

FORT DAVIS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE: AN INDIAN FORT WITHOUT INDIANS

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ABSTRACT

National parks are selected as places of national importance, with national meaning. At the same time, the political process that shapes park management is often a local one. This biases park interpretation away from national concerns and toward local ones. The National Park Service's corporate interests and decision-making processes often reinforce the role of local interests except in the rare cases of congressional intervention. A close look at the political environment of Fort Davis National Historic Site, Texas, illustrates these points. Congress mandated the site to interpret westward expansion and its impact on American Indians. It became instead a program of park interpretation based on westward expansion and the role of African-American "Buffalo Soldiers" within it. As a result, Indians have effectively been written out of the story of this "Indian fort." Interestingly, Native American issues reappear in commercial establishments, both the gift shop in the park and businesses in the town of Fort Davis outside the park. If businesses perceive a demand for information about Native Americans among tourists, presumably there is a similar, unmet demand among the same tourists as they visit the historic site. Given the role of local concerns in park interpretation, national intervention will probably be necessary to provide political support for reinterpreting the site.

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1 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, wearing a U.S. Cavalry uniform, appears on screen
 in the auditorium at Fort Davis National Historic Site (FDNHS). The
 3 basketball great is not normally associated with historical interpretation,
 but as an African-American his presence signals the visitor that the “Buffalo
 5 Soldiers,” African-American cavalrymen in the West, will play a major role
 in the story of Fort Davis.

7 In contrast, Indians are nearly invisible at this “Indian Fort.” Though the
 film mentions the Indians against whom the soldiers fought, the story of
 9 Fort Davis is clearly the story of U.S. soldiers, both black and white. At the
 end of the film, Abdul-Jabbar admits that the present generation might see
 11 the fort as a symbol of a “tragic conflict” – but he immediately says that this
 modern view should not diminish the honor of the soldiers who served their
 13 country there, for whom the Fort serves as a memorial. The Apaches and
 Comanches on the other side of this tragic conflict are thus written out of
 15 the story.

In contrast to the park’s official presentation, written histories of Fort
 17 Davis give the Indians a role in the story. Unofficial interpretation at the
 site, and in the town of Fort Davis more generally, highlights the Indians
 19 even more. Bookstores and gift shops in the town of Fort Davis make
 Native Americans more visible than the Park Service does. These
 21 commercial sites apparently respond to the changing interests of the
 American public without being subject to the political environment in which
 23 the National Park Service (NPS) operates.

This Indian removal at FDNHS is puzzling given the visibility that Native
 25 stories receive elsewhere, such as the Nez Perce and Navajo sites, or
 battlefields such as Little Bighorn. Explaining the peculiarities of Fort Davis
 27 requires looking at the historical construction of the park narrative,
 grounded in a particular time and place. The key finding is the central role
 29 of *local* politics in shaping the interpretation of an ostensibly *national* park.
 Locals lobby for “their” park, volunteer in that park, donate to that park,
 31 and complain if interpretation does not match their expectations. Local
 advocates view Fort Davis as a memorial to the westward expansion of the
 33 United States, and the NPS delivers this.

More generally, this study points to the role of local politics in shaping
 35 national parks. Studies of Mount Rainier National Park (Catton, 2006) and
 Golden Gate National Recreation Area (Rothman, 2004) have also
 37 highlighted the role of local communities, but this issue has only gradually
 become more widely visible in the literatures on the national park system.
 39 The literature on other memorials on monuments has, in contrast, been
 more aware of the local nature of historical interpretation (Foote, 1997;

Loewen, 1999, pp. 29–36). Since many national parks play an important role in the construction of history, identity, and national community (for Yellowstone, see Denzin, 2008), this local role in national interpretation has wider implications for Americans’ understanding of their past and present.

POLITICAL ISSUES IN PARK INTERPRETATION

“Interpretation” is how the NPS conveys the meaning of an object or site to its visitors (Tilden, 1957). It may serve educational or recreational purposes, depending on the visitor and the site (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2002, p. 240). These explanations of meaning are especially important for historical parks such as FDNHS, since natural beauty or recreational opportunities interpret themselves to some degree (Mackintosh, 1986, p. 18). Interpretation also provides the main form of communication between the agency and its visitors. Because the NPS believes that interpretation helps provide political support for the agency and the parks, it devotes considerable staff to the activity.

The NPS imagines this interpretation as an exchange between itself, as an expert, and the interested visitor or school group. Information moves in only one direction, from park to visitor, though the NPS likes to imagine this as a “conversation” (see Tilden, 1957, chap. 2). While the NPS believes that good interpretation should provoke the visitor, the NPS never expects the visitor to provoke the interpreter, nor to inform or persuade the expert of the value of park resources. Visitors’ political views, similarly, may be challenged or reinforced by interpretation, but those views are not allowed to challenge the interpretation. Indeed, visitors’ views that differ from NPS views must be changed through education (Rikoon & Albee, 1998, pp. 208–209).

From a social-scientific perspective, this interaction also occurs in a political or social context. NPS staff bring their own disciplinary training and professional identity to the task of designing and delivering interpretive messages. At the same time, these experts work for a government agency that responds to a political environment, both national and local. National politicians may want a particular message delivered, and both tourists and locals may resist certain messages.

Interpreting the U.S. Civil War presents a good illustration of the interplays here (Sutton, 2008). Most battles occurred in Confederate states, where local communities and their politicians often identify with the

1 Confederacy. These people often subscribe to the “Lost Cause” interpreta-
2 tion of the Civil War, and refuse to acknowledge slavery as a key element in
3 the states’ rights issue. In contrast, park staff often have disciplinary training
4 in history that recognizes the role of slavery in the decision to secede from
5 the Union.

6 In this environment, mentioning slavery as “a possible cause” of the
7 conflict could lead to political firestorms – one park superintendent reports
8 getting over 1,100 cards and letters in protest after doing exactly this. To
9 avoid such opposition, the NPS used to avoid talking about the causes of
10 the Civil War. Intervention by national politicians changed the interpretive
11 message. Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) obtained legislation to
12 require that the NPS consult outside historians about the causes of the war.
13 This national action gave the service the political push to change its
14 interpretation at Civil War sites and to resist local opposition (see Jackson,
15 2001).

