



National Park Service Volunteers as Courageous Citizens: Keeping the Flame of Democracy Lit

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The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

This essay examines National Park Service volunteers as courageous citizens who strengthen democratic resilience through civil conversation, historical interpretation, and human connection. Drawing on interviews with volunteers and rangers, it demonstrates how parks create civic spaces where people encounter difference, navigate difficult histories, discover shared identities, and practice democratic citizenship.

Maury Giles defined courageous citizenship as "remembering that every act of connection, every repair, every moment of humility is an investment in the country we share"

(<https://togethernow.substack.com/p/what-is-courageous-citizenship>). This essay shares the stories of National Park Service (NPS) volunteers as courageous citizens keeping the flame of democracy lit across the United States of America's national parks.

Set within the context of an executive order signed by President Donald Trump in March 2025, entitled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," this essay examines the role of NPS as interpreters and educators of complex history, as well as enablers of rich visitor experiences and encounters with natural, historical, and cultural spaces. The executive order surfaced underlying cultural tensions expressed through the interpretation of the nation's history. It called on government officials to "ensure that all public monuments, memorials, statues, markers, or similar properties . . . do not contain descriptions, depictions, or other content that inappropriately disparage Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), and instead focus on the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people..."

The order represents a challenge to democratic norms and institutions by denying voice to living citizens and our collective ancestors—voices that are lifted through the factual, passionate actions of volunteers in parks (VIPs). VIPs are the frontlines of democratic resilience. They are the passionate few who can keep the nation's stories and diverse values alive when they are threatened, as they are with the truth and sanity executive order.

The ambition of NPS and national parks is expansive. The philosophies and interests behind the preservation and conservation of vast natural wonders, historical treasures, and cultural landmarks have served as inspiration for dreamers and doers, artists and administrators, planners and politicians, volunteers and visionaries. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., wrote about the importance of opening vast wilderness spaces for the common person to enjoy, not only society's elite (see more at <https://www.nps.gov/frla/index.htm>). Stephen Mather, the first NPS director, captured the grand ambition more than 100 years ago (see <https://www.matherhomestead.org/tour-spots/stephen-mather>):

Who will gainsay that the parks contain the highest potentialities of national pride, national contentment, and national health? A visit inspires love of country; begets contentment; engenders pride of possession; contains the antidote for national restlessness... He is a better citizen with a keener appreciation of the privilege of living here who has toured the national parks.

More recently, in 2013, an NPS leader invited public comment to a draft servicewide interdisciplinary strategic plan for interpretation, education, and volunteers. In the cover letter, she wrote about the collaborative efforts that have helped NPS achieve its mission, stating that “we can leave the world a better place. We can increase quality of life, we can help realize the vision of democracy, we can ensure that all Americans’ stories are shared, we can facilitate learning, we can improve education and health, and we can help ensure environmental adaptation and resiliency”

(<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=442&projectID=47992&documentID=54248>).

As evidenced by these words, written about 100 years apart, the ambition of a well-managed and maintained system of national parks can be transformational for American society. This essay contributes to understanding courageous citizenship through discussion of empirical qualitative findings on the democratic impact of VIPs, which includes their ability to forge connections, deescalate tensions, and express humility when interpreting or sharing the awesomeness of history and nature across the National Park System. It posits that the training provided to volunteers is useful in everyday life; the behaviors modeled by volunteers are transferrable beyond the context of parks. As one volunteer expressed in an interview, the parks remind visitors that we are "one America." Volunteers show us how to act on that bold ambition.

VIP Impact on Democracy (aka—Sky Level Impact)

Parks are not political spaces. Rangers and volunteers do not discuss politics, though what happens in politics most certainly alters the present and future of parks. This is true in thinking about park budgets, staff levels, and the interpretations of history, culture, and natural resources. Parks are places where people can do three things: (1) Learn about differences across people, (2) Have their understandings of history, culture, and the environment challenged through fact-based interactions with rangers and volunteers, and (3) Forget about or set aside political differences for the common enjoyment of a set of stories that together tell the overall story of the nation. The capacity for visitors to participate in these activities, and for the impact of democracy to be achieved, requires steadfast commitment on the part of VIPs to open inquiry and honest interpretation, as well as the experience and training necessary to interact with visitors who enter a space with different motivations than these.

