

Visceral History: Interpreting Independence National Historical Park

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History

The eminent French historian Pierre Nora, in his formative work, *Realms of Memory*, posits the existence of “*lieux de mémoire*,” or places of memory. According to Nora, these sites are significant because societies define them as areas where history is to be experienced and remembered. A prime example of this concept is Independence National Historical Park (INHP), located in the “Center City” area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which started operations in 1948 under the auspices of the United States National Park Service (NPS).¹ The park consists of an area from Seventh to Second Streets (west-east) and from Race to Spruce Streets (north-south).² Independence Mall was originally established as a state park in 1945 through the efforts of the Independence Hall Association, but was immediately incorporated upon INHP’s founding.³

Nora’s conception of history and memory would designate INHP as a single place of memory. However, this fails to address the park’s diversity, as it actually houses a variety of historically significant monuments. The two most important and widely known symbols at the park are Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, but these only scratch the surface of the park’s overall significance. Determining this meaning, however, is complicated by INHP’s location and surroundings. While historical parks like Colonial Williamsburg or Valley Forge have problems all their own, the fact that the historical buildings operated by the park exist amid a contemporary urban environment only introduces more complexity into an already complicated case of public history.

For much of its history, the responsibility of providing an interpretation to this significant place of memory has fallen to its Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services (DIVS). The *interpretations* ascribed to the park by this organization are

¹ Pierre Nora and Various Authors, *Realms of Memory*, vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996). See Postscript for a deeper examination of this work in context.

² Constance M. Grieff, *Independence: The Creation of a National Park* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 5.

³ The Independence Hall Association was an *ad hoc* group of influential Philadelphians who officially banded together in 1942 (but were active long before that time), to prevent the loss of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell and to establish them as national historical monuments.

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the primary subjects of this study. While different approaches to INHP (e.g. the physical structures, tours, bureaucracy, etc.) should be considered, it is my view that an analysis of interpretation at the park in recent history will be most fruitful. Historian Constance Grieff, who wrote the official institutional history of the park in 1987, supports the primacy of this approach, saying, “The chief purpose of displaying them [the historic buildings of the INHP] to the public was to *teach a lesson* about the events that had taken place at the site, or *interpret* the broad themes in American history they exemplified.”⁴

Another fact justifying this approach is the number of visitors that attend the park yearly. For example, in the years immediately preceding the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration, annual visits to INHP were estimated to be around three million. During the Bicentennial celebration of 1976, that number doubled to six million.⁵ By 2004, visits nearly matched the inflated numbers from the Bicentennial, rising from 500,000 to 5.36 million.⁶ Considering the goal of the park’s interpretive services is to both attract and educate these visitors, it would be helpful to establish a history of the various historical meanings offered at INHP in order to interpret and fully understand them.

This study of the DIVS will occur on a variety of levels. Fundamentally, this analysis will consider the interpretation at the park in both *practice* and *theory*. That is to say, for each time period in which a distinct DIVS interpretation is determined to exist, its practical aspects (i.e., the park’s exhibits) and their connections to historical scholarship and specific events in American history will be considered. This practice will then be connected to historical theory to achieve a better understanding of what actually happened. This analysis will answer certain basic questions, such as what interpretations have INHP offered to the public in the past? When did these interpretations occur? What theories lurk viscerally behind these interpretations? What did these theories translate to in DIVS practice? Were these interpretations of the historical events that occurred at the INHP either conscious and deliberate, or more subconscious and visceral?

As can be deduced by this study’s title, it will be asserted that though INHP advanced conscious interpretations from its inception to the present day, there simultaneously existed unconscious (i.e., *visceral*) reasons for those ideas. This work will illuminate an objective pattern in both levels of the park’s conception, and will apply that pattern to the interpretation currently being planned. Given this line of argument, INHP interpretations can ultimately be divided into three distinct

⁴ Grieff, *Independence*, 84. (Emphasis added.)

⁵ *Ibid*, 248.

⁶ National Park Service, *Independence National Historical Park: Preliminary Interpretive Plan* (Philadelphia, National Park Service, 2004).

epochs. First, the period in between the park's establishment and 1976 will be considered. In this period, INHP instantly acquired so many historic landmarks that much of its time was spent researching, evaluating and restoring the spaces, along with catering to its first visitors. However, even with no time to plan or develop it, the park practiced an unofficial interpretation that glorified the American story in a classic, idealized narrative. A visceral idea also underlies this practice. This was the concept of "civil religion," first advanced by historian Robert N. Bellah in a 1967 article from the journal *Daedalus*.⁷ This study will link civil religion and the original idealized interpretation at INHP, define that concept and explain its inadvertent promotion by the interpretive staff.

Next, I will consider the era between the 1976 Bicentennial and 2004, when the DIVS started planning a new interpretation. The year 1976 is significant for a number of reasons in this context because it marks the DIVS' first foray into interpretational planning, evidenced by the three major themes presented for the Bicentennial celebration. This era constitutes the establishment in *theory* of the *practice* that occurred between 1948 and 1976—a process that upheld the influence of civil religion. Many questions will be asked regarding this era, including why the prior period's interpretation (which *in part* was necessary because of practical needs at the park) was not abandoned, especially since, after the Bicentennial celebration, the practical work on INHP was completed and a more intellectually rigorous story for the park could have been planned and applied.

