"I have colleagues who endlessly berate their undergraduates for how stupid they are. You’re not going to go anywhere from that point. As a teacher you meet people where they are. You begin the journey there. You look for the teachable moments when the past isn’t the past anymore. When it’s real people making real choices about real problems."


WILLIAM CRONON: THE PROBLEM IS THE PAST IS INFINITE. FOR ME historical literacy is more an inquiring backward, where we are on a journey to reach the place we’re in today.

The parks are brilliant for helping people make that journey. You thought this person or this place or this event was important. Now let’s figure out why it’s actually even more important or more interesting, more curious, more wonderful than you ever imagined. The burrowing deeper, the peeling back of the layers—that’s part of the entertainment and part of the education.

PATRICIA LIMERICK: I CONSIDER IT A GREAT SUCCESS IF A STUDENT comes out of a class believing the people of the past were fully alive. There’s a story about a little boy taken to see the Supreme Court in session. He’s sitting with his father listening to the attorneys argue. A fly comes into the chamber, buzzes around, and lands on one of the justices, who reaches to brush it off. And the boy grabs his father’s sleeve and says, “Look, one of the judges is alive!” That’s victory number one. The second challenge is getting across that change is contingent, improbable, unpredictable. We do not ride through time on a conveyor belt. We do not inherit trends to follow.

William Cronon is Professor, History, Geography, and Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin; Patricia Limerick is Professor of History and Environmental Studies, University of Colorado; Michael Kammen is Newton C. Farr Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell University and a member of the National Park System Advisory Board; Larry Rivers is President, Fort Valley State University, and a member of the National Park Service Advisory Board; Eric Foner is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History, Columbia University; Richard West is Founding Director, Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian; William Kornblum is Chair, Center for Urban Research, City University of New York, and Chief, National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit; Edward Linenthal is Professor of History at the University of Indiana and Editor of the Journal of American History; William Baker is President and CEO of New York PBS station WNET and a member of the National Park System Advisory Board.

LEFT LINCOLN’S WRITING DESK, THE LINCOLN HOME NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE IN SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS.
"As much as I’d like to say the answer is get them off the computer and into a park, audiences of the future have to see themselves in these places, too. But it takes commitment. You have to understand the magnitude of the task and be willing to bite it off."

RICHARD WEST: I hate to come off as a slight dissenter. But somehow institutions, if they’re going to have books into diverse generations, have to transform themselves from the inside. That’s a long-range proposition.

As much as I’d like to say the answer is get them off the computer and into a park, audiences of the future have to see themselves in these places, too. But it takes commitment. You have to understand the magnitude of the task and be willing to bite it off.

WILLIAM KORNBLUM: Yes, the more you engage the person when they’re young, the more likely they are to engage others in the future. One of the most moving experiences I’ve had in the last few years was at the Lincoln Home in Springfield, Illinois. And there was a little kid next to me who said to his parents, “Look at that little desk. How did he get himself down into it?” And that started a conversation right there in the room. I’m going to start crying here because it was so moving, this child wanting to know more about Lincoln writing at that desk.

We talk about teachable moments. Now this kid is going to bring his children and his grandchildren to this place to try to have that experience.

EDWARD LINenthal: The late Shaike Weinberg, former director of the Holocaust Museum, always described the museum as a story. And I don’t know if this has changed, but the average time a visitor spends in a museum on the Mall is something like 45 minutes. The average time a visitor spends in the Holocaust Museum is 2½ hours. My oldest son, a normal 14-year-old, spent 3½ hours in the permanent exhibition.

At the Little Big Horn, when the name was changed from the Custer Battlefield National Monument, that made a real difference because people felt they had a stake in the story. Former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell came and said, “I feel now like I belong here.”

RICHARD WEST: The power of the story, the fact that you’re so moved by what you saw, is because it has great personal resonance to you. It is this experience of inquiry, beginning with a person’s experience, that can be taken somewhere else, expanded. And frankly the person...
"At the Little Big Horn, when the name was changed from the Custer Battlefield National Monument, that made a real difference because people felt they had a stake in the story. Former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell came and said, ‘I feel now like I belong here.’"