16 That kind of national intervention also occurred at Little Bighorn
17 Battlefield National Monument (Greene, 2008). Congress forced a change in
18 name from Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1991 and encouraged a
19 more balanced interpretation of both sides in the battle. These changes faced
20 strong opposition from the main cooperating association, the Custer
21 Battlefield Historical and Museum Association (CBHMA). The CBHMA
22 had run the bookstore, which generated profits of over \$100,000 a year for
23 park projects of which it approved. The CBHMA also had a strong pro-
24 Custer stance, and the association had refused to stock books such as Dee
25 Brown’s famous *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. The political conflict
26 over the new name and interpretative perspective ultimately produced new,
27 or newly purposed, affiliated associations, including the Little Big Horn
28 Associates (LBHA), the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee (CBPC),
29 and Friends of the Little Bighorn Battlefield (FLBB). The NPS expelled
30 CBHMA from the bookstore, and signed a memorandum of understanding
31 with the FLBB to run the bookstore in 1998. As in the Civil War case, high-
32 level political intervention brought about changes to politically charged
33 interpretation that otherwise would not have occurred because of local
34 opposition.

35 Such high-level involvement in Native American issues has not occurred
36 at most other national parks. As a result, park interpretation of Native
37 Americans usually reflects the normal internal politics of the NPS as agency
38 and the political environment that all parks face. In the next section, I
39 develop an ideal-type account of how this political process normally works
in shaping park interpretation of its resources.

THE POLITICS OF PARK INTERPRETATION

The Civil War and Little Bighorn battlefields led to political conflict because a legacy of interpretation became out-of-step with modern sensibilities. They illustrate a common challenge, in that government agencies typically change slowly, face tight budgets, and may develop a corporate interest in existing ways of doing things. Understanding the politics around the outputs of these agencies therefore requires a historical grounding. Rather than providing a full history of the NPS (see Runte, 1979/1987), this section develops an ideal-type history of a national park unit to develop an understanding of how park interpretation emerges. Using this ideal-type story, this section explores how interpretation at FDNHS came to develop the themes that it presents, and how it came to neglect its mandate to interpret the impact of westward expansion on American Indians. After this, the next section examines the contemporary product, Fort Davis, as a tourist would see it.

Park Advocates

Creation of any national park begins with park advocates, often people who live near the site. These advocates must convince their political representatives that a given location has national importance in some way. For example, Fort Davis local advocate Barry Scobee testified to Congress in 1961 that “the old fort, because it symbolizes the courage, sacrifices, persistence, and the idealism of brave men and women on a wild frontier, should be perpetuated as a shrine to American history” (cited in Welsh, 1996, chap. 3). Like most other historic parks, it focuses on “honoring” past people and their achievements, presenting largely positive portrayals of them (Mackintosh, 1986, p. 36).

The argument about what makes this park special will reflect a particular time and place. West Texans in a ranching community from the 1920s to the 1960s were not going to argue that Fort Davis needed memorializing because it was a monument to U.S. imperialism or the genocide of Native peoples. They saw it instead as a monument to western settlement by Euro-Americans. For them, the role of the U.S. Cavalry in “western expansion” provides a central perspective, one that neglects Native Americans. It also minimizes Hispanic traditions in the story of the Southwest, though Mexican Americans are a visible, if marginalized, part of the community (Welsh, 1996; Wooster, 1994, 2006).

1 The African-American experience at Fort Davis was assimilated to this
Anglo-centric perspective and incorporated into park interpretation.
3 Buffalo Soldiers fit easily into the narrative of western expansion. Because
almost no African-Americans lived in west Texas, this story was less
5 polarizing locally than it might have been elsewhere in the South, and it was
attractive to the national professional staff who served the park after its
7 establishment in 1965. Park histories, both official and unofficial, feature the
Buffalo Soldiers prominently. Advocates' focus on military values and the
9 frontier experience defined the context within which Buffalo Soldiers could
be assimilated to the park's interpretation. The Apaches and Comanches did
11 not fit this story of heroism on the westward march.

That Anglo narrative also framed the one Native story that park
13 advocates wanted the NPS to tell. Local tradition held to a mythical story of
"Indian Emily," a Pocahontas-like figure who warned the white soldiers of
15 an imminent attack by her people. Before establishment of FDNHS, Indian
Emily featured prominently in local festivals and July Fourth celebrations
17 around the fort. The Texas Centennial Commission even had an Indian
Emily marker on the post grounds before the NPS arrived. NPS historian
19 Robert Utley never believed the story but regularly confronted local leaders
such as Barry Scobee and Carl Raht who wanted to tell the story of "the
21 kid" (Welsh, 1996, chap. 3). For example, Scobee had written an article in
the May 31, 1935 issue of the *Alpine Avalanche* entitled, "Indian Squaw
23 Who Betrayed Her People And Gave Her Life Out Of Love For Young
Officer Is Paid Honor By Fort Davis Citizens On Memorial Day." As park
25 historian Michael Welsh (1996, chap. 2) rightly notes, "This story fit well
with the nation's understanding in the 1930s of the 'noble' savage, as
27 Indians were depicted in film, literature, and song."

When such advocates succeed, Congress will pass legislation establishing
29 the park. This legislation explains why the site is special, and it tells the NPS
why the park is important. The NPS will follow that mandate when
31 developing the site, deciding how to present its natural and cultural
resources, and working up the park's interpretive plans. That mandate
33 provides protection of the natural and cultural resources of the site, and
educating the public about development and settlement of the southwest
35 and the impact on Native Americans.

In the case of FDNHS, the final part of that mandate, educating
37 the public about the impact of Fort Davis on Native Americans, has
been squeezed out of park interpretation. Understanding how that
39 happened requires attention to how the NPS goes about interpretation
after it arrives.