Finally, the most recent interpretive plan of 2004 to 2006 will be considered. First, that plan's process will be considered because it constitutes INHP's first real change in interpretation. The practical aspects of the plan will be considered next, including the attempt to unite the park into one homogenous entity and the desire to establish practices that would convince visitors to see the whole park. This runs contrary to common visitor practice, as they tend to only visit Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Finally, the historical paradigm behind this interpretive plan will be examined—that of contemporary social history. We will then conclude by connecting conscious social history with the controversial subject of postmodernism (which will operate as the visceral theory in this case). This will suggest that the DIVS may be making the same mistake of their early INHP predecessors by unknowingly sliding into postmodern park interpretation, ignoring the possibility of a well-reasoned meta-narrative and simply presenting disparate *stories* and *perspectives*, which lack synthesis. Reasons why this is a problem will be presented, offering potential considerations for those in charge of this present interpretive plan. A postscript will then package this case study by placing it in the

⁷ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1-21.

context of a recent historiographical trend that examines the concept of “memory,” its connections to historical understanding, and the creation of public history.

1948-1976: The Primacy of Practice: Glorification and “Civil Religion”

“Interpretation,” in its most basic form, is a version of historical events advanced by a source. Public historians’ definitions of “interpretation” vary. For example, Freeman Tilden’s work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, advanced what amounts to the “classic definition” of the term: “...an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”⁸ Public historian Patricia Mooney-Melvin, former editor of that discipline’s official journal, ascribes much more significance to interpretation, claiming that it is “the key to unlocking the historical significance of a site or landscape” and “the medium for educating the public about the history associated with historical sites, cultural landscapes, the built environment, and artifactual remains.”⁹ While there is evidence that the National Park Service came to support this definition, INHP’s ideas during this period differ significantly from those offered above.¹⁰ While their interpretive plan of 1954 hints at this academic definition, they thought that providing “maximum benefit and enjoyment to the visitor and... [reflecting] credit on the National Park Service” was more fundamental to their mission.¹¹ They classified the role of their interpretive program as “designed to fill a latent but often inarticulate need of the visitor; to assist him where he needs and wants further understanding and appreciation of the thing he came to see.”¹² This demonstrates how INHP defined its educational role as secondary. They did not want to practice a concerted pedagogy, but instead desired to communicate information and stories *as the public requested*. This “all for public’s sake” character is critical to understanding the park’s function during this period.

⁸ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage: Principles and Practices for Visitor Services in Parks, Museums and Historic Places* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1957) 8.

⁹ Patricia Mooney-Melvin, “Beyond the Book: Historians and the Interpretive Challenge,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1995), 78.

¹⁰ See both T. Danton, “History and Philosophy of Interpretation Syllabus,” National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2007. <http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/103/intphillp.pdf> and Ronald F. Lee, *Public Use of the National Park System, 1872-2000* (Washington D.C., U.S. Department of the Interior, 2002)

¹¹ National Park Service, *Independence National Historical Park Operations: Interpretation Plan* (Philadelphia, NPS, March 1954), 23.

¹² *Ibid.*

As was asserted in the introduction of this work, INHP lacked an official interpretation and focused on practical functions during this era. The best evidence for this is the interpretive plan of 1952 to 1954. It was the last plan of its kind until the 1970s, when Bicentennial plans were well underway, so it can be reasonably inferred that interpretation at the park was essentially dictated by the approach of this document. The interpretive plan of 1952 through 1954 essentially reads as an INHP laundry list, laying out in vivid detail what existed, what happened at those places, and what could be done with them. This approach constitutes eighty-five pages of the one hundred-page report, which indicates the practical approach that the newly established INHP intended to implement.

Along with this practical approach, a plethora of evidence suggests the park's desire to inspire a positive attitude towards INHP and to draw more visitors. For example, the interpretive report given to park rangers asks them to "have that 'freshly-scrubbed' look; clean shaven, his hair cut and neatly combed, and fingernails trimmed and clean."¹³ Provisions of how the park staff should look and talk abounded in the "interpretation," suggesting that the DIVS was sensitive and tried to cultivate the public's perception of them. This sentiment even reared its head in the historical discourse, as rangers were asked to "*avoid jarring the sensibilities of visitors in manners relating to history. An air of 'debunking' popularly accepted notions and traditions which may be questionable in historical fact should be avoided.*"¹⁴ This is especially surprising considering that historical discourse often involves the very approach being rejected in this source. In sum, interpretation at the park during this era *privileged visitor experience over the questions of truth* in the interest of completing and establishing the park as a viable public historical entity. However, it must be noted that this sacrifice of intellectual rigor did not necessarily distinguish INHP and the National Park Service from the academic community. The 1950s through the early 1960s are historiographically known as an epoch of "consensus history," which was roughly equivalent (though more justified by use of evidence and argument) to the idealized narrative practiced at the park.¹⁵

The interpretation of the park during this era is widely known and accepted in America. This is the glorification narrative, which privileges all things positive involving the American Revolution and its founding documents (the Declaration of

¹³ National Park Service, *Independence National Historical Park Operations: Interpretation Plan*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3. (Emphasis added.)

¹⁵ For an early view of this trend, see John Higham, "The Cult of 'American Consensus,'" *Commentary* 27 (February 1959): 93-101. For the period in context, see Jonathan Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980," *American Historical Review* 76, no. 2 (September 1989): 399-434.