WILLIAM BAKER: We understand that media are very critical, meaning television, radio, Internet, print, etcetera. We have to get into the drinking water where the Park Service used to be. Especially when

may leave with questions rather than answers when they walk out the door. The questions may be every bit as important.

MICHAEL KAMMEN: The book The Presence of the Past surveyed 1,500 people about how they got engaged by history. The majority response was, “My family.” I hate to admit it, but there were six categories and school was at the bottom. It was the least interesting and least trusted.

WILLIAM CRONON: I want to come back to the word enjoyment. I think the word is a little misleading because it tempts us into Disney space. Nobody enjoys the Holocaust Museum. All human beings, but

small controversies wind up being amplified in wrong ways. So the committee challenged the people in the Service itself. We want to create a show, which we are working on, with the title “National Park Stories.” We have professionals in the television business working on it.

In public TV, games are powerful ways to bring young kids into learning. There may be ways to use the website for that purpose.

RICHARD WEST: At the National Museum of the American Indian, very early on we created what we refer to as the fourth museum. That is our effort to bring the museum beyond its boundaries through a spectrum of means.

You can’t always expect everybody to come to a national park, but consider the educational resources that already sit within the National Park System. There are all kinds of possibilities.

"We can restore, we can co-exist in the flight pattern of the biggest airplanes we can get up in the air. It shows students ‘I can make a difference. I can make a difference in my own backyard.’”

William Kornblum, Chair, Center for Urban Research, City University of New York, and Chief, National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit

I teach a course for undergraduates in problems of the American environment. We start with a modern classic, William Cronon’s Changes in the Land. And we encounter the problem you always encounter. The subject produces a great deal of melancholy. It’s a fundamental problem studying the human relationship to this planet. It threatens to turn students off, threatens to turn them back to the world of the video game, where they have a lot more mastery. How do you deal with the problem?

We take a trip to the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, one of those very moving places in contemporary environmental history because students have within their own city a genuine refuge you can get to by the subway or bus. A quarter of mile from the train station and they’re at Jamaica Bay, where major jets are landing at Kennedy and birds are landing in the ponds.

It’s a storied place in National Park Service history, in part a catalyst for the creation of Gateway National Recreation Area. Just the way Alcatraz and some of the other sites at Golden Gate were the catalysts for the creation of that super-important urban park system. But more than that it’s the story of human agency in the environment, because it was created by a park maintenance man named Herb Johnson, who worked under Robert Moses, then commissioner of parks and housing in New York City and State.
"The creation of the Central Park Conservancy added people to t
park—zone gardeners are taking care of 15 or 20 parts of it, so the public sees the place coming back to life. They see new interpretive resources. The private money is spent in ways that are transparent, that the public can see.”

Johnson purloined a bulldozer, put up some berms, and impounded fresh water. Lo and behold there were two fresh water ponds in the middle of the bay, in the middle of a big salt marsh ecosystem on Broad Channel Island, which was basically a landfill. He had permission from Moses but he went beyond that. He was an amateur ornithologist, so he did all these plantings to attract the upland birds, the migratory waterfowl. So there it is—this magnificent place.

It’s a story of the resiliency of nature. We can restore, we can coexist in the flight pattern of the biggest airplanes we can get up in the air. It shows students “I can make a difference. I can make a difference in my own backyard.” I can plant plants to attract birds and butterflies. In a small way, this is a tonic to the melancholy. The Park Service addresses this problem of melancholia, too.

When people say to me the Park Service is getting bureaucratic, and that sometimes partnership is a surrogate word for privatizing the parks, I say you’ve got to take the long view. The view that takes in generations—and not just your children, but generations beyond your children. How will decisions made in the present affect the long view?

One of my major clients is Central Park. A lot of the people who created the park’s conservancy came out of experiences with the National Park Service—in the 1960s with the seashores and in the early 1970s with the urban parks. These are people who feel deeply but understand when budgets are limited.

