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## Interview

# MEMORY IN BLACK AND WHITE: RACE, COMMEMORATION, AND THE POST-BELLUM LANDSCAPE

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Interview with Dr. Paul A. Shackel

by Leah Wood Jewett

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### ***Civil War Book Review(CWBR): What is public memory?***

**Paul A. Shackel (PS):** The study of public memory is fascinating because it shows how groups of people negotiate and select a past in order to affect the present. Public memory is a communal identity of a group, community or nation that is continually negotiated. It is the story of the past that reaches a wider audience and it is part of the popular culture. Public memory serves as a vehicle to create a common standard of history. Often there are competing interests that struggle to make their memory of events part of a wider audience -- much like what we see at Civil War battlefields today. While public memory is about power, or the ability of a group to promote their particular perspective of the past, by no means is the public memory found at historic sites the only memory of the place. Understanding how and why some groups tend to remember a particular past, while others forget or ignore a past, is an important issue when critically evaluating and understanding how the public memory of Civil War battlefields are created.

***CWBR: Why, in your opinion, does examination of Civil War memory necessarily include a study of race relations?***

**PS:** I am really baffled when people claim that race is not part of the Civil War memory. The study of race is about the relationship between blacks and whites (and other groups may be included too), and in this case the oppression of the former by the latter. Race was erased from the public memory of the Civil War by the late 19th century. Through the southern revisionist movement in literature and history, blacks were either omitted from the story or scholars denigrated them, painting a picture that made them incapable of civilized behavior. I admire the scholarship and courage of several historians who have successfully shown that with the development of reconciliation between the north and the south that blacks were increasingly omitted from the story. It is also apparent that the declarations of secession of several states clearly note that they left the Union in the name of state's rights in order to perpetuate the institution of slavery. Therefore, race and the Civil War are very connected. Race can be central focus of any study if scholars want to tell an inclusive story of the past.

***CWBR: How can the study of race and public memory enhance traditional Civil War history?***

**PS:** We live in a racist society. People often categorize social relations based on skin color or ethnic background. Institutions and scholars who are the gatekeepers of Civil War history have a choice to make when they tell the stories of the war. Right now the story of race is often missing from many analyses of the event. Very few blacks visit national battlefield sites because their story is often omitted from these sites. By introducing race, the story becomes more inclusive. There are many stories about racial uplift that are worthy of becoming part of the public memory -- such as the Underground Railroad, the participation in the war after the Emancipation Proclamation, and the settlement on the landscape after the war. While I admire the detailed oriented scholarship of many of the traditional Civil War histories, I believe that the inclusion of race, the study of black and white relations, makes for a more complicated story, but it also makes for a richer and more inclusive story that is relevant to today's racial struggles.

***CWBR: How is the discipline of anthropology uniquely suited to tackle the topic of Civil War memory?***

**PS:** I think it is important to acknowledge that anthropologists can make important contributions to studying the Civil War. Anthropology introduces a

very different perspective and it gives us the tools to look at a history from the bottom up (to borrow a phrase from social historians). In particular anthropologists have been grappling with the issue of race for well over 100 years. It was the early anthropologists who exploited and twisted Darwin's ideas about evolution in the late 19th century in order to create a racist typology of society. And it was anthropologists in the early 20th century, led by Franz Boas, who began to dismantle these evolutionary typologies. But it wasn't until after World War II when anthropologists worked hard to dismantle these early racial typologies after the fall of the Nazi regime by successfully showing that race is a social construction. Looking at Civil War histories from the bottom-up allows us to look at race relations that not only include blacks and whites, but should also include other racialized groups, like Jews and the Irish. At the time of the Civil War the Irish were perceived to be at the bottom of the evolutionary scale and perceptions of these new immigrants certainly impacted the way they were treated in civilian life, as well as in the army. Anthropology is also well suited for understanding the impact of gender relations. If you look at the media today race is still part of the way Americans look at the world. By examining historical issues related to race and gender we can become more aware of our prejudices today and hopefully people can take action by changing the way they think about the world by promoting tolerance.

***CWBR: What are the functions of ritual commemorations (anniversaries) and monument building? What can we learn from the current debate over Confederate monuments?***

**PS:** Ritual ceremonies and anniversaries are a way to create and foster a public memory of a particular version of history. After the Civil War both Northerners and Southerners participated in commemoration activities in order to enhance their view of the past. The Confederates were very successful in promoting their view of the past from about the 1890s and through a good portion of the 20th century. While the Union won the war on the battlefield, Confederate groups won the propaganda war. The debate over Confederate monuments brings to light that there are different versions of the past. These debates show that well over a century after Appomattox this country is still very divided about how to interpret this part of our past. These factions only emphasize the deep divisions that we as a nation have on many other social and political issues today û including regionalism, race, gender and labor.