Volunteers and rangers define volunteer impact on democracy across five dimensions: (1) Civil Conversation, (2) One America, (3) Diversity & Inclusion, (4) Calming Tensions, and (5) Race/Race Relations. The overall theme across dimensions is that volunteers, along with rangers, while performing their work in interpretation, education, and in other divisions, have the potential to reduce demonization, expand openness to alternative viewpoints, promote civility, and facilitate empathy. This essay focuses on two categories: Civil Conversation and One America.

Civil Conversation

One volunteer shared that their hope was that meaningful conversation started inside the park would continue in visitors’ cars as they left the park, perhaps more explicitly linking

interpretation of historical people and events to contemporary issues. This general idea that good conversations can start in parks was echoed across sites, park designations, rangers, and volunteers. A ranger made the case clearly, stated within the context of the difficult issue of race relations in the United States:

[T]he nature of our country and people's awareness of historic sites and the role that they have connected to today is increasing. And there are other historic sites out there that are willing to talk, whereas a lot of folks have not been for a long time, about real race relations and racial situations and hard history that you know we've been dealing with or not dealing with for a long time, and . . . I'm very keenly aware that—the last that I've read—the National Parks and Park Service sites and museums have a good reputation amongst the majority of the American people as the place to get accurate information and hopefully that will continue to grow and also be a place where we can have safe, even though hard, conversations.

Ongoing conversations might also take the form of internal reflections. “I think people do get some educational benefit and they might leave here with a little bit of knowledge they didn't have before and that's a good thing. We might also know if we're really lucky and we can engage in a conversation [that] changes somebody's perspective or get them to think about things in a different way, even in their own life.” Whether visitors engage in this kind of reflection or carry the conversations forward to other people in their lives, is out of the control of park volunteers and rangers. A National Park VIP noted this fact: “It's like the classic, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. I am so happy that we're able to help get these [visitors] to the creek to see that water. If they want to drink it or not, that's up to them.” Volunteers have a belief that they will drink, however. A VIP from National Memorial observed that visitors “going home or sitting in the park, having an ice cream and talking about it, it just really makes it, it enriches their lives in ways that we will never know.”

Before getting to the possibility of conversations that continue outside the park, the VIPs and rangers must set the tone inside the park and facilitate civil conversation. How they do this varies park-to-park and person-to-person. One pair of volunteers at a National Historic Site reflected on the importance of wearing period clothing to set the tone for possible interactions. “It allows the visitor to relax and know they can ask questions, whereas before [we were dressing up] they were hesitant.” The VIPs described how visitors will approach them and ask a simple question about their clothes or the props they are using, but they are “really not asking that question.” What the visitor is really trying to communicate is, “I want to talk to you. I want to engage, but I don't know what I want to say.” The period dress breaks the ice and paves the way for conversation.

Once past the opening niceties and casual tone-setting conversations, volunteers and visitors can begin to learn from each other and engage in dialogue that enriches the visitor experience. A volunteer at a National Memorial described it this way:

When I engage with the visitor I make it an experience. I don't want to overwhelm them with information, but if they can walk away saying, “oh I never knew that, or you know, oh thank you for sharing that.” It makes me feel good, but it also makes me feel like, okay, someone's dug a little deeper into this site, and you know, maybe they'll be inspired to visit more places,

or they'll, you know, a lot of times people don't ask questions, right they come and visit and so if you can get them to ask a question or you can ask them a question and get them engaged somebody who might have just walked past you suddenly you're having a 15-minute conversation with them. I just think that's so important because they're learning more but they're, you know, hopefully they're just becoming more appreciative so I think you know when I can do that, that really benefits people.

Building on these themes, another VIP shared the conversational journey with a visitor, even if only for a few minutes, has benefit:

There's a sense of a real obligation to serve here because of what it represents particularly in these times and how it's important to help people understand the nuances of our history that it's never clear-cut. You have to take history in the context of its times but you know when people talk about erasing history well okay there are all kinds of forms of erasing history, you know, I mean we know history is written by the victors but I think it's getting back to the original point, the idea of being here at this time and introducing people to, you know, all the different complexities of the Civil War and Reconstruction and this whole notion that you have this this dramatic shift in the mindset of the country about a race, you know? And we can't even conceive of that now, you know? And so, I think it's helpful just to lay those things out for people and then ideally get in conversations with them. And some people don't respond well, but most are really, oh, I didn't know that, you know, tell me more about that, you know? And that's the payoff for me.

