

Harpers Ferry Center

An Interpretive Planning Primer

Division of Interpretive Planning

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handout is to assist park staffs in preparing for an Interpretive Planning Team visit. It explains how a planning team functions; the differences in the two basic interpretive planning documents produced by the Division; and the advantages and limitations of each of the media used in parks.

THE PLANNING TEAM

Interpretive Planning Teams are typically composed of:

- an Interpretive Planner who acts as team captain.
- media specialists from the various disciplines represented at Harpers Ferry Center (exhibits, waysides, audiovisuals, publications, furnishings).
- the Park Superintendent, Park Interpreter, and other staff as designated by the Superintendent.
- a Regional Office representative.

In addition, consultants may be requested from other areas or offices if a special area of expertise is not readily available within the park or region. These may be from other regions, HFC or DSC, the archeological centers, from another agency, or by contract from outside the NPS.

Team composition varies from one project to another, and is dependent upon the expertise needed to accomplish the given task. It is the team captain's responsibility to assure that the proper specialists/consultants are selected. However, heavy reliance is made on the park staff's advice as to the project's scope and probable kinds of media involvement.

INTERPRETIVE PROSPECTUS OR MEDIA REHABILITATION?

Harpers Ferry Center produces two basic Interpretive Planning documents:

Interpretive Prospectus -

Generally, the Interpretive Prospectus (IP) is an outgrowth of the park's General Management Plan (GMP). The GMP addresses the what and where of interpretation, while the IP focuses on the how. The IP serves as the controlling document in the development of all interpretive media and facilities within a park. As such, it insures orderly and coordinated development of the various media, while at the same time providing cost estimates for funding and establishing production priorities. In addition the IP provides guidance for the more detailed plans which follow it (museum exhibit plan, wayside exhibit plan, audiovisual script, furnishing plan, etc.).

Media Rehabilitation -

The Major Rehabilitation Program was established to respond to the needs of parks which have outdated and/or substandard exhibits and audiovisual presentations. Under this program, planning is similar to the IP process in that:

- both use the team approach.
- the on-site planning process is virtually identical for both.
- approval procedures are identical (Park Superintendent/Harpers Ferry Center/Regional Director).
- both focus on media needs.

The Major Rehabilitation process differs from the IP in that:

- the final product is basically an expanded 10-238 with its accompanying 10-802 (Package Estimating Detail), which is considerably less comprehensive and involved than an IP.
- it proposes solutions primarily for problems of an immediate nature, while an IP normally considers the long term, optimal perspective.
- the actual planning and production of media is generally accomplished more quickly, ideally within the succeeding two fiscal years.

BEFORE THE PLANNING
TEAM ARRIVES

As the area's Chief Interpreter you are probably already prepared to participate in an interpretive planning effort for your park. Your intimate knowledge of the park (its resources, its visitors and its interpretive problems) is the most valuable ingredient you bring to the team.

In addition:

- the team captain will depend heavily on your advise in preparing an itinerary for the team while it is in the park.
- you should schedule your own time in such manner that you can fully participate as a team member throughout the on-site planning period. Your full participation is vital.
- arrange for any local subject matter specialists who you believe should meet with the planning team.
- you will be asked to provide a copy of the park's Statement for Interpretation; a bibliography of pertinent reading materials essential to a fundamental understanding of the park; and a brief synopsis of the scope of your museum collections, photo resources, etc.
- you should re-read the General Management Plan, Statement for Management and Basic Operations Data for the park to be certain that these documents guide the interpretive planning proposals for the site.

THE TEAM AT THE PARK

While on-site, the planning team members analyze interpretive problems and opportunities, and propose their best solutions. There are no standard procedures to accomplish this. Interpretive Planning is a group dynamics process that generally involves a completely free exchange of ideas and a great deal of dialogue. Sometimes compromise is necessary. The final plan must accurately reflect the team's thinking and be a document which the full team supports.

Before leaving the park, the plan should be presented to the Superintendent to secure his general concurrence with the proposals.