Agency Procedures

The NPS, like other government agencies, is an organization that follows routinized procedures. In the case of interpretation, these procedures are dominated by the notion of an *interpretive theme*. Each theme is a simple idea about a site or group of sites that the NPS wants to convey to the fast-moving visitor. NPS staff choose these themes carefully for each site. For good pedagogical reasons they also keep these themes small in number (Mackintosh, 1986; Tilden, 1957). At many parks it is obvious that staff has aimed for exactly three themes.

For understandable reasons, interpretation of any NPS unit is dominated by what is physically present as opposed to what is absent. Restoring historical buildings at Fort Davis creates a need to interpret these buildings, which have dominated NPS efforts to interpret the site. Archaeology at the site, and the collection of period artifacts for the FDNHS collection, similarly comes to dominate the needs of interpretation. As Barry Mackintosh (1986, p. 36) notes, these processes lead to “a tendency to focus on the site and its story at the expense of context and proper evaluation.”

To make general historical processes concrete, the NPS chose to emphasize several individuals at FDNHS. To the extent possible, the site is restored to the period when Benjamin Grierson commanded the garrison. Lt. Henry O. Flipper, West Point’s first African-American graduate, represents the Buffalo Soldiers in park interpretation.

By focusing on physical buildings and personalizing those who lived in them, the NPS has allowed non-Native themes to crowd out possible Native sites and themes at Fort Davis. Material objects such as buildings and artifacts dominate the story. Indian campground at adjacent Limpia Creek lacks the materiality of wooden buildings, so it does not become part of interpretation.

This tendency is reinforced by the fact that the military conflicts around Fort Davis consisted of minor skirmishes, lacking a decisive battle or campaign. Nor was Fort Davis a site at which important meetings or treaty signings occurred. At root this makes Fort Davis less obviously important than, say, Little Bighorn battlefield or Fort Laramie. The NPS finds it very difficult to argue that any of its sites are less important than previously believed (Mackintosh, 1986, p. 36), so it has made FDNHS an exemplar of wider themes such as western expansion.

The first “Historical Research Management Plan” of 1967, for example, made the park a “commemorative symbol of the advance of the frontier across the American continent” (Welsh, 1996, chap. 5). That plan included

1 one Native theme, the use of plants by American Indians before Euro-
2 American contact. By 1975, park naturalist Derek Hambly had built a small
3 herbarium containing 253 plant species. He hoped to display information
4 about how “pioneers, military units, and native Indians” used these plants,
5 though information was often difficult to find (Welsh, 1996, chap. 5). There
6 are some examples of such signs on the park nature trail today, such as a
7 sign identifying Sotol (*Dasylirion wheeleri*) as having been used for basket
8 weaving, thatching, and alcoholic beverages. Plant use by prehistoric
9 peoples, like geology, is politically uncontroversial and easier for the NPS to
10 interpret to visitors. It has also been marginalized, limited to a few small
11 signs on a hiking trail on the bluffs above the fort.

NPS Staff

12
13
14
15 NPS staff play an important role in constructing park interpretation. NPS
16 historical and cultural specialists are part of a national professional
17 community that continually refines and reinterprets history. The most
18 influential NPS historian for interpretation at FDNHS is Robert Utley
19 (b. 1929), a long-time professional historian for the NPS. Utley worked at
20 many parks, and is a prolific author with 16 books to his name. He is
21 primarily interested in the military history of the western frontier; indeed, the
22 Western History Association gave an annual award in his name for the best
23 book published on the military history of the frontier and western North
24 America (<http://www.westernhistoryassociation.org>). At Fort Davis he was
25 interested in telling the soldiers’ story. Utley believed that the NPS southwest
26 region had neglected this military story because its sites are dominated by
27 precontact Native archaeology. Utley’s (1965) work telling that history at
28 Fort Davis provided the foundation for current interpretation.

29
30 Other key personnel have also made a difference. William “Bill”
31 Gwaltney, park technician in 1983–1986, played a leading role in making
32 these soldiers visible at the park. Because one of his grandfathers was a
33 Buffalo Soldier, Gwaltney had long been interested in their role and in
34 western history more generally. When he arrived at the park, he noticed that
35 black soldiers were “invisible” in the local community’s mind, and the white
36 staff had felt awkward interpreting the black experience. By bringing in
37 black seasonal personnel and students, building relationships with
38 historically black colleges, and engaging in outreach to African-American
39 media outlets, Gwaltney laid the foundation for the site’s current
highlighting of the Buffalo Soldier role in its history (Welsh, 1996, chap. 7).

1 FDNHS has never had Native American staff who have been able to exert
leadership comparable to Utley or Gwaltney. FDNHS hired Frank
3 Chappabitty (Comanche) and Fred Peso (Mescalero Apache) in the
1970s. Though both were college educated, they did not have the same
5 success as Gwaltney (Welsh, 1996, chaps. 5–6), for reasons not evident in the
record.

7
8 *Agency Interests*

9
10 Both the planning process and external political pressures can bring out
11 some of an agency's own self-interest. Planning rewards risk-averse
behavior. National parks, like national forests and other government
13 agencies, have learned that controversial plans cause them nothing but
trouble for a long time (Nie, 2008). This explains the NPS interest in
15 interpreting geology in the national parks, since geology is uncontroversial
and beyond the parks' control.

17 Any historic site such as Fort Davis must nonetheless confront some
controversies. When presenting potentially controversial historic issues
19 about the Buffalo Soldiers, the NPS originally chose to do so obliquely,
using direct quotations from historic actors presented in an antique typeface
21 (Welsh, 1996, chap. 4). This distances the park services' own text, in a
modern typeface, from the controversial material, and allows the visitor to
23 confront the controversial "other" through a typographical "other."
Interestingly, this typographical intervention is much less obvious today,
25 evidence that African-American soldiers do not engender the same reactions
among white Texans as they might have in the 1960s and 1970s.

27 In the case of Native American issues, archaeological and precontact
topics are much less controversial than modern Indian politics. Presenting
29 Native Americans as historic peoples does not threaten the corporate
identity of the NPS. The NPS cannot change the historical mistreatment of
31 Native Americans, so it can present this material without needing to change
its own behavior. In contrast, presenting modern Indians might raise
33 sensitive issues about NPS relationships with the tribes, which have
historically been quite difficult (Burnham, 2000; Keller & Turek, 1998;
35 Spence, 1999). In park interpretation, then, Comanches may hate Euro-
Americans in the 1800s but they will never be seen to be hostile today.
37 Affiliated tribes may receive draft GMPs in the mail with a request for
"consultation," but they will not be given panels in the visitor center talking
39 about their contemporary lives. Geography reinforces this, as the relevant
tribes now live far away.