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Independence and Constitution) and avoids mentioning slavery, the lack of women's rights, or many of the other implicit paradoxes involved in the new republic. These ideas were especially valid in this Cold War era, during which the idealization of American democracy was seen as an ideological tool with which to fight communism. For example, in her work, *Independence Hall in American Memory*, historian Charlene Mires claims, "By mid-century, the work of the Independence Hall Association had defined Independence Hall and the surrounding area [INHP] as *places for patriotic commemoration of the American Revolution*."¹⁶ She also refers to INHP's "efforts to create a *controlled environment* dedicated to past events."¹⁷ Constance Grieff's handling of this era in *Independence: The Creation of a National Park* reflects this sense of control and the lack of a serious challenge to the consensus of the park. While she devotes three chapters of narrative to this period, those chapters' coverage of the years between 1948 and 1972 emphasize the physical establishment of the park (e.g. building restoration) and its fashioning into an operational bureaucracy.¹⁸ As Grieff sums up this period of interpretation at INHP, "[their] historians never promoted and publicized their methods and findings... the work at Independence remained relatively unknown to the broader scholarly community."¹⁹ The first serious case of challenge to the institutionalization and self-establishment of the park seems to have occurred in 1973, when the creation of a film for the upcoming Bicentennial event included an entrant that wanted to stress a "strong sense of reality and sensitivity to [American history's] human aspects." Grieff points out the INHP leadership's adverse reaction to this approach, asserting:

This revisionist view of history was *not acceptable* to the staff of the National Park Service. Although they were prepared to accept a vision of the founding fathers as less than godlike, *they intended to glorify and celebrate* the events at Independence, not follow the radical historiography of the Vietnam Era.²⁰

¹⁶ Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 203. (Emphasis added.)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For this story of consensus history in action, see Grieff, *Independence*, 77-188 ("The First Wars of Independence," "Restoring the Buildings" and "Telling the Park's Story")

¹⁹ Ibid., 188.

²⁰ Grieff, *Independence*, 217. (Emphasis added.) In this context, revisionism ran contrary to the glorified consensus of earlier years. This represented a concurrent movement in the academic community, represented at this time by the work of historian William Appleman Williams in the area of U.S. Foreign Relations.

This sentiment by the INHP administration reflected the desire to interpret American history *only* in the sense of presenting a story that its audience could both relate to and enjoy. The park wanted to inspire return visits, receive positive press, and avoid controversy. The approach had its intended effect, as attendance steadily rose.

However, even this controlled glorification of the American Revolutionary narrative may have been overextended. For example, Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell and the surrounding area are referred to as a “national shrine.”²¹ Along with this, religious metaphors abound at the site. The Liberty Bell itself contains the phrase: “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”²² In this case, the visceral history in practice has obvious connections to the conception positing the existence of an ever-present civil religion in America. All of these ideas point toward some deeper sense of American history at INHP and the interpretation of the site in both the first and second eras within this study (1948 to 2004).

Robert N. Bellah’s Concept of Civil Religion and its Influence on Public History

In an article following up on his original 1967 work, historian Robert Bellah asserts the existence of “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America... alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches.”²³ He defines civil religion as the intersection of national identity and religion by analyzing excerpts from speeches by former presidents John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln, while paying close attention to the intersection of national and religious language within them. These two presidents also have tangible connections with INHP, as both spoke at Independence Hall during their tenures. For example, Bellah cites the end of Kennedy’s inaugural address as an example of this phenomenon:

With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking *His blessing* and *His help*, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.²⁴

²¹ Grieff, *Independence*, 1.

²² This inscription quotes the Bible, specifically the book of Leviticus, ch. 25, verse 11.

²³ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York, Harper & Row, 1974), 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22. (Emphasis added.)

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Bellah sums up his analysis of Kennedy's speech by stating:

The whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth. *This was the motivating spirit of those who founded America, and it has been present in every generation since.*²⁵

Bellah moves on by citing French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the originator of the concept of civil religion, though Bellah's own conception differs significantly from Rousseau's.²⁶ The "life to come," as Rousseau termed it in *The Social Contract*, is not so privileged in Bellah's conception, for he rejects Rousseau's argument that civil religion necessarily implies the "exclusion of religious tolerance"—a major point Rousseau cited in arguing against the civil religious trend in his native France.²⁷

The general understanding of civil religion that can be derived from Bellah's article is simply the religious character of American politics. This excuses the separation of church and state and cites the continued and repetitive use of the concept of God, the idea of providence, and the goal of doing God's work on earth by American political figures. Bellah concludes positively that the civil religious character of American society "is a heritage of moral and religious experience from which *we still have much to learn* as we formulate the decisions that lie ahead."²⁸ It is apparent that this means civil religion should not be immediately shirked, as Rousseau argued, but should continue to operate and be analyzed in order to cultivate a deeper understanding of American politics.

Bellah's *Daedalus* article inspired a boom in scholarship during the late 1960s and 1970s. Following this major period of civil religious scholarship, interest in the concept lapsed as a major field of intellectual study. However, as an influence upon contemporary scholarship, civil religion has continued relevance. For example, Craig R. Smith recently published a work, *Daniel Webster and the Oratory of Civil Religion* (2005) that connected Bellah's concept to former American politico Daniel Webster. Even more historiographically significant was Benjamin Hufbauer's use of the concept in *Presidential Temples: How Memorials*

²⁵ Ibid., 25. (Emphasis added.)

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *American Civil Religion*, 26. For the original quote see, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Christopher Betts (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), 158-168.

²⁸ Ibid., 41. (Emphasis in original)

and Libraries Shape Public Memory.²⁹ Hufbauer's idea of civil religion specifically relates to presidential memorials and libraries. Hufbauer's claim is best summed up by his introduction, which states:

Presidential libraries are an attempt to construct sites that have all four of the elements of civil religion.³⁰ They are meant to be sacred national places where pilgrimages can be made to see relics and reconstructions of presidential [or national] history, all in order to elevate in the national consciousness presidents [or the nation] who, even if figures lesser than Washington or Lincoln, are *represented* as worth of patriotic veneration.³¹

The applications of these concepts to Independence National Historical Park are obvious. Some historical work has already referred to this connection. Charlene Mires' work on Independence Hall makes the civil religious connection to Independence Hall even during the 1860s, as she explains, "Representing the foundation of a nation that might have been lost [like the Hall itself in 1816], the building acquired a magnified significance, reflecting a civil religion that united religious belief with faith in the nation's progress."³² With this analysis in mind, INHP interpretations from 1948 to the recent interpretive plan served to establish the park as one of these "sacred national places" where both Americans and foreigners are intended (subconsciously) to pilgrimage and consume the idealized conception of America offered by such sources as the Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services at INHP.