When you ask if private arrangements are replacing vital resources, that question can be answered empirically. The creation of the Central Park Conservancy added people to the park—zone gardeners are taking care of 15 or 20 parts of it, so the public sees the place coming back to life. They see new interpretive resources. The private money is spent in ways that are transparent, that the public can see.

So when you’re talking about partnerships, it seems to me that transparency and evaluation—not just fuzzy rhetoric but empirical evidence—that’s what we scholar types look at. These are the questions that have to be answered to preserve these resources for generations.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. William Kornblum is the author of several books including At Sea in the City: New York from the Water’s Edge and Blue Collar Community. Contact Kornblum at the City University of New York, email wkornblum@gc.cuny.edu.

TYRANNY OF THE WITNESS

Historical perspective can be difficult in the aftermath of events like the Oklahoma City bombing, particularly when deciding how to memorialize a site where 168 people died. Edward Linenthal, professor of history at the University of Indiana and author of The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory, met with members of a 350-person task force that wrestled with the issue, many who lost family members.

Linenthal observes that the “tyranny of the witness” is often problematic when those seared with violence become part of memorial projects. Yet, in Oklahoma City, people soon realized that if they wanted the process to succeed, they had to move beyond deep convictions that only their design could properly memorialize a loved one. They had to join with others to envision a more expansive function of memorialization. “It was a majestic process,” he says, “because a number of people who had never played such a role before found their public voice—and in some cases became energetically involved in the civic community.”

Together, the group transcended individual ideals, creating a memorial that brings visitors directly into the reality of April 19, 1995. Linenthal, also author of Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum, says that though everyone is a potential stakeholder in such sites—as part of the American fabric—scholars, museum experts, archivists, and other professionals must be key players because they can capture the often elusive objective perspective.

"There was a man with three children reading an inscription about passing down the value of sacrifice to future generations. And he said, 'Do you know what that means? That means that the people here have sacrificed for you, so you could be free.' And he opened up his wallet [and] pulled out a dollar bill and turned to the Great Seal of the United States, and proceeded to show how the same symbols were on the monument."

Charlene Mires, Associate Professor of History, Villanova University

Perhaps my current interest in history and memory comes from a visit to Fort Ticonderoga at about the age of 10. I have a distinct memory of a reenactment that involved weapons firing. When the historically accurate means of igniting the weapons failed, the re-enactor pulled a Zippo lighter from his pocket. I don’t remember much from the visit, but I do remember that.

Parks are implicitly educational in allowing us to come to insights about the relationships between past and present. I was reminded of this again a few weeks ago when a colleague and I went to visit Ford’s Theatre. Here were two grownups, with way too much education, walking up the steps to the president’s box—and instinctively we start to creep like John Wilkes Booth.

Education in the parks happens in unstructured and unexpected ways. In 2002, I spent some time observing visitors at Valley Forge. One cold and rainy Saturday afternoon, I was near the Washington Memorial Arch, a 60-foot granite triumphal arch sitting rather incongruously in the park landscape—a Roman-style tribute dedicated in 1917. It’s covered with inscriptions about sacrifice and patriotism and the iconography of the nation.
EMBRACING RELIGION

"Religion is a razor's edge," says Edward Linenthal, editor of the Journal of American History as well as professor of history at the University of Indiana. Few subjects are as volatile and polarizing and yet religion is intricately bound up with the past. But whenever the subject comes up, he says, "eyes glaze over and excuses are made—it's too difficult to talk about."

What role should religion play in interpreting the past? Who owns the truth about it? The authority of historians, scholars, and other professionals is frequently contested by those who fervently believe in their own versions of history. Says Linenthal, "One would not dream of balancing a board of planners at the Holocaust Museum with Holocaust deniers, of balancing geologists with creationists. And yet at the Grand Canyon bookstore at least, just this issue has raised its head."

Linenthal says that examining the role of religion in American history could be one of the most exciting interpretive efforts ever. If civic engagement means anything, he adds, it means talking about the things that really matter, like religion. It is too important to ignore.

