYSELF ASKING A QUESTION THAT OCCURRED DURING my bicycle tour. I was peddling along the eastern flank of Little Round Top, a place of some significance. Everyone who watched Ken Burns' documentary remembers the struggle atop this rocky, wooded hill, a struggle for the existence of the Union Army.

After repulsing repeated Confederate assaults, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, a bookish professor with no formal military education or experience before the war, ordered his men to fix bayonets on their now-empty rifles and counterattack down the slope. The Confederates, shocked and surprised, retreated. The army was saved.

It's one of those tales of gallantry that can mask the reality of all those young men lying butchered or badly hurt among these trees and rocks. As I biked along, the gunfire and shouting just an old echo in the woods, I wondered what we should take away from all that bloodshed in long-ago America.

John pauses and looks out his window at a black thunderhead bearing down on the visitor center. He says the answer is in the last election. "The philosophical divisions were profound, even unbridgeable. There were huge regional differences in how people thought and voted. It was in some ways not unlike the election of 1860."

"But you know what? The morning after, about half of us were elated, and the other half of us were angry and bitter, and all of us just got ourselves up, and went off to work. There was no serious talk anywhere of secession or taking up arms against our own countrymen. There was no bloodshed. We don't do that sort of thing anymore."

John turns and looks me in the eye. "That's what the sacrifice of all of those soldiers gave us. We owe them a debt, every last one of them."

For more information on Fort Sumter, contact Fran Norton, (843) 883-3123, ext. 23, fran_norton@nps.gov, or visit the park's web site at www.nps.gov/fosu. At Shiloh, contact Woody Harrell, (731) 689-5275, ext. 24, woody_harrell@nps.gov, or visit www.nps.gov/shil. For Richmond National Battlefield Park, contact Dave Ruth, (804) 226-1981, dave_ruth@nps.gov, or visit www.nps.gov/rich. At Gettysburg, contact John Latschar, (717) 334-1124, john_latschar@nps.gov, or go to www.nps.gov/gett. Reach the author at (717) 705-1482, joebear81@aol.com.

Far and near left: The Gettysburg battlefield is a living landscape of memorials to the fallen.