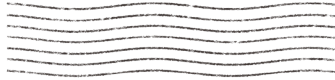




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



Humanities in Exile

ROLF DIAMANT

When I was superintendent of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, I was invited to a Boston event, where I received, on behalf of the park, an award from the Green Building Council (GBC). We had recently completed our education-oriented Forest Center, built with third-party (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood from the park's historic managed forest. Our new building had been given GBC's highest LEED rating, "Platinum," and we were quite proud of and honored by this recognition. At some point during the evening, one of the GBC organizers confessed to me that his organization was somewhat ambivalent about holding such award ceremonies. What was most important about the certification ranking system, from GBC's perspective, he explained, was not just the recognition of the highest achievers—those in the vanguard of change. Rather, GBC defined success, in relation to its mission, by the extent to which the organization was able to encourage gradual improvement in green construction across the board, particularly with those builders who often lagged far behind the curve. GBC's primary objective was incentivizing incremental positive changes in the building practices of those who were not part of a vanguard of early adopters, but who were encouraged nevertheless to do better. I came away from the evening with a nice plaque for the park, but more importantly, I gained a new appreciation for GBC's strategy to reach its desired outcomes—its "theory of change."

I recall this conversation, as I sit down to write this thirty-seventh Letter from Woodstock, reflecting on the turbulent life of one of the most ambitious partnership programs in the history of the US National Park System, the National

ARTICLE • BALLOT BLOCKED PODCAST

Ballot Blocked Episode 1: Service, Sacrifice, and Citizenship



An African American soldier in Union Army uniform sits with his family for a photograph. More than 180,000 African American men served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT) during the Civil War.

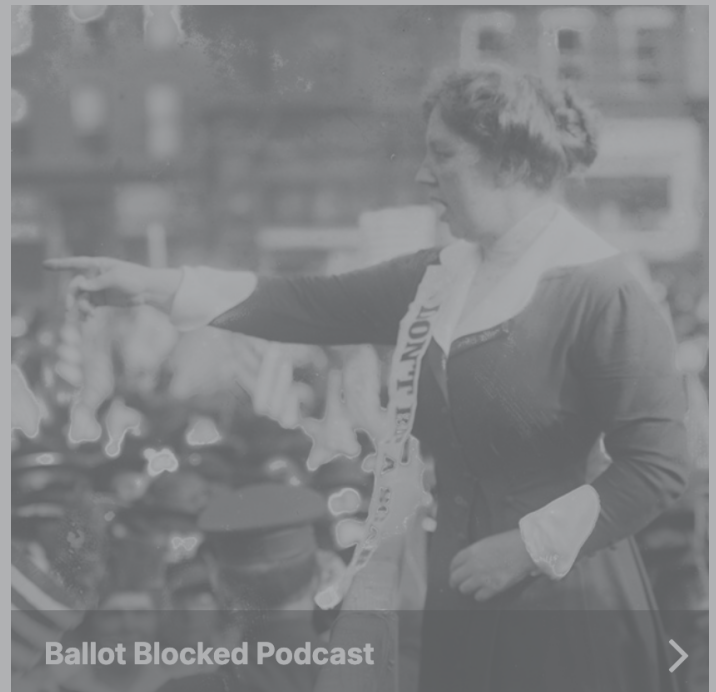
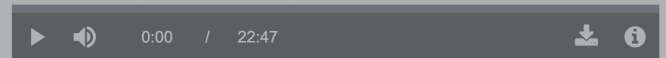
Library of Congress

This episode takes us to the 1860s and the period of the Civil War. The nineteenth amendment would not be ratified for another half century, but a lack of voting rights didn't stop women from being active in civic and political life. In Philadelphia, for example, free African American women played a critical role in supporting the Union Army.

To learn more about this wartime service, we interviewed Dr. Holly A. Pinheiro, Jr. His forthcoming book, *The Families' Civil War*, is under contract with the University of Georgia Press. Dr. Pinheiro's scholarship is focused on free African Americans living in Pennsylvania between about 1850 and 1930. It

examines the toll that enlistment in the Union Army took on soldiers and their families. His work also highlights the ways that Black women claimed civil and political rights, despite being denied access to the ballot.