"Of course, there could be enormous pressure to use interpretive programs as cultural capital," he says. "Is the Park Service ready to tell how religion has been mobilized in American society in ways both comforting and horrifying? Is the public ready? It's a central challenge if we're really serious about telling the American story."

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. Charlene Mires is the author of Independence Hall in American Memory. Her previous work as a journalist earned her a shared Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for general local reporting. Contact Mires at Villanova University, email charlene.mires@villanova.edu.
“The parks were my classroom. They were where I learned about the American land; where I learned about the American people; where I learned about the American nation; where I learned my love of being an American. And I put it this way to remind you that one of the missions of the National Park Service is to be a school of American nationalism—to teach the love of the United States.”

William Cronon, Professor, History, Geography, and Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin
“You are the keepers of our myths, not myths in the false sense of the word but myths in the true sense of the word, the things that embody the deepest values that Americans have struggled with each other over and that they hold dear.”

Controversy is about an opportunity to make values come alive again. If we try to finesse by coming up with a bland interpretation, we kill the past the same way textbooks do. One of the reasons kids don’t remember is that textbooks usually are horribly boring with no connection to them. Unfortunately some of your interpretations are that way, too. You commit the same sins that academics do in going for the least common denominator instead of going for the passionate story. What were they arguing about back then? What was so important?

SO A FEW TIPS. IT’S ALL ABOUT CONNECTIVITY, MAKING CONNECTIONS.
The things you are trying to interpret do not end at park boundaries. Don’t get locked in. Often the most important things are five miles outside the park. Just because you don’t control them doesn’t mean they’re not part of the narrative. If visitors keep your story going 200 miles past the boundaries, then you are interpreting the United States of America and not just a location you have bureaucratic control over.

The parks should connect to their surroundings, to the larger landscape, the larger history. They should connect to each other. You tend to interpret discretely when you have the makings of a pageant of America—if you could only connect the elements into a larger fabric. Narrate the entire system. Hard to do—don’t hear me say it’s easy. But I don’t think you’ve solved that one.

Connect nature with culture. The deep institutional divides in this agency have not served you well—and not served our nation well. They have not served nature well. They have not served history well. Your greatest opportunity is to interpret them together. So embrace environmental history as a core idea, not as a little add-on. It brings together your missions.

Connect past with present. Connect each of us with each other. Connect your visitors with the idea that the project of freedom is not finished. It will never finish. It cannot finish. We have to make it real each new day.

The history and the nature we encounter in the parks are about the future we’re building together, one that reminds us we are Americans together in this shared enterprise. That’s the core message the national parks should seek to engage.

So all power to you, keep up the good work.


William Cronon is the award-winning author of Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England and Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West. He is also the editor of Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature. Contact Cronon at the University of Wisconsin, email wcroron@wisc.edu.
When it opened in 1926, Maui’s Hana Belt Road was a wonder to behold. “Spectacularly chiseled out of abrupt cliffs and precipitous valleys,” is how one early observer described it. Local newspapers credited “dare devil exploits” for its unlikely completion, the result a breathtaking vision of plunging canyons, tropical wilderness, narrow waterfalls, and mountains that dropped straight to the Pacific Ocean. The new road freed East Maui from centuries of isolation. The village of Hana, perched between the Pacific and the rim of the giant Haleakula volcano, was separated from the rest of the island by impassable terrain. Travelers who wanted to go to the eastern side of the island had to take a week-long trek by steamer. The Hana Belt Road was part of an island-wide effort to build a new road system. It was a staggering engineering feat that inspires wonder even today. The hairpin turns, precipitous drops, and incredible vistas are one of Maui’s main attractions. The Historic American Engineering Record of the National Park Service documented the Hana Belt Road in summer 2005, producing measured drawings, large-format photographs, and a written history. The road retains much of its historic character, and the HAER team captured its bridges, culverts, and retaining walls in great detail. The images and drawings will be part of the Library of Congress’ collection, Built in America, online at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/. For more information, contact Todd Croteau, todd_croteau@nps.gov.
The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

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—John Hope Franklin, keynote speaker,
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