Planning Process

NPS internal processes may shape the content of interpretation but the agency must also present its plans to the outside. Every NPS unit has a general management plan (GMP), and the general plans include secondary plans for park interpretation. The GMP usually also serves as the park's environmental impact statement (EIS) as required by law. Those planning rules require that government agencies consider the costs and benefits of their actions on the natural and social environments. Agencies must also conduct public hearings and solicit other forms of public input in the planning process.

In accordance with the National Environmental Planning Act (NEPA) and other legislation, the national parks must develop formal management plans through a process that is open to public review and comment. Public meetings are held in and around the park, and publicized locally. In recent years, the NPS has made good use of the internet to involve wider audiences in the planning process. Before the internet, however, locals were involved in these discussions while tourists and other national audiences largely were not. This gave a privileged role to the cooperating association and to the local community, who could mobilize as outsiders could not.

Cooperating Associations

Once the park is established, the NPS must develop the site and its interpretation, following the congressional mandate but also responding to political pressure. Cooperating associations can play a leading role here and shape the park (for GGNRA, see Rothman, 2004, chaps. 4 and 7). People who love the park form an association to work with the park, volunteer on park projects, and raise money for park improvements. These people define for themselves why the park is important, and they will resist NPS decisions to redefine a park. Sucec and Sikoryak (1996) note that many cooperating associations have resisted park efforts to inject Native American stories into park interpretation.

Because the NPS relies on the associations for money and volunteers, it must take their views seriously. One dramatic example to the south of FDNHS came when Big Bend National Park was considering a Mexican wolf reintroduction program. Local ranching communities strongly opposed a wolf presence, and played an influential role locally. The Big Bend Natural History Association cut off funds for the park's site bulletin because it made

1 reference to the possibility of wolf reintroduction. This act forced Super-
2 intendent Robert Arnberger to agree to avoid “politically sensitive issues” in
3 the site bulletins in exchange for renewed funds (Jameson, 1996, p. 95).

4 Both professionals and volunteers also staff information kiosks in visitor
5 sites, though these informal encounters are to my knowledge completely
6 undocumented in any social-scientific sense. Notoriously, the most common
7 questions at these locations concern restrooms and not interpretation.

9 *Local Community*

11 Even if the citizenry does not join the association, it will likely visit the park
12 frequently. School visits, hikes and picnics, and other activities create
13 powerful emotional connections to the park. These locals will often resist
14 change that threatens these emotional values. In addition, as noted above,
15 locals played key roles in lobbying for the creation of FDNHS, and local
16 volunteers support the park in many ways. Park staff may come from
17 elsewhere but must live in this small, conservative ranching community.

18 FDNHS lies adjacent to the town of Fort Davis, Texas, originally found
19 to serve the fort. During the military period, it was a surprisingly diverse
20 community, with Mexican ranch hands, laundry, and other service workers,
21 in addition to the Buffalo Soldiers. Reflecting Texas’ distinctive Indian
22 policy, there was never a significant Native American population in the area.
23 Over time, the Latino community has remained but other groups have
24 drifted off (Welsh, 1996). These demographics made it difficult for the NPS
25 to attract non-Anglo staff to FDNHS. Frank Smith, the first superintendent
26 of FDNHS, tried to bring African-Americans and Native Americans to
27 work at the park as seasonal or full-time employees. He had to compete with
28 other public agencies and with corporations who were also trying to
29 diversify their work force, and the geography of Fort Davis made its
30 opportunities relatively unattractive to candidates.

31 In the South of the mid-1960s, some political issues emerged immediately
32 as the federal enclave did not follow state practices. Even so, the NPS did
33 not go as far as it might have. For example, park interpretation might
34 engage multiculturalism, such as racial tensions in the community associated
35 with the presence of black soldiers. However, these issues, like the role of
36 Indians, remained outside the NPS narrative (Welsh, 1996, chap. 3).

37 Perhaps surprisingly, women are visible in the NPS narrative in their role
38 of army wives. The lives of white officers’ wives are most visible – and
39 presumably best documented – but enlisted men’s wives, both black and

1 Latina, also appear in the NPS narrative. Cookbooks based on wives' recipes take up an entire shelf in the FDNHS bookstore, suggesting that
 3 parts of this story also resonate with park visitors. The records do not reveal where the pressure for these stories came from, but it is easy to imagine that
 5 local white women volunteering at the park would have been attracted to these issues and pressed to make them more visible.

9 *National Political Environment*

11 Though the NPS likes to avoid controversy it must also respond to the national political environment. National political views may differ from
 13 local views, as the case of Civil War sites illustrates. Individual senators or representatives may also decide to intervene in the policy of a particular
 15 park, for whatever reason.

At FDNHS, the national political environment had an important effect
 17 on park interpretation. Though the Buffalo Soldiers are not mentioned in the establishment legislation, African-American issues have grown in
 19 national visibility since creation of the park in the 1960s.

National sensibilities sometimes lead FDNHS to resist local pressure of
 21 various forms. For example, Superintendent Becker turned down a Texas state historical marker commemorating Confederate President Jefferson
 23 Davis. Both the county and the fort were named for Davis when he was U.S. Secretary of War. Becker disliked the idea of rebel history on federal
 25 property (Welsh, 1996, chap. 4), a position that is rather ironic in terms of how the NPS interprets Civil War battlefields (Jackson, 2001; Sutton, 2008).

27 Increasingly, the national community of professional historians has developed an understanding of Fort Davis differs greatly from what the
 29 NPS provides its visitors. When discussing his own relationship with Little Bighorn, Utey noted a change from his interpretation of Indians as
 31 "cardboard cutouts" in 1947–1952 followed by a later "quest for balance" (Greene, 2008, pp. 173–174). At Fort Davis, even the same historian's story
 33 has shifted emphasis in a decade. Robert Wooster's (1994) pamphlet-length study, written with NPS support, is subtitled "Outpost on the Texas
 35 Frontier." In contrast, Wooster's (2006) history has a chapter entitled, "Agent of Empire: The U.S. Army." Times change.