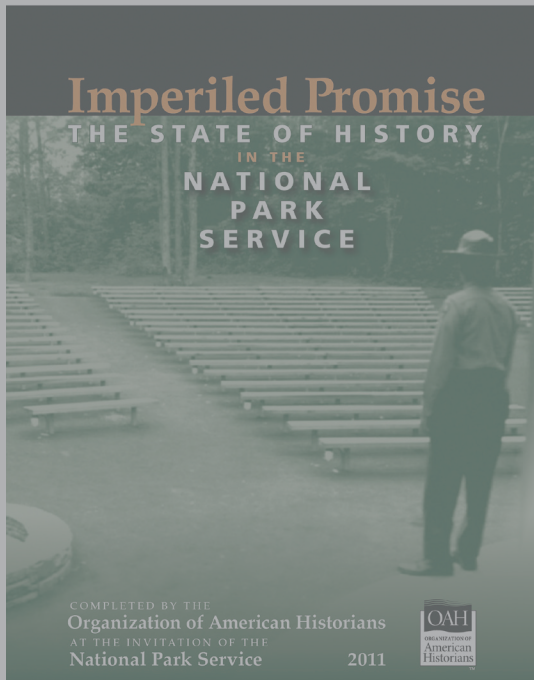
Ballot Blocked Episode 1: Service, Sacrifice, and Citizenship



Ballot Blocked Podcast

↑ "Ballot Blocked," Mellon Humanities Fellowship Program podcast

- ↓ Cover of the *Imperiled Promise* report
- ↓↓ “Digital Storytelling,” Mellon Humanities Fellowship Program project that includes podcasts, maps, and other materials
- ↓↓↓ “More to the Story,” Mellon Humanities Fellowship Program newsletter



Digital Storytelling >

The image shows the cover of a newsletter titled "MORE TO THE STORY" for "NOVEMBER 2025, ISSUE 3". The cover features a photograph of a long, low building with a flagpole flying the American flag in front of it, set against a backdrop of mountains. Text on the cover includes "ACE Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program Newsletter" and a compass rose logo. A sidebar on the right lists "In This Issue" with "Highlights: The latest from the ACE Mellon Humanities Program" and "Digital Humanities Projects: Blending Technology and Story".

Park Service (NPS) Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. Started in 2018, with generous Mellon Foundation funding and help from the National Park Foundation (NPF), the program grew to include 35 post-docs, recruited from a wide spectrum of disciplines related to public humanities, who were awarded two-year research appointments and competitively placed throughout the National Park System. The stated purpose of the program was to “help NPS better meet its mission to broaden and deepen historical interpretation,”² and make a “commitment to inclusive, community-based interpretive strategies”³ centered on new and refreshed research, particularly focused on those who have been under-represented in traditional histories. The initiative was in part conceived in response to the incisive 2011 Organization of American Historians report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*.⁴ The report urged NPS park interpreters and educators to offer more inclusive and comprehensive narratives based on the most up-to-date scholarship.

This theme issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* features interviews with several Fellows and updates on their current work. Their offerings are prefaced by an excellent introduction by program coordinators Eleanor Mahoney and Perri Meldon, and an evocative retrospective essay by Barbara Little, an early NPS champion of the fellowship idea. I encourage you to read everything.

Much of the turbulent history of the Mellon Fellowship Program is told by Little, Mahoney, and Meldon; I will not repeat it here. It is enough to say that the Mellon Fellowship, as a unitary program based in Washington that emphasized inclusive and diverse history, became a highly vulnerable target after the 2024 elections. Under pressure from the Trump Administration, NPS and NPF leadership abruptly cut all ties to the program. Fortunately, the Mellon Foundation is standing fast by its financial commitment, and despite official NPS defenestration and exile, the program is tenaciously clinging to life. Mahoney and Meldon have deftly steered the program past the shoals of this sudden and painful separation, while managing to support the morale, sustenance, and continued productivity of their many far flung post-docs. Their perseverance is nothing less than amazing.