INHP Interpretation from 1976 until 2006: Recognizing and Accepting Prior Practice

INHP's interpretation hit a pivotal point during the American Bicentennial of 1976. This event commemorated the two hundred-year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and was celebrated as a memorial during which citizens were meant to reflect upon America's founding and ideals. Philadelphia was one of the headlining cities in these celebrations. Consequently, INHP was

²⁹ See Craig R. Smith, *Daniel Webster and the Oratory of Civil Religion* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2005) and Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2005).

³⁰ These four elements of civil religion (as explained by Hufbauer) are saints (e.g. Washington and Lincoln), sacred places (e.g. Mount Vernon and *INHP*), sacred objects (e.g. the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution), and ritual practices (the pledge of allegiance and the fourth of July).

³¹ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 7.

³² Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory*, 114.

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pressed into service. Also, as the home of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, the park was doubly significant. Constance Grieff provides a useful timeline of INHP's awareness of the Bicentennial, claiming:

Although Judge Edwin O. Lewis began reminding the National Park Service of the approach of the Bicentennial in the late 1950s, it was not until 1969 that upper management began to devote serious attention to the park service's role in its celebration. By late 1970 the park had begun to plan for the Bicentennial on a national basis, which would spread its resources to satisfy its countrywide constituency.³³

With this basic timeline in mind, the history of INHP in this era can essentially be simplified into three elements harmonious with the practice-theory dichotomy considered in the introduction: the completion of research, repair and restoration activities performed since the park's opening; the additional enhancements made to the park prior to the Bicentennial celebration; and the production of an interpretation befitting the park's status as a centerpiece for the celebration. The reference to 1976 as "pivotal" above alludes to this interpretive function, since the era that followed also produced INHP's first codified and implemented interpretation.

The research, repair and setting activities were explained in section two, but they may require a bit more expounding. Research was an ongoing function of INHP, as DIVS staff attempted to update the park's interpretation with new information and ideas as much as was possible within the context of their glorifying or civil religious interpretation. Repair was a similarly continuous function, both the repairs to the buildings as they were when INHP acquired them and subsequent maintenance of those buildings. These were the two main functions of the DIVS after the Bicentennial era.

This era was quite instrumental in the physical development of the park. It took on new staff and opened the Todd House, the Bishop's White House, Pemberton House and the New Hall to visitors.³⁴ The opening of the Bishop's White House is immediately relevant to this study, as it exemplified the intersection of religious and national narratives through the figure of Bishop William White.³⁵ Along with these additions, candlelight tours through Society Hill and the park proper were

³³ Grieff, *Independence*, 233. Judge Edwin O. Lewis was a major figure in Philadelphia's historic preservation. He was the first president of the Independence Hall Association and was the most influential figure in establishing (at least) Independence Mall as a historic site.

³⁴ Grieff, *Independence*, 236.

³⁵ White was rector of Christ Church and St. Peter's Church, first Protestant Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania, and chaplain of the Continental Congress. He built the house from 1786 to 1787.

instituted in 1974, sponsored by the Philadelphia Convention and Visitor's Bureau.³⁶ Carpenter's Hall also saw an increase in attendance due to the commemoration of two hundred year anniversary of the first meeting of the First Continental Congress in 1774.³⁷ Most importantly, the park built and opened Franklin Court and the moved the Liberty Bell out of Independence Hall to a pavilion across the street, emphasizing the Bell's significance and allure to visitors.

The Franklin Court project was constructed in between 1972 and 1976 under the supervision of the architectural firms Venturi & Rauch and National Heritage.³⁸ The court consists of three key buildings leftover from the era on Market Street (one of which Franklin had owned), along with the foundations of Franklin's original house, which park administrators chose to represent with a steel outline of the structure's original dimensions with peep holes to view the foundations (due to a lack of sources describing the exterior of the house and the existence of good sources from the Franklins themselves about the interior).³⁹ This was important relative to the official interpretive themes produced by the DIVS for the Bicentennial (which will be explained below), one of which directly addressed Benjamin Franklin as a "man of ideas."

The biggest move during this era was an attempt to unify the park by augmenting its geography to get Independence Hall visitors to visit other buildings (a major problem for INHP since its inception). The new Visitor's Center, a modern building constructed from 1972 to 1976, was meant to perform this function. It was constructed as an intended starting point to park visits, the idea being to take visitors east, first to City Tavern, and then westward to the main part of the park. The building was also meant to directly impact interpretation, as visitors to the center were exposed to an interpretation of INHP through a film shown there. It also featured a Bicentennial Bell cast in the Whitehall foundry from which the Liberty Bell originated and featuring the inscription "Let Freedom Ring" (consider the glorifying interpretation).⁴⁰ If successful, the center would have significantly impacted the practice of interpreting the park, likely for the better. However, it failed to inspire visitors or change Independence Hall's dominance vis-à-vis the rest of the park, and the building was eventually appropriated for use as an archeological center (among other purposes) in 2001. Around that time, a new Visitor's Center was constructed at the corner of Sixth and Market Streets. The lasting innovation of the Bicentennial celebration was the creation of the first Liberty Bell Pavilion, a structure displaying and interpreting the Bell's

³⁶ Grieff, *Independence*, 238.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-216.