37 These political forces have given FDNHS a straightforward interpretative narrative. In the NPS history, U.S. soldiers heroically protect Euro-
 39 American settlers and travelers from Indian "depredations." African-Americans could be assimilated to this story through the Buffalo Soldiers,

1 while women joined the narrative as soldiers' wives. Native Americans did
2 not belong in that story, and there were never political actors working to
3 include them.

5 THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE AT FORT DAVIS TODAY

7 The political process described in the previous section produces a particular
8 form of interpretation at any given moment. To see this result, I examined
9 how tourists would experience Fort Davis and its interpretation. I
10 considered all of the interpretive resources available to the visitor, while
11 recognizing that few visitors took advantage of all of them.

12 There are at least six forms of interpretation available to the visitor. First
13 is the official park website, which helps orient visitors to the site and
14 introduce the themes that they will experience while there (Newsome et al.,
15 2002, p. 250). Second is the park brochure, given to every visitor and
16 providing the main explanation of the site; I also examined all other
17 brochures and flyers that a visitor might collect. Third is the exhibits and
18 film in the visitor center, which provides the main educational opportunity
19 for the park. Fourth, I walked the grounds and examined the restored
20 buildings, grounds, and interpretive signs. Fifth, I inventoried the
21 "commercial" sites with Fort Davis-related themes, including the gift shop
22 managed by the affiliated association and the other tourist-oriented stores
23 outside the park in the town of Fort Davis. The commercial sites provide an
24 important contrast to park interpretation by suggesting what topics interest
25 visitors to FDNHS, topics that may differ from those that the NPS
26 interprets. Finally, I also read official and unofficial histories of Fort Davis
27 as an indicator of what kinds of raw material are available for the NPS to
28 interpret. The FDNHS General Management Plan (GMP) also illustrates
29 NPS themes and priorities.

31 *Website*

32 As they plan their visit, many visitors will first interact with FDNHS
33 through its website. The index page clearly presents the central interpretive
34 theme, "Fort Davis: Frontier Post." The following extract summarizes the
35 website's orientation to its subject:

36 A key post in the defense system of western Texas, Fort Davis played a major role in the
37 history of the Southwest. From 1854 until 1891, troops stationed at the post protected
38 emigrants, freighters, mail coaches, and travelers on the San Antonio-El Paso Road.

1 Today, Fort Davis is considered one of the best remaining examples of a frontier military
post in the American Southwest. It is a vivid reminder of the significant role played by
3 the military in the settlement and development of the western frontier.

5 This frontier narrative shapes the website as a whole and the stories told
on its various pages.

7 Across those web pages, the NPS presents the history of the first Fort
Davis, its minor role in the Civil War, the second Fort Davis after the war,
9 and the military's efforts to protect U.S. citizens against the Comanches and
Apaches in the area. Other pages discuss "African Americans in the
Frontier Army," the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, the Twenty-fourth and
11 Twenty-fifth Infantry, and the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts. It is
indicative of overall park interpretation at the site that the mixed-race
13 Seminoles serving the U.S. military are more visible than the Apaches or
Comanches against whom the fort was built.

15 Though there are no active links to the material from the current website
(2009–2010), the site maintains archived pages on individual tribes
17 (Jumanos, Lipan Apache, Warm Springs Apache, Mescalero Apache, and
Comanches). I found this material by Google search ([http://www.nps.gov/
archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/About_the_Fort/Indians_of_West_](http://www.nps.gov/archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/About_the_Fort/Indians_of_West_Texas.htm)
19 [Texas.htm](http://www.nps.gov/archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/About_the_Fort/Indians_of_West_Texas.htm)), and presumably other highly engaged visitors could do likewise.
21 As is true for other interpretation, information on Native Americans may be
available to the committed searcher but it is not served up to the casual
23 visitor. NPS interpretive staff has constructed a narrative around soldiers on
the frontier and not around the peoples against whom they fought.

27 *Brochures*

29 Every national park unit has a brochure that is given to every visitor. It
provides the core orientation to the site, including maps or diagrams,
31 practical information about operating hours and services, and an introduc-
tion to the cultural and natural resources of the site.

33 The Fort Davis brochure identifies the site as "a key post in the defense
system of west Texas." Consistent with the overall narrative, this text defines
35 the soldiers' task as "defense" and not "expansion." One paragraph
describes "The Indian Challenge," while a second provides a capsule
37 biography of Victorio, the "proud and aggressive leader" of the Warm
Springs Apaches. It would obviously be possible to recast this story as U.S.
39 aggression, met with Apache defense, but that would detract from the
frontier narrative.

1 The Buffalo Soldiers receive about the same amount of text as the
Indians. Second Lt. Henry O. Flipper receives a slightly longer biography
3 than Victorio. The longer sections on the front page address “Officers and
Enlisted Men” and “Fort Davis and the Indian Wars.” A prominent
5 summary of the fort’s history, in five paragraphs and a larger font,
dominates the text. The back page is entirely devoted to a tour of the
7 buildings and practical information for visitors.

In addition to the official brochure, a “Guide to the Buildings and Ruins”
9 (2005) is available for sale at a nominal price in the bookstore. This
emphasizes the reconstructed buildings and the surrounding ruins, explain-
11 ing how the soldiers used them. There is no corresponding guide, pamphlet,
or brochure that would provide background to the Indian side of the
13 conflict.

Exhibits and Film

15
17 Once visitors arrive at FDNHS, they are steered from the parking lot to the
19 visitor center, in a historic building (former barracks). Visitors pay the
admission fee in the bookstore/gift shop, where staff orient them to the site.
21 The film introducing the fort, discussed at the start of this chapter, is
available for viewing in a separate space nearby.