I wish to conclude this brief letter with a few reflections of my own.

It is essential, no matter how it is accomplished, that former NPS host sites continue to have access to the Fellows’ research findings. If not

immediately usable, there will ultimately come a time when their work can inform NPS interpretive and educational programs and exhibits. Indeed, this is precisely one of the reasons why the publishers of *Parks Stewardship Forum* have stepped in to put out this special issue.

In this context, despite official NPS disengagement, the Mellon Fellows must not lose sight of their connection to, and their huge potential impact on, the National Park System. I recently attended a discussion panel of Mellon Fellows, facilitated by Mahoney and Meldon, at the George Wright Society workshop held in the fall of 2025 at the University of Montana. The panelists were upbeat, confident that they had found creative ways to continue their research, even in the absence of direct NPS involvement. In fact, several panelists went so far as to suggest that they were now free of certain constraints previously imposed on their work by NPS oversight. This may be the case, but it seems to me that such thinking overlooks one of the primary objectives of the fellowship. The individual research and original scholarship were always a means to an end, a way to open a door to greater use of humanities scholarship in NPS cultural resources management and interpretation, much as the research behind Richard West Sellars' landmark 1997 book, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*,⁵ served as a catalyst for the hugely impactful NPS Natural Resource Challenge.

In her *Parks Stewardship Forum* essay, Barbara Little, now retired, writes:

Ever since I joined NPS in 1992, I had constantly heard the “if only” statements in any conversation having to do with the interpretation of cultural resources. “If only” we had enough staff, research, expertise, funding, etc.⁶

The Mellon Humanities Fellowship is an example of what can be accomplished when enough “staff, research, expertise, and funding” are available. As part of a week-long onboarding process, which included an introduction to every relevant NPS office in Washington headquarters from the director on down, incoming Fellows also teamed up with a supporting cast of specialists in communications, interpretation and public engagement, evaluation, and especially digital

humanities. This is a thoughtful model for starting any new program in the future.

A thorough and independent evaluation, if not a brief administrative history, of the entire Mellon Humanities Fellowship—not just evaluations of individual projects—is essential. Despite Trump Administration efforts to disrupt and derail the Fellowship, there is much that can be learned from this remarkably resilient program.

In this context, there are a few questions I would also like to ask:

What is the Fellowship Program's theory of change? How did the program's original design and execution, based on selective infusion of knowledge by a vanguard of scholars, envision transforming NPS into a more humanities-oriented organization?

Was there consideration given to creating a formal or informal advisory group, either to cultivate support among key constituencies, serve as a sounding board, or to advocate on behalf of public humanities? Even now, when active NPS employees are barred from being directly involved, is there an opportunity to organize interested NPS retirees with strong contacts in the parks, as well as humanities professionals from allied organizations such as the National Council on Public History, to act in such an advisory capacity? I ask these questions because the program coordinators appear to be largely on their own right now. They are doing a commendable job, but the program would benefit from an invested advisory environment.

As Barbara Little points out, “meaning really matters,” now more than ever as we begin contemplating what a refoundation of NPS might look like after the Trump assaults have finally been stopped and the wreckage cleared away. Centering humanities scholarship in the mission of NPS is a refoundation undertaking of the highest importance. Similar to GBC's theory of change, the example set by the Mellon Fellows, demonstrating the value of up-to-date humanities scholarship, will eventually help motivate the steady improvement of historical interpretation throughout the National Park System.



ENDNOTES

1. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is described by GBC as “the world’s most widely recognized green building rating system.”
2. Barbara Little, “Some Thoughts about NPS, the Humanities, and the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program,” *Parks Stewardship Forum*, this issue.
3. Eleanor Mahoney and Perri Meldon, “Now and Here: Public Humanities and National Parks in Tumultuous Times—An Introduction,” *Parks Stewardship Forum*, this issue.
4. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians, 2011.)
5. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
6. Barbara Little, “Some Thoughts about NPS.”

The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley or the George Wright Society.