***CWBR: You state that; Public memory is more a reflection of present political and social relations than a true reconstruction of the past. How can this idea help us understand the role of the National Park Service in interpreting battlefields û with or without reference to slavery as a cause? Should parks' enabling legislation be examined in the context of contemporary politics and public memory?***

**PS:** I believe that any park's enabling legislation is very important, and I also believe that it is necessary to understand other histories û before and after - of the place being commemorated. These histories need to be continually examined and reexamined in the context of contemporary politics and public memory. The National Park Service has the instruments to examine the way histories are examined at parks. For instance, in 1996 the National Park Service developed the NPS Thematic Framework (1996) with input from outside scholars and NPS staff. The Thematic Framework provides a guideline for understanding historic and prehistoric events in national parks. The framework stresses the importance of recognizing the interplay of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. It encourages the exploration of social history and seeks to tell the stories of broad social trends and ordinary people. This emphasis, however, does not preclude the examination of notable events. Rather, these unique events should be placed within the broader contexts of their time. The thematic framework encourages the connection of events to other historic places in order to emphasize that American history did not occur as isolated events. By developing context and emphasizing social history the Thematic Framework helps interpret the interconnectedness of events and the many layers of history that occurred at a particular place. Therefore, the battlefield is more than the event, but it is also about larger issues related to the war. The National Park Service is the caretaker of many nationally significant battlefields and each park has its own strategy on how much context is needed to interpret the event.

***CWBR: Interpretation and historic preservation efforts necessarily promote certain time periods and events to the exclusion of others. How can interpretation of a specific time period effectively incorporate significant events outside of its scope? In other words, how should National Parks address historic sites within their boundaries that are unrelated to Civil War battles?***

**PS:** While some people come to national battlefields to understand military logistics, the experience can only be enhanced if we learn some of the other compelling stories about the history of the local community. Community stories,

agricultural landscapes, industrial sites, and plantations can be part of the larger context of the battlefield. These stories provide context and they enrich the visitor's experience. Equally important is the story of how the communities were affected by the war and if and how they were rebuilt. Who came back to the worn-torn lands? How did they reestablish their lives? How did the local economy change after the war? How did the outcome of the war change race relations during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow eras? The battlefield history should also be about the history of how veterans and other groups remember the event. While the Civil War battlefield is the place considered nationally significant, all of these other stories help weave an interesting social and political fabric around the site and connect it to important and compelling human stories. Developing a broader history may provide a more complicated, and sometimes confusing story of the past. But this complicated story shows how dynamic and interesting social history can be.

***CWBR: You advocate the inclusion of dissenting voices in interpretation. In the context of a plantation site, it is clear that you call for the slave perspective to be included. But is the opposite true? For example, should an exhibit of a slave cabin that focuses on West African foodways and architecture also include the perspective of the planter? Can all voices be equally represented? If not, where do you draw the line?***

**PS:** It's difficult to know where to exactly draw the line, but if both perspectives are provided in a balanced way it can provide for a much richer experience for the visitor. It is important to place all primary information within a larger context. In other words, while a planter's diary can be used for interpreting plantation life, and while it may include degrading language, it is necessary to interpret its context in order to provide a balanced view. It is important to interpret this information and explain the social, political, and economic context for a planter's view. By the 21st century we have learned a tremendous amount about plantation life and it is important to interpret the meaning of any contemporary narratives. Anthropology can play a major role by providing information about race relations.

The Tredegar National Civil War Foundation is planning a museum in Richmond that will tell the stories of the war from three perspectives; those of the Union, the Confederacy and blacks. While everyone involved sees the undertaking as a challenge, its results may serve as a model for future interpretations of national battlefields.

***CWBR: How does the study of history through multiple perspectives affect our conception of nation? Without one shared, agreed-upon history, how can we pass on the founding principles of our country and the notion of citizenship to future generations?***

**PS:** Our nation is very different, both socially and politically, from when it was founded over 200 years ago. Slavery has been abolished; women now have the right to vote and American Indians can claim citizenry. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 needed to be enacted in order to assure all citizens equal accommodation. All of these changes have occurred while still adhering to the founding principles of our country. Power is now distributed more evenly today than the way it was dispersed two centuries ago with regard to color and gender. However, there still needs to be more progress in this direction. The United States has always been a multicultural nation and our national story can only be enriched if we try to understand our similarities and our differences. Let us look at the new economic union being developed in Europe by many nations speaking over a dozen languages and with dozens of ethnic groups. It's working.

There is a growing movement in the United States where historic places are becoming the center of critical discussions about making history applicable and relevant to all ethnic groups. Civic engagement at historic places can provide a place to celebrate important events and it can also be a place where collaborative problem solving may occur by connecting heritage to contemporary social and political issues. Those administering historic places need to think about this concept if they want to make the founding principles a part of an increasingly diverse population.