Other volunteers, such as one at a National Historical Park, reflected the sentiment that people/visitors seem to want more honest conversation. A quote demonstrates this point of view, calling to mind the lyrics by Stephen Sondheim in *West Side Story*, “Could be, who knows? . . . Something’s coming, I don’t know what it is, but it is gonna be great.” The volunteer said, “I’ll sit around the table [with other volunteers and rangers] and say, you know, I had this conversation with a visitor and it kind of started to seem like it was going off the rails, but we brought it back together and had a pretty good argument more or less. So, you know, usually we’ll talk about lost cause proponents, but there can be other things too. I think that shows that there’s something happening.” The parks are ready for when the something arrives.

A VIP shared their perspective on this point:

You know, you can have people just come in and just look around, but they don't get anything out of it until they start asking questions. And then the ranger, as a ranger or a volunteer, you have to assess what does the visitor want, how to touch him, what is the interpretation. Some of them like the visual, so you show them a bunch of things. Some of them just like to chit-chat and talk back and forth. Some of them like to be lectured to. I don't find that pleasant myself. I like the interaction a lot better. But you can go to places and just look at it, and then you can read the waysides and that kind of thing, but that doesn't make it human. We're all humans, and some of us are more loquacious than others, but I think everybody at some level likes to talk with other people. So, I think giving the visitors that opportunity to help them expand, again, their curiosity, that's kind of [why] we're here.

One America

Former NPS Chief Historian Edwin C. Bearns (1981-1994) once commented: “As we Americans celebrate our diversity, so we must affirm our unity if we are to remain the ‘one nation’ to which we pledge allegiance. Such great national symbols and meccas as the Liberty Bell, the battlefields on which our independence was won and our union preserved, the Lincoln Memorial, the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and numerous other treasures of our national park system belong to all of us, both legally and spiritually. These tangible evidences of our cultural and natural heritage help make us all Americans.” The idea of parks, and of volunteers acting as agents of the parks, help create a sense of ‘one America’ and is foundational to the impact volunteers and parks have on democracy.

A volunteer at a National Historic Site captured the essence of Bearns’ words: “As someone who’s very often been not from around here, there is a silver lining to that, because you can connect with the many, many people who are coming upstate, especially if you happen to be from the same area as they have been. And I think that’s one of the great things about America. We are so vast, you know, and the odds are that you can have a connection to Arkansas or Alaska, or you know Wisconsin, whatever. You know that we’re all still Americans. And I think the park is a really cool place [for] that intermingling and coming together [of] all those places.”

Some VIPs paint a picture of a shared American identity based on historical and contemporary national experiences. In the case of a National Battlefield Park volunteer, the collective experiences are mostly tragedies or disasters, but they provide a sense “we’re all as Americans. We’re all in this together,” as a National Historic Site volunteer expressed. The battlefield VIP uses shared experiences to draw his listeners in to appreciate the enormity of what occurred on the field where they stand together:

Challenger. And then of course 9-11. Understand that if you were alive at the time, and of a certain age... You have vivid memories of that. And our battle here is like that. People didn't know exactly when or where. But they knew something big was about to happen in the United States. And what was going to be determined... was whether the American experiment was going to move forward. And so now, I've got them. They're with me. And then I say... In the morning, on July 21st, out on that hill. A mile away. 300 soldiers are going to die. 300 Americans. They come here in the afternoon, right where we're standing. And for three and a half hours, 30,000 soldiers try to kill each other.

Different units of the National Park Service open pathways to different social and cultural periods in American life. With a great span of time and locations that offer historical interpretation, volunteers recognize their role as ensuring visitors understand the full context of any one historical moment. Through their visitors interactions, they fulfill a clear connection mission for the parks. For example, one National Monument VIP shared:

It seems like a lot of people focus on the Revolutionary period and then they focus on the Civil War, but there was a very telling period in this country between the Revolution and between the Civil War where the political and social upheaval caused by slavery. You know, we just kept kicking the can down the road and we had the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850, but the nation was absolutely churning underneath the surface.

And I don't think the average American, I don't think the average southerner, I don't think the average white person understands how close we were to the precipice throughout all of those years. And the union almost dissolved several times. And finally, it just reached the point of where bloodshed was the only thing that was gonna solve, because they certainly tried. They certainly tried in Congress, but they could find no good way to do it. And it's incredible that our nation had been pretty good at compromise up until that point. And it finally just reached that Armageddon DEFCON 1 stage, you know?

Ultimately, when VIPs tell the stories of soldiers during wartime or conflicts and tension during peace time, they are telling stories and interpreting history about fellow Americans. It is a deep responsibility VIPs recognize, but it is their goal to remind visitors that “these people were Americans, too, and they were just doing what Americans do best—fighting for their rights.”

Other volunteers promote a vision of togetherness through the inspiring tales of their subjects, particularly when those tales of a relationship to contemporary times. A National Historic Site VIP described their subject: “Amazing driving force and just a role model and just you know just as it was like so much fun to be able to talk about it and have people hear it and you know it was always a positive message which is pretty amazing when you think about the times that you’re talking about. Depression, World War II, locking up American citizens in internment camps, turning away immigrants, you know, these are the times we’re talking about, and yet her, somehow, she created this positive momentum and force that you could become a part of.” A VIP at another National Historic Site echoed these views and the idea that the stories of the past can translate to today’s times: “And it’s an important thing to do and to keep the American story alive. And if you can tell the story and you can communicate the story in a way that’s transferable, what a great thing to do.”

National Park sites are rich in history and have an opportunity to tell the story of one America, but the stories need not be only positive. They can reflect the challenges and stumbles, weaknesses and moral failings of leaders throughout the country’s history. These too demonstrate a shared history and do so in an inclusive manner. One VIP shared their understanding:

There was an African American couple that I asked what they thought about the space and they said, had I known this was a space that was a memorial to Robert E. Lee I would not have come. They didn't feel welcome in this space. They had a visceral reaction to a National Park Service site because of the name that was on it. And I got into a conversation with them, which I talked about my relationship with the park and with the space and with the descendant families, and told them that we are working to try to tell a more complete story here and that we acknowledge that the way it's being cast today is about one person who in our country's history is you know very shaded and that you know my goal is to try to make it more inclusive so that people of every persuasion feel like this is a place where they can learn something and are not turned away because they feel like, one, it doesn't represent them and two, it's a period of our history that doesn't reflect what our what our standards are. So, that to me is extremely powerful. I think it underwrites and I don't think we do enough to remind the park and our elected officials that these things matter.

Conclusion

Two quotes summarize the essence of this essay. Both are from a volunteer. The first expresses the volunteer's desire to create a more peaceful society, freed from the divisiveness that dominates news headlines and, to some extent, daily life for many Americans. The volunteer sees the parks as a place for temperatures to cool and community to form across cultures.

My personal belief is that each person is a unique culture. And so, learning about each person, obviously families are cultures, communities are cultures, a nation is a culture, things like that. So, I think if the more each person, each entity, is exposed to each other factually, not just through a history book. But I'm a big proponent of just live, interactive experiences. And so, I think the more that that happens, it would just help ease a lot of the tensions that our culture is experiencing. Not just ease it, but I think it would, to me, create a more peaceful life experience. The more that we understand that differences are okay, and we can still live with each other in the midst of differences we find out when there's actually more things we have in common.

The second quote is one shared previously but is worth repeating as a final word on democracy, and the role of VIPs, rangers, and parks as a whole in promoting democracy. The parks and all the workforce of the parks stand ready for conversation when the people are ready to begin.

I do think that that if you can't understand where we are now, if you don't know, if you don't know the history and history can be like, like a site like this can really be, I think a very useful way of helping people understand kind of the moment where we're in, realizing that a lot of the tensions that we're feeling right now around race relations, around sort of some folks feeling as if they're being left out by the larger, kind of larger trends within the country really have roots that go back to the Civil War, that we really are, a lot of it is because we've not really reconciled or were really addressed, kind of the, some of the root causes of the of the war, right? So, it's become, you see firsthand why a site like this becomes important because it becomes a place where you can have the conversation. It's a place where we can be reminded of that, of that past. So even if we're not ready to have the conversation now, it stands there helping us when we're ready for it.

References

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