23 The film supports the central theme of westward expansion. After briefly
mentioning that Indians and conquistadors preceded the U.S. presence in
25 the area, it tells the story of Anglos needing protection while traveling
through the area after the 1848 California gold rush. The film briefly
27 mentions the Confederacy controlling, and then abandoning, the fort. After
the Civil War, black soldiers played a key role in rebuilding the fort in 1867
29 but then had a tedious life when stationed there. Blacks also suffered racial
discrimination at the hands of white officers and local civilians.

31 In the film’s telling, the soldiers’ daily tedium was broken only
occasionally by Indian raiding parties or brief battles with Apaches. These
33 fights proved the value of the Buffalo Soldiers, but racism meant that these
men and their officers did not get the recognition that they deserved. The
35 effect of these battles on the Natives of west Texas can only be imagined,
since this issue does not appear in the film at all.

37 The visitor center building includes a museum with artifacts and panels
interpreting the history of Fort Davis. The space is divided into several “rooms”
39 with panels and other temporary dividers, in addition to display cases. One
of these rooms, with three panels, is devoted to the Apache tribe, their war

1 leader Victorio, and some of the battles in which they fought the U.S. soldiers.
3 This space constitutes virtually all of the Native-themed interpretation at the site.

For comparison, this is about the same amount of space given to Lt.
5 Flipper and his court martial. Another dozen panels and display cases interpret the Buffalo Soldiers, with an emphasis on enlisted men. Yet,
7 another dozen panels cover a variety of other historic topics. Thus, the exhibits in the museum do give the Apaches a real, if decidedly small, part in
9 the history of Fort Davis.

Buildings, Grounds, and Signs

13 The FDNHS legal mandate includes provisions of the Historic Sites Act of
15 1935 providing for museums, tablets and other signs, and an educational program at historic sites (Mackintosh, 1986, p. 22). These interpretive signs
17 are much in evidence when the visitor tours the grounds.

The NPS has emphasized restoration of historic buildings whenever funds
19 were available. The visitor can view these restored buildings and see appropriate period artifacts from the park collection. For example, the
21 barracks building shows soldiers' beds, clothing, and personal effects; the hospital building has a small collection of medical supplies from the 1870s
23 and 1880s. Signs interpret both the buildings and the artifacts for the visitor.

Taken as a whole, these buildings and objects interpret the daily life of a
25 frontier soldier. For example, the sign in the squad room describes the lack of privacy in the barracks, the common use of nonregulation clothing and
27 equipment, and forms of relaxation such as reading, music, or playing cards.

Visual and aural cues reinforce this emphasis. Recorded bugles are
29 broadcast over parade ground on regular schedule. In addition, FDNHS was apparently the first national park unit to dress interpreters in period
31 uniform (Mackintosh, 1986, pp. 55–56), though I did not observe any such interpreters during our January visit.

33 In addition to the fort's buildings, a network of trails ascends onto the bluffs that provide a scenic backdrop for the fort. The trails extend several
35 miles to Fort Davis Mountains State Park, but a short loop with a nature trail and many scenic overlooks provides the interpretive focus of this area.
37 The scenic backdrop is itself a park emphasis, and the subject of legislation extending park boundaries at the time of my research visit.

39 The trails are conceived as scenic walks, with benches at several locations for visitors to enjoy the views of the fort and the community. In addition to

1 this scenic purpose, a small number of signs identify local vegetation and
their uses. For example, one sign identifies Sotol (*Dasyllirion wheeleri*). It
3 explains that both Native Americans and U.S. soldiers used this plant to
brew an intoxicating beverage. Native Americans are not otherwise visible
5 on the fort grounds.

7 9 *Commercial Sites*

Not all interpretation of the site occurs under NPS control. The visitor
11 experience includes engagement with hotels, restaurants, gift shops, and
other sites that present the story of the fort. While a gas station or grocery
13 store does not increase sales by interpreting the site, tourist-oriented
businesses make their sales by connecting their products to the park. For
15 this reason, they should be considered a form of unofficial interpretation
that contributes to the visitor experience.

17 Understandably, these businesses have an emphasis that differs from the
NPS. We can identify three types of relevant businesses nationwide, the
19 concessioners, the cooperating associations, and private businesses outside
the parks. Concessioners have a profit motive, but often tout environmental
21 and other values as part of their marketing strategy. (However, there is no
concessioner at FDNHS.) The cooperating associations are non-profits, but
23 they generate considerable income that they may donate to the park or
otherwise use in support of the park unit. They must be recognized officially
25 by the park, and this approval can be withdrawn. Usually the park
superintendent is a member of the association board. In addition, the NPS
27 may veto controversial or inappropriate products in concessioner or
association stores. Such vetoes are uncommon, but this authority probably
29 produces some self-censorship to avoid them. Private businesses outside the
park have profit motives and are not subject to NPS veto. All three of these
31 nongovernment actors make their own decisions about product lines,
though concessioners and particularly associations may explicitly choose
33 products to support an interpretive site. Association stores rarely offer items
completely unconnected to the site such as popular fiction, while stores
35 outside the park do.

Bookstores inside and outside the park offer more significant Indian
37 content than does the NPS interpretation at FDNHS. The Association
bookstore in the Visitor Center has two shelves with adult-oriented books
39 on Native Americans. This includes books on the Apaches and Comanches
as well as more general titles about Indians of Texas or the United States as

1 a whole. These offerings are about equal to the volume of books on the
wives of the fort, and less than the three shelves given to Lt. Flipper and the
3 Buffalo Soldiers. Other books for sale cover general military, national park,
nature, and wildlife topics.

5 The commercial offerings show that Native Americans provide one of
several major topics that interest visitors to Fort Davis. The bookstore is
7 much more balanced than NPS interpretation. In the Visitor Center
displays, Buffalo Soldiers (other than Flipper) get about four times more
9 panels than do the Indians whom the soldiers were fighting. In contrast, the
on-site bookstore run by the affiliated association gives books on Indians
11 that take up two full shelves against the three shelves given to the Buffalo
Soldiers and Flipper combined. In short, the book-buying visitor would
13 appear to be more interested in Native Americans, and less interested in
Flipper and the Buffalo Soldiers, than the NPS is.