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significance. It was placed at Sixth and Chestnut Streets in 2003, adding a permanent interpretive edifice to Independence Mall.

These physical innovations improved the surface image of INHP exponentially and fit with the 1954 interpretive ideal by improving visitors' aesthetic experience of the park. However, more significant to the present study are the interpretive changes that occurred during this time. The year 1976 marked the first time that a tangible, listed interpretation emerged from the DIVS office. Essentially, that interpretation represents both the understanding of practice in the prior period and the acceptance of that framework for the Bicentennial. This interpretation revolved around three major themes. The first two themes of "Independence and the New Nation" and "Historic Philadelphia, Capital City," according to Constance Grieff, "[were] always central to the concept of the park." Grieff also claims that the third theme, "'Franklin, Man of Ideas,' represented a reassessment of values at Independence over a period of some twenty years. This was in large part due to the accumulation of knowledge through the park's research."⁴¹ So, for the first two themes, Grieff explicitly supports the claim that the 1976 interpretation was an official affirmation of prior practice. As for the Franklin theme, while it did not reflect prior practice, it was researched in the 1948 to 1976 period. Along with this, Ben Franklin is an intimately connected character to the American Revolution and the city of Philadelphia, so the use and glorification of him is no stretch of the imagination. No example elucidates this connection better than INHP's construction of Franklin Court, which essentially represented the final bubbling of these ideas to the surface. As for the first two themes, they are depicted by a number of tangible structures in the park, including Independence Hall, Congress Hall, Carpenter's Hall, and "The Signer" statue erected during the Bicentennial improvements, which sits on the corner of Fifth and Chestnut Streets. These ideas constitute the core of the glorification and civil religious narrative, and though they were perceived and understood during the Bicentennial research, they were still confirmed for the celebration. There does seem to be a reason for this confirmation, as 1976 constituted a positive event for the country. It was also positive for Independence Mall, which was officially transferred to the National Park Service in a ceremony involving President Gerald Ford. The INHP staff did not want to cause controversy during such an event, befitting the park's original interpretive stance.

⁴¹ Grieff, *Independence*, 200.

**Current Independence National Historical Park:
Glorification and Civil Religion⁴²**

To a certain extent, the glorification narrative expanded following its affirmation for the Bicentennial celebration. Two more recent additions best exemplify this expansion—Welcome Park (constructed in 1982 by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park, a contributory group) and the new Liberty Bell Pavilion (constructed in 2003). These monuments demonstrate the previously established connection between the glorifying interpretation (which was affirmed in this era) and civil religion.

Welcome Park sits on Second Street just south of the intersection with Market, on the site of William Penn’s former Philadelphia home, known as the “Slate Roof House.” The “park” is a monument to Penn, Pennsylvania founder and Quaker, whom the Friends of Independence National Historical Park group deifies, placing him among the pantheon of those commonly known as “Founding Fathers.”⁴³ The site stresses his political and religious roles, as they say of his Quaker transformation, “The Lord visited me with a certain sound and testimony of his eternal word through one of those in the world called a Quaker.”⁴⁴ His role in the political life of nation is also expressed with a religious element, as another panel features the quote, “...serve His truth and people, that an *example* may be set up *to the nations*, there may be room there [in America], but not here [in Europe], for such an *holy experiment*.”⁴⁵ The glorifying and civil religious properties of the site pertaining to park interpretation between 1976 and 2006 are self-evident.

The Liberty Bell Center lies at the corner of Sixth and Chestnut Streets. While the Bell’s display changed little there, a series of exhibits leading to the Bell itself were added. These exhibits did not exist before 2003, and give a nice window into the interpretation that existed during the period. For example, one panel refers to the Bell as “...one of the nation’s *sacred relics*, preserved as a tangible link to the struggle for freedom that created the nation. Such *hallowed objects* are often located at *sites of pilgrimage* like Independence Hall.”⁴⁶ Another panel proclaims,

⁴² This research was first done in the fall of 2006 in the form of park visits, but its content remains current.

⁴³ This also coincided with the 300th anniversary of the founding of Philadelphia in 1982.

⁴⁴ Michael Chornesky, Notes on City Visit (Welcome Park, November 25, 2006). Quote from William Penn, no source provided at the site.

⁴⁵ Michael Chornesky, Notes on City Visit, from William Penn, no source provided. (Emphasis added.)

⁴⁶ Michael Chornesky, Liberty Bell Visit Notes (Bell Pavilion, November 13, 2006). (Emphasis added.)

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“Ring loud that hallowed BELL... ring it till the slave be free...”⁴⁷ These obvious examples of the glorified, civil religious interpretation are also mixed with a hint of a new interpretation, evidenced by panels influenced by the emancipation and suffragist movements. In reference to the suffragette movement, one panel asserts, “The original Liberty Bell announced the creation of democracy; the Women’s Liberty Bell will announce the completion of democracy.”⁴⁸ Coincidentally, circumstances involving the creation of the Center also advanced the need for a new interpretation, as a major controversy arose over the proximity of the Liberty Bell to the foundations of what interpreters previously called the “First White House,” along with its slave quarters. This issue is currently being resolved with the construction of a monument to the site, the President’s House, though that building is still in its planning stages as of January 2008.⁴⁹

Discontents with the Present Interpretation: Prelude to a New Interpretive Plan

The Liberty Bell Center exhibits were not the first signs of change in INHP’s interpretation. In fact, discontent with the presentation offered by the park can be traced to back to 1999, as scholars took notice of INHP’s lack of interpretive adjustment to changes in the historical field. While the park’s interpretation of the Liberty Bell Center represented some recent trends in scholarship, the remainder of the park was woefully antiquated with the continued influence of the civil religious narrative. It took five years for criticism to flow from the level of professional intellectuals to that of the park’s interpretive staff, which finally decided to develop a new master interpretive plan in 2004. The National Park Service, not academic historians, was the impetus of this change, demonstrating the bureaucratic nature of that institution in its control over INHP.

