

**REENACTORS IN THE PARKS:  
A STUDY OF EXTERNAL REVOLUTIONARY WAR  
REENACTMENT ACTIVITY AT NATIONAL PARKS**

by

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for the 225<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the American Revolution Planning Committee

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Cathy Stanton  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Origins of this study**

This project began in the summer of 1998, when the 225<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the American Revolution Planning Committee of the National Park Service recognized that the upcoming anniversary would likely bring larger reenactment events at Revolutionary War parks. Realizing that a better understanding of how parks and reenactors already worked together could help with planning for these larger events, the committee requested a brief survey of what kinds of reenactor activities were currently taking place within the national park system.

Sixteen Revolutionary War parks responded to the survey. Their responses showed that external reenactment groups were becoming an increasingly prominent part of many parks' interpretive programs. The study also revealed that each park had developed its own way of working with reenactors, and that many park staff felt the relationship was highly important—and, in some cases, problematic.

The present study builds on those findings. Its overall aim has been to document both the strengths and the difficulties of the park/reenactor relationship, and to identify opportunities to strengthen it in the future—both in the immediate future of the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary years and in the longer term as well.

### **Framework of the research and researcher**

Each weekend, avocational reenactors throughout the U.S. put on the clothing of other eras and attempt to step into the past. They are in search of many things: camaraderie, entertainment, or a sense of experiencing another reality—a reality that often centers around times of war. