



Four Signs

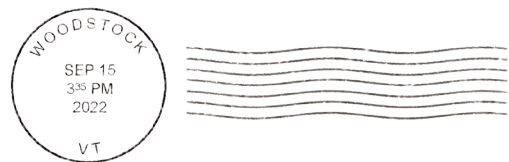
Rolf Diamant

An Old Sign

While riding a bike on a recent visit to Cumberland Island, I briefly stopped for a water break and took a photograph of a small sign I might have otherwise missed. Shards of glass on the weather-beaten sign were missing; what was left was pockmarked by three bullet holes. Mottled gray-green lichen gave a camouflage-like veneer to its wooden frame. The sign looked like it had been around for a while, a lonely sentinel waiting to be relieved or renewed. Its message, however, was still legible in large block letters—THIS IS A NATIONAL PARK—serving as a timeless



LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



reminder to all who traverse the sandy artery that runs the length of this long and narrow sea island. Much like the time-worn road-sign, Cumberland Island National Seashore, though somewhat battered and beleaguered by controversies—almost too many to keep track of—is still doing its job, as the seashore prepares to mark its 50th anniversary.

I remember National Park Service (NPS) legendary leader Denis Galvin referring to parks like Cumberland as the “hardy perennials” of the national park system.

Old issues never seem to be get fully resolved, and new ones regularly flare-up. Locked in uninterrupted cycles of conflict, these parks keep NPS solicitors extremely busy. I have previously written a “Letter from Woodstock” about one such park, Point Reyes National Seashore (“Point Reyes: A Landscape Indivisible?”; <http://www.georgewright.org/342diamant.pdf>). I’ve also developed case studies for graduate seminars I’ve given at the University of Vermont based on long-running controversies at Point Reyes and Cumberland. Periodically updating these cases with the latest developments, it sometimes feels like I’m preparing successive episodes of a never-ending TV series. In fact, as I write this 28th “Letter from Woodstock,” there is yet more late-breaking news from Cumberland. The seashore, along with many of its Camden County neighbors, have been fending off a proposal by the county commission to build a commercial spaceport on the mainland, just across the Cumberland River from the park. The spaceport proposal, placed on the ballot earlier this year, was soundly rejected by 72% of Camden County voters. However, the county commissioners, are now trying to have the Georgia Supreme Court set aside the referendum and nullify the will of the voters—a distressing turn of events becoming an all-too-familiar narrative in America since 2020.

When all is said and done, parks like Point Reyes and Cumberland—despite contested plans, monumental environmental documentation, and serial lawsuits—remain beloved by the public. They preserve a vanishing part of America’s natural and cultural coastal heritage for their visitors, ultimately justifying all the effort that goes into protecting them and running them well.

So, staff and supporters of Cumberland Island National Seashore deserve to take a deep breath and a deep bow when they hold a celebration this fall in the town of St. Marys, Georgia, marking half a century of park operations. Lary Dilsaver, an

excellent historian whom I have gotten to know through the George Wright Society, has been invited to speak at the event. Dilsaver is the author of an outstanding park history, *Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Conservation Conflict* (2004; <http://npshistory.com/publications/cuis/dilsaver/index.htm>). I am eager to hear what he now has to say.

A New Sign

Continuing my bike ride I stopped at the seashore’s small museum housed in a former icehouse near the Dungeness end of the island. Here, I encountered another sign, of a more recent vintage, announcing a much-welcomed renovation of museum exhibits. “The park is working to tell a broader and more encompassing history,” the sign read, “that recognize[s] the heritage, culture, and experiences of all the people of the island.”



Park staff would agree (I spoke with the cultural resources team) that this renovation is long overdue. The museum’s exhibits panels, installed by NPS more than 40 years ago, are heavily focused on the Gilded Age with the historical timeline jumping abruptly from the Plantation Era (ending with 1862 Federal occupation of Cumberland during the Civil War)

to the “Industrialist Period” of grand island estates beginning in the early 1880s. Most troubling is exhibit text that sounds disturbingly nostalgic for the “order and serenity” of the antebellum years of slavery:

After the war, the Georgia sea islands were a scene of desolation and ruin. Planters returned to former homes, but the order and serenity they knew were gone. Fields lay wasted, mansions were in a state of decay, slave quarter in ruins, a way of life ended.

Given this dated interpretation, it is not surprising that very little is said about emancipation and its consequences for Freedpeople on Cumberland. Hopefully, when new exhibits at Cumberland are installed, this will change.

Signs of Progress

Cumberland exhibit planners do not have far to look to find park interpretation that tells a more complete story of emancipation and Reconstruction on the Sea Islands. One hundred twenty-five miles up the coast at neighboring Fort Pulaski National Monument on Cockspur Island at the mouth of the Savannah River, there is the excellent wayside interpretive sign, “Freedom Ahead!”, shown here.

The interpretive wayside succinctly illustrates events at Pulaski that were in fact replicated at Cumberland and many other coastal locations. In 1862, during the Civil War, Federal military incursions along the Southern Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, far from main battlefields, encouraged resistance by enslaved people, including the exodus of thousands of “self-emancipated” people

Fort Pulaski National Monument

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Freedom Ahead!

Union forces took back Fort Pulaski in 1862, opening a door to freedom for enslaved people in the region. Families fled to this Union outpost in Confederate territory for liberty and protection. The military recruited African American men from the surrounding area to form one of the first African American regiments in the Union Army.



Soon after the Battle of Fort Pulaski, General David Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, issued General Orders No. 7, freeing enslaved people at Fort Pulaski and on Cockspur Island, Georgia.



Formerly enslaved people lived in the village supporting the Fort Pulaski post.



After Fort Pulaski fell, the Union recruited the 1st South Carolina United States Colored Volunteer Infantry, shown here in Beaufort, South Carolina.



from plantations to improvised camps and settlements behind Union lines. The refugees forged a complex and ultimately hugely impactful alliance with the Federal forces, and eventually almost 200,000 Black soldiers fought with the US Army. This resistance accelerated

interpret this socially complex and geographically sweeping story in a comprehensive and coordinated way—as a networked system should. This brings us to the fourth and last sign.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

the codification of emancipation and passage of the 13th Amendment, the defeat of the Confederacy, and the end of slavery. (See excerpts elsewhere in this issue from my book, co-authored with Ethan Carr, titled *Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea*.)

Early Reconstruction also had its start on the sea islands, including on Cumberland, and on nearby Hilton Head and St. Helena. Much of this story is in fact told in NPS or NPS-affiliated areas including Fort Monroe National Monument (VA), Fort Raleigh National Historic Site and Cape Hatteras National Seashore (NC), Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park (SC), Reconstruction Era National Historical Park (SC), Gullah Geechee National Heritage Area (NC, SC, GA, FL), Fort Pulaski (GA), Dry Tortugas National Park (FL), Gulf Islands National Seashore (FL, MS) and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park (LA). All these parks (and others) have joined a Reconstruction Era National Historic Network established by Congress in 2019 and administered by Reconstruction Era National Historical Park. The real prize here is for NPS to

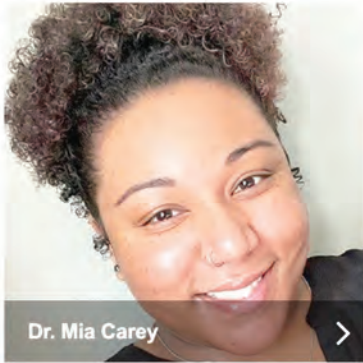
Over the past three years a small cohort of post-doctoral fellows has been hard at work doing research and programming for NPS under the auspices of a nearly \$1 million pilot program managed by the National Park Foundation (NPF) and NPS and funded by the Mellon Foundation. The four National Park Service Mellon Humanities Fellows conducted original research to expand park interpretation related to the History of Labor and Productivity, the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, Gender and Sexuality Equality, and the Legacy of Monuments and Memory (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/ooo/mellon-humanities-fellowship.htm>).

“History, as it turns out, is a living thing,” observed Brook Gladstone, host of National Public Radio’s “On the Media,” “in constant transformation, renewed by research reconsiderations, and reckonings in every realm of human endeavor.”

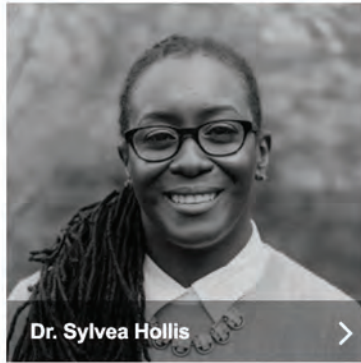
For example, Humanities Fellow Dr. Mia Carey, focusing her research on the long-overlooked history of Black women, developed nine online biographical profiles for the “Exploring the Meaning of Black Womanhood Series: Hidden Figures in NPS Places.”

Humanities Fellow Dr. Emma Silverman organized a virtual public event series, “The Lives of Monuments: Memory, Revolution, and Our National Parks” (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/monuments/lives-of-monuments.htm>). This series brought together scholars, national park staff, and community members for conversations about Revolutionary War monuments and their place in American memory, identity, and belonging. Silverman and Humanities Fellow Dr. Eleanor Mahoney co-organized another virtual public event series, “Monumental Labor,” on the memorialization of key events in labor

MEET THE MELLON FELLOWS



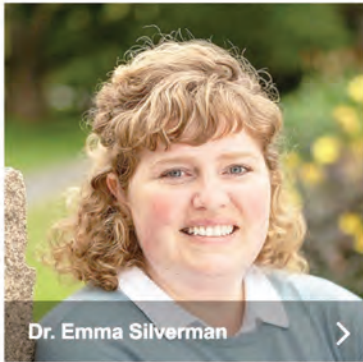
Dr. Mia Carey



Dr. Sylvea Hollis

Mellon Fellow in the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement

Mellon Fellow in Gender and Sexuality Equality



Dr. Emma Silverman



Dr. Eleanor Mahoney

Mellon Fellow in the Legacy of Monuments and Memory

Mellon Fellow in the History of Labor and Productivity

history (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/labor/justiceandinjustice.htm>).