The birth pangs of this process can be traced to the publication of a number of harshly critical popular texts regarding the public’s conception of history in the 1990s. Prominent examples of this genre included *Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of American History* and *Not So!: Popular Myths About America from*

⁴⁷ Ibid., from H.R.H. Moore, “The Liberty Bell.” (1844).

⁴⁸ Michael Chornesky, Liberty Bell Visit Notes, from Katherine Ruschenberger, suffragist, *New York Times* (March 31, 1915).

⁴⁹ See Jill Oglie, “‘Creating Dissonance for the Visitor’: The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 49-57. For another version, see Gary Nash, “For Whom Will the Bell Toll? From Controversy to Cooperation,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York, The Free Press, 2006).

Columbus to Clinton.⁵⁰ While these texts did not mention INHP directly, the park did not escape scrutiny for long, as James Loewen's 1999 publication of *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* cited their narrative errors. Loewen complained, "NPS relies on its staff to tell visitors the history that makes this building [Independence Hall] important. Based on my four visits, the strategy doesn't work—the history does not get told... Instead of revealing *what* happened here however, they tell mildly amusing anecdotes about *how* it happened."⁵¹ Loewen went into detail about the events that occurred at the park and how the staff told the story of those events poorly. In one of Loewen's more incisive comments on the subject, he claimed:

Guides might also point out the contradiction between the famous phrase, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," and the founders' practices of slavery and sexism. Guides say nothing so substantive now.⁵²

As will be established in the next section, this is a critique that definitely seems to have been considered and followed by the INHP. Loewen continues, stating:

Instead of telling about the Constitution [he does explain their better consideration of the Declaration of Independence], guides describe how long it took delegates to get to Philadelphia from South Carolina or New Hampshire. They point out how the delegates sat facing George Washington, whom they expected would be the first president. And they tell how Ben Franklin observed to delegates sitting near him that the back of the president's chair had a sun painted on it. "I have often... looked at that behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun."⁵³

⁵⁰ Richard Shenkman, *Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of American History* (New York, Harper Paperbacks, 1992) and Paul F. Boller, *Not So! Popular Myths About America from Columbus to Clinton* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵¹ James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone Publishing, 1999), 358.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 359.

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All of these anecdotes were included in my three tours of Independence Hall, so there is no reason to doubt the veracity of Loewen's claims. His general criticism of INHP is that it tended to practice antiquated consensus history over recent scholarship, which points more towards conflict over consensus in the early republic. It is also apparent that the DIVS staff heard these complaints in some form, as one staff member described INHP's presentation as "dated, white, middle-class history... not suited to the increasingly diverse group of visitors to the park."⁵⁴ In sum, DIVS, under pressure from the National Park Service, the Organization of American Historians and INHP administration, resolved to create and implement a new interpretive plan. This plan and its ideas will be considered in the final two sections of this analysis.

The 2006 INHP Interpretive Master Plan: Conception and Major Themes

The most recent INHP interpretation was conceived between 2004 and 2006 by the park staff in consort with a number of peripheral groups. It was, in its most basic form, an attempt to contrive an interpretation befitting present historical scholarship, but also to conceive a presentation that would make for a pleasurable visitor experience and avert any potential controversy (especially in the wake of the Liberty Bell debacle). Though the interpretation is not fully implemented yet, it has coincided with the original mission of INHP interpretation by avoiding serious controversy.⁵⁵

The interpretive process began more than two years ago, in October, 2004, when a few historians from the Organization of American Historians (OAH), including prominent local historian Gary Nash, were selected to visit the park and submit lengthy reports to the DIVS. This study pointed out three key problems with services there. The first was a physical problem mentioned in the conclusion of the report. As the report argues, "The 'park without borders' challenges tourists and residents alike to be alert to their location in a national park."⁵⁶ The second problem mentioned is also physical, claiming that, "Interpretation at the park core is inflexible. Visitors get a better, nuanced tour when they leave the icons and move to the edges."⁵⁷ These two ideas refer to the park's existence within a

⁵⁴ Stephen Sitarski, Interview by Michael Chornesky, November 13, 2006.

⁵⁵ The only press coverage the park received in the four months predating this study's completion were the process of selecting a design for the planned President's House monument and the implementation of further security measures at Independence Hall.

⁵⁶ National Park Service, *Independence National Historical Park: Report on Site Review of Interpretive Programs by The Organization of American Historians* (Philadelphia, National Park Service, 2005), 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

modern city, which can confuse visitors who do not know where the park “ends” and the city “begins.” DIVS traditionally reacted to this problem by confining its interpretation to Independence Mall. The report suggests that INHP stop compensating for these problems and *solve* them.

This same reasoning is then applied to the park’s conceptual interpretation. The report points to the third problem: “The park is bound by the ‘inertia of tradition.’ Find a way to give ‘punch’ to canonical stories without diminishing the traditional themes.” Finally, the study settles in on the most incisive criticism of the park’s ideas, claiming, “Conditions in the park have changed and the park must rethink its approach. These changes break down into internal factors, external factors and *visitor factors* [the variety of visitors viewing the park].”⁵⁸ This seems to have been the main problem with interpretive operations, the telling of a 1950s story to a twenty-first century audience.