15 Businesses outside the park present a similar picture. In the largest store
outside the park, the Hotel Limpia Gift Shop, the space allotted to Native
17 Americans is about double than that given to Buffalo Soldiers. However,
Native Americans receive less shelf space than that given over to the Texas
19 Rangers. Barbara Youngblood Carr, a Texan of Cherokee descent and
author of 13 books on her upbringing and Cherokee heritage, makes up
21 about half the Indian-themed selection. Despite her apparent popularity,
Carr is not to be found in the park's bookstore. Her Cherokee heritage
23 would not fit the FDNHS history, though her Texan heritage might. In any
case, her books are not less connected to the park than some of the general
25 nature books available for sale in the association store.

Both inside and outside the park, the bookstores meet an apparent demand
27 among visitors in proportions very different from how the NPS interprets the
site. In particular, book readers seem to be more interested in Native
29 American themes than they are in the Buffalo Soldiers or Lt. Flipper, despite
the prominence of those latter themes in NPS interpretation at the site.

31 Nonbook merchandise offers a similar picture in terms of quantity,
though not in quality. However, this market responds much more obviously
33 to the preconceptions that non-Natives bring to the site. Indian-themed
souvenirs treat all Natives as sharing a similar culture and material objects,
35 marked by headdresses, eagle feathers, dreamcatchers, beadwork, and
ponytails. These popular themes tend to be historically part of Plains
37 cultures. These features mark gifts and souvenirs as "Indian" instead of
identifying them as belonging to Apache, Comanche, or other tribes. Thus,
39 the quality of this material tends to be far lower than the NPS interpretation
in the visitor center.

Written Histories

Over the years, the NPS has commissioned histories and other material from various professional historians, both from their own staff and from the outside. Robert M. Utley's (1965) handbook was completed soon after creation of the park, and it sets the park in the context of U.S. military history. Early pages make some pro forma references to the Apache and Comanche tribes but Utley emphasizes Euro-American efforts to build transportation routes through west Texas. He tells the stories of explorations and fort construction, while also discussing the daily life of frontier soldiers. Utley provides about one page of text and three pages of images of the Buffalo Soldiers (pp. 21–25), reflecting the early decision to make this one of the major themes of FDNHS.

Though they are part of his story, elsewhere Utley (cited in Mackintosh, 1986, p. 80) warns against giving ethnic and racial minorities too much salience:

In our new awareness of minority and ethnic roles in our history, we must rigorously guard against exaggerating them in an effort to atone for past neglect. With minorities taking on ever more political clout and not always restrained by an objective view of their own past, we shall often face powerful pressures that could produce distorted interpretation.

Though he gives both Natives and African-Americans some space in his story, Utley's main interest in this pamphlet, and throughout his career with the NPS, is telling the military story in the West. Much of the pamphlet (pp. 31–48) recounts the Indian raids, cavalry retaliation, and longer campaigns in 1867–1880. This includes a two-page sidebar explaining why Apaches found cattle raiding an attractive response to the U.S. invasion of their lands. Utley's military focus explains why he gives the Buffalo Soldiers more attention than daily Indian life, and why he does not dig too deeply into the political economy that lay behind U.S. western expansion. Even so, these themes did not make it into the park's own interpretation.

Historiography has changed significantly since 1965. I have already noted the difference in interpretation across Robert Wooster's two books, which shift from a "frontier" focus to seeing the U.S. Army as an "agent of empire." The collection of histories also documents increasing interest in the story of the Buffalo Soldiers as opposed to other themes.

As a rule of thumb, the longer the history, the greater the proportion of Indian-related content. Clearly, the historians view the Apaches and other tribes as an issue of secondary interest, worthy of treatment when space is available.

1 If we compare the histories with the interpretation, we see that the NPS
condenses the park's themes as it moves from the mostly highly engaged
3 visitor to the casual day tourist. This cleaning-up process systematically
reduces or eliminates coverage of Indians while highlighting the Buffalo
5 Soldiers and daily life on the military frontier. As noted earlier, the Buffalo
Soldier theme has been developed since park establishment, without a
7 congressional mandate to do so. Native American themes have remained
nearly invisible despite being part of the park's original mandate.

9 From whatever perspective, these official and unofficial histories provide
a solid foundation for reimagining the Fort Davis story. Park interpreters
11 could use published sources as the basis for new stories without needing to
engage in extensive, time-consuming research on these subjects. The book-
13 buying visitor has a clear interest in seeing more of these stories. The
purchaser of plastic tomahawks probably would not object.

17 LOOKING AHEAD

19 American Indians were explicitly part of the legislation when Congress
21 established FDNHS. That legislation mandated that the site would
"Educate the public about the influence of Fort Davis on the development
23 and settlement of the Southwest *and about the impact of military operations
on American Indians*" (Fort Davis National Historic Site, pp. 1–2, emphasis
25 added). Despite that legislation, FDNHS does not interpret the impact of
the Indian wars on Native Americans. Instead, it has developed an
27 alternative secondary theme, the Buffalo Soldiers, which Congress did not
mention. It should be noted that the NPS has the discretion to develop such
29 non-mandated themes, but it is obligated to present what Congress does
mandate.

31 Evidence from the cooperating association shop and stores in the town
suggests that tourists are interested in learning more of the Native side of the
33 story than the park currently tells them. This is not to say that a gift shop
full of plastic tomahawks should guild NPS interpretation. As the previous
35 section documented, much of this tourist interest is reflected in quality
products such as books on the Apaches or Comanches, and DVDs telling
37 the story of Geronimo or Vittorio. This suggests that lifelong learners
among the tourists would appreciate greater depth in on-site interpretation.
39 This national constituency can provide both justification and political
support for changes at FDNHS.

1 Motivated staff for such changes could be found among the NPS, which
has become increasingly aware of the need to address its history with the
3 tribes. Better relations with tribes were a major theme of the 2009 George
Wright Society annual meeting, the main professional association for NPS
5 staff. The moment is also ripe for staff leadership on this issue. The NPS
recently created a new position, Assistant Director for American Indian
7 Relations, held by the widely respected career NPS employee Gerard Baker
(Mandan-Hidatsa). National leadership from his office can support
9 transformation in the face of inertia, or perhaps opposition, from the local
political environment.

