

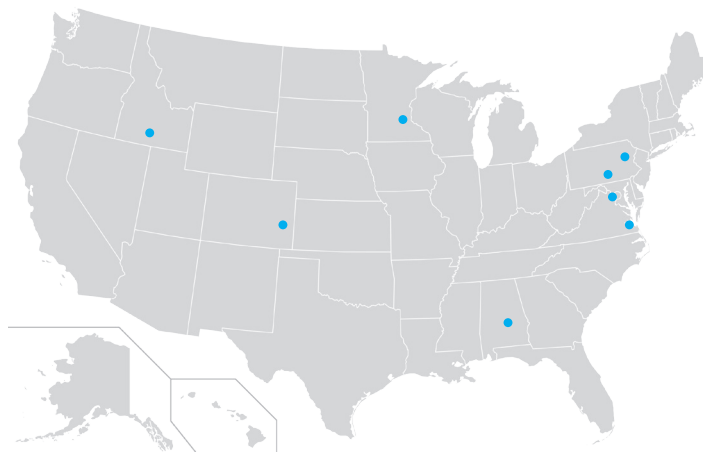
BACK TO THE BATTLEFIELDS:
HISTORIANS TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT AMERICAN SITES OF CONFLICT

BACK to the BATTLEFIELDS: *An Introduction*

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The genesis of this themed issue began two years ago when Dave Harmon and I convened a series of conversations with former National Park Service (NPS) historians to discuss ideas for a set of articles on battlefield preservation and new re-interpretive efforts taking place at several Civil War battlefield sites across the country. At the time, a public debate was raging over the removal of Confederate monuments and symbols, a process of reckoning with racial injustice that began shortly after June 17, 2015, when Dylann Roof, an avowed White supremacist, massacred nine African American congregants attending a Bible study session at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The pace of monument removal accelerated greatly after May 25, 2020, when Minneapolis police officers detained George Floyd, a Black man, on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill and then callously allowed him to die after one of them, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck for nearly 9 minutes. Polarized disagreement over monument removal turned decidedly uncivil, compounded by a seemingly unstoppable wave of police brutality incidents and racially motivated mass killings. By late 2020, the America landscape was pockmarked with new, and raw, battlefield sites that, to many, recalled the urban riots of the late 1960s.

The intersection of Chicago Avenue and East 38th Street in Minneapolis was closed for more than a year while protestors occupied the site to demand racial justice in America. Gradually, the murder-site-turned-protest-site transitioned into a public monument, which was officially designated as George Perry Floyd Square in 2022. While this transformation was taking place, the breadth of our thinking expanded beyond Civil War battlefield sites to encompass a wide range of sites of conflict: places where the civil rights of hyphenated Americans, Indigenous peoples, people of color, and immigrants have been forcibly contested.¹ Our thinking was shaped by an understanding that sites of conflict loom large in public history, and when public history is done well, dramatic moments from the past are connected to the lived experiences of current visitors.



Locations of the eight “Back to the Battlefields” sites. In the articles that follow, a version of this map appears on the second page, with the site being discussed shown as a red circle.

Likewise, our thinking was shaped by the phenomenal expansion of historic places represented in the National Park System, and, with the advent of the 21st century, a growing movement to recognize the educative potential of NPS units, particularly historic sites.² The NPS response has been halting, but nonetheless forward moving. Director’s Order #75A (*Civic Engagement and Public Involvement*)³ articulated a framework for NPS units and offices to establish civic engagement as an ongoing “dynamic conversation with the public on many levels that reinforces public commitment to the preservation of heritage resources, both cultural and natural, and strengthens public understanding of the full meaning and contemporary relevance of these resources.” Director’s Order #100 (*Resource Stewardship for the Twenty-first Century*)⁴ elevated the agency’s stewardship goal by enjoining NPS to “integrate natural and cultural resource management where beneficial to resource stewardship,” called for reliance on science and scholarship in resource management, and specifically recognized the value of Traditional Knowledge and perspectives held by Indigenous peoples. It also reaffirmed the “inclusive public engagement strategies” promulgated in D.O. #75A.

In early 2022, we issued invitations to a select group of scholars who had written penetratingly on sites of conflict and commemoration. We asked them to travel to a particular site and take a look at it in a reflective mode, pondering what led to the conflict memorialized at that place and reflecting on the site’s meaning and how it has changed over the years, how their own personal understanding of the site has evolved, and the site’s relevance to America’s current socio-political situation. We also gave them license to analyze how well interpretation at “their” site presents historic events within a broader historical context, connects lessons of the site’s story (or stories) to contemporary issues and concerns, and encourages meaningful engagement from diverse audiences. The essays contained in this section should be approached with this request in mind.

When we issued these invitations to scholars, we worried a bit that by the time their essays were published, the grip of cultural-political polarization plaguing America might have loosened, thus diminishing the relevance of what they had to say. We needn’t have been so concerned. Not only has that grip remained firm, but the polarization is more extreme. As this issue goes to publication, we are witnessing state after state pass legislation designed to promote a nostalgic, primarily White, vision of American history by prohibiting African American perspectives promulgated via The 1619 Project, directing teachers *not* to teach divisive history, and giving organized minority groups power to force the banning of “objectionable” books from K–12 libraries and classrooms. Never has the educative potential of historic places been so important, and never has it been so important for historic sites to collectively present the full panoply of American history. In this climate, we are grateful to offer scholarly perspectives on how effectively eight specific historic sites are meeting this potential.

Rebecca Conard is co-managing editor of *Parks Stewardship Forum*.

ENDNOTES

1. Many thanks to historian Laura Feller, who was an integral part of this evolution.
2. This movement has been driven both from within and without the Park Service, often through collaborative studies. See, for instance, *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Report* (2009), <https://www.npca.org/resources/1900-national-parks-second-century-commission-report>; *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (2011), https://www.oah.org/site/assets/files/10189/imperiled_promise.pdf; and *Achieving Relevance in Our Second Century* (2014), https://www.nps.gov/interp/IEV%20Strategic%20Plan_FINAL.pdf.
3. Mary Bomar, *Director's Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2003), <https://www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/75A.htm>.
4. Jonathan B. Jarvis, *Director's Order #100: Resource Stewardship for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2016), https://www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DO_100.htm. I include D.O. #100 even though Ryan Zinke, the first Secretary of the Interior appointed by President Donald Trump, rescinded the order on August 16, 2017, and it has not yet been reinstated because its spirit and policies are still operational under current Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland.



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GARY E. DAVIS