Mahoney teamed up with Humanities Fellow Dr. Sylvea Hollis to create a podcast series, “Ballot Blocked,” exploring the history of women’s suffrage before and after ratification of the 19th amendment (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ballot-blocked-episode1.htm>). Mahoney also provided Pullman and César Chávez National Monuments with feedback on new exhibits and produced additional digital humanities content for the web, including a virtual re-creation of the historic 1966 farmworkers’ march led by César Chávez (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/83c9572089744703a506417bc1a2204a>).

NPS’s Barbara Little and NPF’s Karen Lee ably guided the pilot humanities program, and this year NPS and NPF successfully proposed that the Mellon Foundation dramatically scale up the fellowship. In

June 2022, Mellon and NPF announced a commitment of an additional \$13.4 million to fund 30 new humanities postdoctoral fellowships—a stunning investment. Mahoney describes the expanded Mellon Humanities Fellowship and Inclusive Storytelling Grants as “potentially transformative for national parks, enabling them to share more inclusive and comprehensive narratives that are based in the most up to date scholarship.” NPS often finds itself in a reactive mode, understaffed and under-resourced, constantly putting out fires, figuratively and literally. NPF’s Lee clearly understands this reality and sees the Mellon initiative as an “unprecedented opportunity for the NPS to be more proactive and have the creative, productive space to better serve the American people.”

Why is this so timely now? As Little points out, “meaning really matters” and the humanities provide a portal for exploring and sharing a wide range of human experiences. Little believes that national parks can help people see their world in a wider context, and thus “make sense out of our collective experience as Americans.” She holds out the hope that more incisive humanities scholarship “might help restore a small measure of national healing and comity, so badly needed in our country today.”

To leverage this extraordinary Mellon investment, NPS and NPF have recently issued an RFP (request for proposals) for a \$2 million grants program that will increase the ability of parks “to deliver inclusive, accurate, and underrepresented stories.” The grants program was greeted with enthusiasm: proposals were submitted from 115 NPS parks and programs. In many parks, these capacity-building grants will enable them to incorporate the new humanities scholarship more fully. According to the RFP, grants will be available to “provide resources for interpreters to examine the process of transforming historical research into contemporary, relevant interpretation”—just what the landmark 2011 report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* called for.

Together, the Humanities Fellowships and the Inclusive Storytelling Grants present an ideal opportunity for the Reconstruction Network parks I previously

mentioned, including Cumberland Island, to team up and work together as never before. With additional original research and enhanced on-the-ground capacity, multiple parks can identify, protect, and interpret resources that tell a more comprehensive and complete story of emancipation and the resulting social revolution that first took hold along the sinuous coastal chain of islands, estuaries, and fortifications.

Looking beyond the Reconstruction Network, there is much work to do across the entire national park system, and there are now some powerful tools in place to help do the job.

This is the final sign—and a hopeful one.



AS A POSTSCRIPT TO THIS ISSUE'S "LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK," I would like to encourage readers not to miss Naomi Kroll and Margaret Breuker's provocative thematic feature on Climate Change and Museums in this issue. Readers of this column may recall Kroll and Breuker, cultural resource management professionals with NPS's Historic Architecture, Conservation, and Engineering Center, were profiled in "Who You Gonna Call?", my previous "Letter" (<https://parks.berkeley.edu/psf/?p=2801>).

I also wish to note that the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' Tribal Council is petitioning the US Board on Geographic Names and NPS to change the name of Clingmans Dome in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The council is asking that the popular visitor destination, named after North Carolina senator and Confederate general Thomas Clingman (1812–1897), revert to its original Cherokee name, Kuwahi. I wrote about Clingman in an earlier "Letter," recommending an alternative name for the overlook be considered. Clingman, a disgraced white supremacist and insurrectionist, was ejected and permanently banned from the United States Senate for conspiring "against the peace, union, and liberties of the people and Government of the United States" (see "A More Complete Story," <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7qx3v8vp>). So far there has been no response from the park.

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On the cover of this issue

Climate change creates conditions conducive to larger, more frequent fires, particularly in the American West. As a result, historic structures and artifacts are at greater risk of fire damage. The Bent's Fort Fire started on the morning of April 12, 2022. Approximately 85% of the national historic site's 800 acres burned. Thanks to the efforts of fire crews, the reconstructed adobe fort was undamaged. | [NATIONAL PARK SERVICE](#)