11 On the local side, such consultations can probably best be started by a
career NPS staffer of Native American heritage or who already has
13 experience in building relationships with tribes. This initiative would be
consistent with the current GMP, which calls for the park to “additionally
15 include the story from the viewpoint of American Indians and civilians,”
while retaining the existing priority to the military story (Fort Davis
17 National Historic Site, p. 22).

The Service’s instincts probably lead it to develop its own vision and then
19 to engage external constituencies about those changes, especially the
affiliated tribes. These instincts are reinforced by the perceptions that tribal
21 consultation is difficult. Many national park interpreters claim that they
have had communication problems with tribes that make it difficult to tell
23 the Native American stories at their sites. Practical problems in the NPS,
such as a lack of time, money, and staff, also pose obstacles to better
25 collaboration (Sucec & Sikoryak, 1996). However, it should be noted that
non-profit sites near other parks, such as the Museum of the Plains Indian at
27 the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, consult extensively
with affiliated Native Americans, who also sit on their governing board.
29 Greater collaboration is possible.

The records show that FDNHS has generally engaged in its required
31 attempts at consultation with affiliated tribes, but staff has not followed up
on the absence of responses from the Mescalero Apache tribe (Welsh, 1996,
33 chap. 6). Even so, the latest GMP documents consultation with the Texas
Historical Commission but not with any tribes. The overall impression left
35 by the documents is occasional “cold calls” to the Mescalero Apaches by
staff. Experience elsewhere shows that a more sustained effort required for
37 building successful relationships at parks such as Grand Canyon, Nez Perce,
and Olympic.

39 Though difficult, most observers would argue that this consultation is
important. It’s conventional in the literature on protected areas to suggest

1 that change happens if and when the managers build better relationships
with stakeholders interested in a park site. However, some skepticism is
3 probably warranted here on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Even
with goodwill and repeated follow-up, a strategy of consultation works only
5 under some conditions. As Pahre, (2010) shows, some exchanges of
information do not change behavior on either side, or may not change the
7 interaction between consulting parties.

At many other sites in the national park system, major changes in
9 interpretation did not come from the consultation process or from the
NPS. Nor did such change come from better consultation with Indian tribes.
11 As discussed briefly above, changes at Little Bighorn and other sites
reflected a national political intervention by Congress. National political
13 intervention will probably be necessary to change interpretation at many
western forts.

17 CONCLUSIONS

19 Euro-Americans have historically presented North American history in
Euro-American terms, with Native Americans as the “other.” Interpreting
21 this as a form of colonialism or internal colonialism is an important part of
American Indian studies. In contrast, many Euro-Americans would say that
23 greater political correctness is changing U.S. culture and the NPS
interpretation of it (i.e., Cheney, 1994; DiLorenzo, 2003; Russell, 2002). If
25 this latter claim were true, then changes in the presentation of Native
Americans would be most evident in sites controlled by the government.
27 Government is, after all, most open to political pressure.

A “politically correct” emphasis on Native Americans is not at all evident
29 at FDNHS. Instead, interpretation reflects more prosaic political processes.
Government, like other large organizations, changes slowly. In a majoritarian
31 political system, the beliefs of the majority Euro-American culture
dominate government policy, and the beliefs of the local community are
33 particularly privileged. The analytical framework developed here looks at
park advocates, cooperating associations, the local community, the nature
35 of the NPS as bureaucracy, the role of the park planning process, and the
intervention of national political forces to explain the content that the
37 visitor sees.

In addition, the NPS has traditionally had very poor relationships with
39 the Indian reservations, Native American tribes, and bands in and around
its units. Most large parks were taken from Native territory ceded to the

1 United States by treaties that may or may not be seen as legitimate in Indian
country. Once established, the national parks have refused to recognize
3 Native hunting, fishing, and gathering rights in those ceded treaties. NPS
victories in various court cases, in some case defending a position that
5 attorneys in the Interior Department had recommended against, did not
further endear the parks to their Native neighbors.

7 Only in the last decade or so has the academic literature begun to explore
these histories and their implications for current relationships (Burnham,
9 2000; Keller & Turek, 1998; Spence, 1999). In roughly the same period,
some NPS units have also begun to build better relationships with their
11 affiliated tribes and to improve interpretation accordingly (Sucec &
Sikoryak, 1996). Grand Canyon NP and Olympic NP have full-time
13 cultural anthropologists who have built long-term relationships with the
many affiliated tribes of both parks (for Olympic, see Wray, 2002). Cultural
15 and historical resource specialists at Nez Perce National Historic Park also
have strong relationships with the Nez Perce. Tribal elders were closely
17 involved in rewriting NPS brochures at those sites, and one elder wrote the
entire narrative for Bear Paw battlefield. Even Badlands NP, whose ties with
19 the Oglala Sioux of Pine Ridge have been fraught with controversy, is now
exploring possible comanagement of one or more units (Badlands National
21 Park, 2008).

Fort Davis NHS has not yet gone through this transformation. Making
23 Natives more visible would require the NPS to confront its own past, and
the way that local political interests shape historical interpretation.

25 Judging from the commercial material available off-site, Fort Davis
tourists have greater interest in Native American issues than the NPS seems
27 to recognize. Making Native Americans as visible in the official materials as
they are in the bookstores would constitute an objective improvement in
29 interpretation as well as serving an apparent public interest better in this
context.

31 The NPS believes that good interpretation shapes visitor political support
for park units (Dahlen, Larsen, Weber, & Fudge, 1996, p. 107; Tilden,
33 1957). There is very little evidence with which to evaluate this claim (Carson
and Knudson, 1996), though rare evaluations of interpretation suggest that
35 it can shape behavior in areas such as littering, bear-safe food storage, and
lessened damage to underwater resources by scuba divers (Cable, Knudson,
37 Udd, & Stewart, 1987) . If park interpretation in cultural areas has similar
levels of impact on visitors, then the current under-service of visitor interest
39 in Native Americans harms FDNHS as well as tourists and Native
American communities.

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