The INHP’s newest interpretive plan seeks to solve these problems. Along with the OAH review, the National Park Service imposed new bureaucratic standards calling for a new interpretation every ten years. This was the practical reason for the new plan. Finally, the DIVS sought to ameliorate past interpretive processes by holding a series of meetings with park staff and business interests around and outside of the park’s borders.⁵⁹

The results of this process were mixed. While the INHP is working to solve its physical problems by increasing the instances of signs and maps throughout the park, attempts to divert visitors away from Independence Mall remain fruitless. Attendance statistics for sites in the park proper continue to overshadow those for exhibits on the park’s periphery. As occurred with the original Visitor’s Center concept in the late 1970s, people ignore the rest of the park. Instead of following the suggestion of the OAH and developing the park’s periphery to fight this trend, INHP chose instead to develop the park’s interior. The development of Independence Mall, the increased security measures (there but nowhere else), the recent openings of the Independence Visitor’s Center and the Liberty Bell Center within a few hundred yards of Independence Hall, and the planning of the President’s House building in the same area point to INHP’s *ad hoc* solution to this problem. The problem with this idea is that it continues to divert attention away from park resources on the periphery, such as Franklin Court, Welcome Park, City Tavern and the Second Bank of the United States, to name a few. If this process continues, visits to those resources will continue to decline. This practice, if continued, will limit the resources from which INHP tells the story of America’s

⁵⁸ National Park Service, *Independence National Historical Park: Report on Site Review of Interpretive Programs by The Organization of American Historians*, 5. (Emphasis in original.)

⁵⁹ Stephen Sitarski, Interview by Michael Chornesky, November 13, 2006.

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founding, failing to reveal the complex circumstances that were required to attain that outcome.

Finally, there is the change in the park's interpretation, which revolves around its four new major themes: "Liberty: The Promises and the Paradoxes," "E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One," "What was Revolutionary about the American Revolution?" and "Benjamin Franklin: The Relevant Revolutionary." While this seems to be a continuation of themes established in 1976, particularly in the latter two, the material has actually been expanded. "What was revolutionary..." is the development of the American Revolution theme of 1976, and significantly improves it with the proposal of the theme in the form of a question. This reflects historical scholarship on the radicalism of the Revolution, specifically the more recent work of Gordon Wood and others.⁶⁰ "Benjamin Franklin" is an obvious continuation of the 1976 theme of the same name, only he is now a "relevant revolutionary." This makes him look more human by removing the veneer of deification and civil religion. "E Pluribus Unum" and "Liberty, the Promises and Paradoxes" are entirely new, and certainly fit with current trends in historical scholarship (i.e., the predominance of social history). In essence, they aspire to analyze the American "melting pot" and the social paradoxes inherent in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.⁶¹ According to the interpretive plan, the themes were innovated "during a series of workshops involving a cross-section of park staff, constituents and partners." More importantly, the plan outlines a clear approach to its subject, claiming that "*The purpose of Independence National Historical Park is to preserve its stories, buildings and artifacts as a source of inspiration for visitors to learn more about the ideas and ideals that led to the American Revolution and the founding and growth of the United States.*"⁶² This subjective character of the recent plan deserves further investigation.

Visceral Postmodernism: Meaning, Potential Problems and Their Solutions

Of course, this interpretation is not without its problems. A critical thinker might note the contradiction inherent in the physical and conceptual proposals. The physical actions taken by INHP suggest a pulling inward of the park's resources to Independence Mall, while the new conceptual proposal emphasizes broader expansion and variety. Also, it is apparent that the visceral component of civil

⁶⁰ See Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, A.A. Knopf Inc., 1992)

⁶¹ Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services, *Long-Range Interpretive Plan for Independence National Historical Park* (Harpers Ferry, VA, National Park Service, 2006) 13-14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7. (Emphasis added.)

religion might just sneak up on INHP again. This could occur through the interpretation's reliance on the now popular conception of "social history" for its ideas. The visceral mechanism being posited here is the connection between current "social history" and the controversial conceptual paradigm of postmodernism, which this study contends are closely linked.

The relationship between the two approaches is one of the overarching theory (postmodernism) and its subsidiary within the historical field (social history). Most literature on the subject rejects a tidy, dogmatic definition of the term "postmodernism." However, postmodernist doctrine consistently features a few basic themes. First, there is the meaning of the term *postmodernism*: a rejection of modernity and the intellectual structures that supported the period (those of the Enlightenment).⁶³ Jean-François Lyotard defines the second theme within his work, claiming, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives [the grand narratives alluded to above]."⁶⁴ The third theme is expressed in the work of historians Michel Foucault and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, both of whom tend to express their perceptions of history in terms of social *power* relations. They show the diffusion of postmodern ideas into both academic and public history respectively.⁶⁵ Finally, there is an undercurrent to these themes that is especially pertinent to INHP—the presentation of material in terms of *stories* and *perspectives*. This last theme can be summed up as the *subjective* character of postmodernism, the primacy of individual approaches over the generalized and all-encompassing narrative. All of these basic aspects of the postmodern approach are explicitly and repeatedly employed in the recent DIVS *Long-Range Interpretive Plan*.

Postmodernism's connection to the new interpretive plan is evident. For example, the plan asserts that "Park interpreters will provide visitors with opportunities to make *intellectual and emotional connections* to park sites and *stories*, fostering the public's interest in the stewardship and preservation of the park's resources."⁶⁶ Foucault might interpret this statement as the park's manipulation of visitors, but the true idea behind this statement is more about *personal* interpretation. This meshes with postmodernism's emphasis on individual

⁶³ Examples of this theme can be seen in David J. Herman's article "Modern/Postmodern," in the anthology *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1993), 157-86.

⁶⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "Modern/Postmodern" *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1993), 72.