AFTER THE TEAM LEAVES

The team captain prepares a draft plan for team review. This is an informal review to insure that the plan accurately states the team's solutions. The team captain then makes any needed changes and submits the plan to park and region for their formal review. The plan is then approved as is, or is returned to the team captain for further revision. If revisions are needed they are made, and the plan is resubmitted to park and region for their approval. Requests for additional changes will not be accepted after the formal review comments are addressed.

Copies of the approved plan are provided to the park, region, DSC, WASO and any other office having input or concern regarding the plan. All media divisions at Harpers Ferry Center receive a copy which becomes the basic document in directing later planning and production of interpretive presentations (films, exhibits, waysides, publications, furnishings, etc.).

Upon receipt of funding, the appropriate Division or Branch Chief schedules the design and production of the media for his unit.

Upon the plan's approval the planning team ceases to exist as an official entity. The team captain, however, will continue to be involved with the plan. Essentially he/she becomes the park's representative at Harpers Ferry Center throughout the design/production process, and is available to respond to the park staff's questions and concerns regarding the project and its status. The Chief of the Division doing the work can also report on project status.

MUSEUM EXHIBITS

ADVANTAGES

Can be viewed at visitor's pace.

Can display objects associated with the site or the story.

Can sometimes visually communicate complex ideas.

Can promote visitor participation.

Can be complemented with other media (publications, AV, etc.).

Can be designed for indoor or outdoor use.

Can do well at communicating ideas or information which may be illustrated graphically or by objects.

LIMITATIONS

Most artifacts are sensitive to agents of deterioration (light, humidity, etc.).

Require security and maintenance.

Each exhibit tends to compete for the visitor's attention.

Does not work well with sequential stories.

Poor at communicating material which is essentially verbal or abstract.

HISTORIC FURNISHINGS
(include all the advantages and limitations of museum exhibits, plus those listed here)

ADVANTAGES

Historic integrity:
visitors can view
real objects in rooms
where important events
occurred.

Historic association:
visitors can compare
objects used by others
with their own.

Timelessness:
original objects are
the only medium that
cannot be manufactured.

Adaptability to different
methods of interpretation:

- look in
- walk through
- guided tour
- audio tour
- setting for living
history
- setting for live
drama presentations
- setting for films/
slides

LIMITATIONS

Acquisition and maintenance costs are very high.

Requires a relatively large amount of space.

PUBLICATIONS

ADVANTAGES

Portability.

Relatively inexpensive.

High souvenir value.

Source of detailed reference information.

Can be produced in foreign languages.

Wide variety of illustrative techniques can be used.

Well suited for presenting sequential material.

Can be read at visitor's pace.

Can produce income for local association.

Very complementary with personal services.

Easy to revise.

Can be produced at various levels of detail.

LIMITATIONS

Lengthy text might discourage use.

Can be a source of litter.

Poor design might dampen interest.

Requires storage, handling and accountability.

Ease of production might encourage use in place of more appropriate media, or result in a poorly designed publication.

AUDIOVISUALS

ADVANTAGES

Captures realism and can provide emotional impact.

Good for introductory programs.

Good for sequential stories.

Opportunity for dramatization.

Portable for off-site use.

Visual and sound effects can be used to advantage.

Can provide views and sounds which are otherwise unavailable or inaccessible.

Can reach many visitors at one time.

Can illustrate before and after effects.

With proper maintenance and backup equipment, can run continuous programs.

LIMITATIONS

Best under controlled situations (e.g. auditorium).

Requires backup equipment and regular maintenance and monitoring.

Might be perceived as sterile or impersonal.

Might be a visual or auditory intrusion.

Very poor for detailed orientation (how to get there, where to go, etc.).

WAYSIDE EXHIBITS

ADVANTAGES

Designed for outdoor use and can be placed in a wide variety of locations.

Can be complemented with other media, such as audio and publications.

Relatively inexpensive compared to most other media.

Can sometimes be used for presenting sequential material.

Viewing is at visitor's pace.

Remains available to visitors when facilities containing other media are closed.

Requires less intensive maintenance than most other media.

Excellent for relating information to the scene before the visitor.

LIMITATIONS

More exposed to vandalism than other media.

Content usually must be limited to the immediate scene and/or features.

A poor medium for dealing with complex or abstract subjects.

Cannot usually display three-dimensional objects.

Can be intrusive if improperly located.