⁶⁵ See Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Foucault's concept of power relations is the original and likely inspired Trouillot's.

⁶⁶ National Park Service, *Long-Range Interpretive Plan for Independence National Historical Park*, 11. (Emphasis added.)

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understanding over the structural approach utilized by the *Annales* School. Also, the preface to the explanation of the interpretive themes contains the loaded statement: “They [focused themes] open minds to new ideas and perhaps to *multiple points of view*. When linked to commonly held *emotions* or universal *human experiences*, themes encourage audiences to *see themselves* in a park’s story and *discover personal relevance*.”⁶⁷ While INHP mediated thematic choices, their content and the approach applied to them are symptomatic of postmodernism’s ubiquitous influence.

So what can we conclude based on the above processes and patterns? Is postmodernism a positive development that stresses the stories of the formerly repressed over consensus narratives (e.g. the newly emerging field of subaltern history)? Or is it, as Larry Laudan, Alan Sokal, and Jean Bricmont claim it to be, “...the most prominent and pernicious manifestation of anti-intellectualism in our time.”⁶⁸ These questions presently remain unanswered. However, INHP’s movement in this direction must, unlike in the case of civil religion, be accompanied by a sense of self-reflection and understanding of previous tendencies in park interpretation: a movement beyond visceral history.

Postscript: Connecting Visceral History to Conceptions of “Collective Memory”

The introduction of this work depicted Independence National Historical Park as an exemplification of French historian Pierre Nora’s concept of realms or places of memory. If this connection is valid, then the park is one of many settings in the United States where American and foreign visitors go to *experience* the nation’s history. While that observation remains correct, it neglects a burgeoning historical discipline partly inspired by this idea and others from Nora’s work, *Realms of Memory*: the examination of memory, specifically what is called “collective memory.”

In its beginnings, the study of collective memory, of “a set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community,” was interdisciplinary, a dialogue between intellectuals of other disciplines and historians.⁶⁹ Thus, the figures cited as figuring in the predawn of the discipline are sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, psychologist Sigmund Freud and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13. (Emphasis added.)

⁶⁸ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York, Picador Press, 1998), 50.

⁶⁹ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 1.

philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.⁷⁰ After Nora's seven-volume French language version of *Realms of Memory* was published between 1984 and 1992, American historians applied his conclusions regarding French national history to American examples, beginning with Michael Kammen's 1991 work, *Mystic Chords of Memory*. Our primary concern is the state of the field after this original period of study, as these ideas in context add meaning to the case study above.

While the study of memory as a historical concept has developed much since Nora's original work, the definition of the term has changed little. Nora defines the term in a variety of ways, at times contrasting it with history, and also connecting it to history. Overall, he deems the concept irrevocably tied to the period in which it is invoked, calling it "life, always embodied in living societies... subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" and "always a phenomenon of the present."⁷¹ Subsequent historians have defined it more literally, corresponding to the increased sophistication of the field. Kerwin Lee Klein claims that, "If memory is objective in the coldest, hardest sense of the word, memory is subjective in the warmest, most inviting senses of that word." He further defines it as "not a property of individual minds, but a diverse and shifting collection of material artifacts and social practices."⁷² David Blight further accentuates the practical distinctions between history and memory, asserting, "Memory is often owned; history interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised. Memory often coalesces in objects, sacred sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts and the complexities of cause and effect. History asserts the authority of academic training and recognized canons of evidence; memory carries the often more powerful authority of community membership and experience."⁷³

Perhaps this draws the distinction too sharply. While these historians seek contrasts between history and memory, the two sources of knowledge are also complimentary. As we have already seen with INHP interpretations before 2004, to advance a historical interpretation without the application of intellectual rigor—to historicize memory—poses certain dangers. However, the last twenty years in the historical field and the last three in the history of the park have also demonstrated that, at least in the minds of many historians, history is not quite as "objective" as Kerwin Lee Klein connotes it. The study of memory was widely ignored prior to 1991, but by 1997, it was featured prevalently in issues of both *The Public*

⁷⁰ Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 133.

⁷¹ Nora and Various Authors, *Realms of Memory*, vol. 1, 3.

⁷² Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 130.

⁷³ Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 2.

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Historian and the *American Historical Review*, with historian David Glassberg calling memory “a new way to think about public history, a common intellectual foundation for the diverse enterprises taught and practiced under its name.”⁷⁴ This fast-paced succession of historical trends and the questionable content of those trends have brought the very notion of truth in history into question. Memory was historicized and history was made increasingly like memory.

Nevertheless, there is a reality behind the vagaries of this “text.” While recent developments have revealed a certain inherent subjectivity to historical study, they have also overshadowed its evidential and argumentative rigors. This is proven by the application of context to a term as loaded and complex as memory in the sources above. In addition, the attempt to apply memory (in the form of the idealistic, civil religious narrative) to a historical site in the preceding narrative lends extra credence to the use of memory as a subject of historical study. Conversely, it demonstrates the weakness of memory as a source of historical knowledge. This is evident in light of a recent historical debate over the weaknesses of oral and interview sources. This is odd given the visiting public’s reliance on that very memory (either in terms of their education or direct experience in more recent history) for knowledge.⁷⁵ The above story of interpretation at INHP reveals to us two potential responses to the complex problems of public history. The first showed visitors the America they wanted to see and satisfied the historiographical tendencies of the time. Nevertheless, it was insufficient. The latter conception appears to satisfy the exact same conditions as the first. However, as we have observed through the concept of memory, reliance on subjectivity also has limits. Better answers likely lay in between these two extremes and in the unity of history and memory.

⁷⁴ David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 8.

⁷⁵ For more on this problem, see Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998).

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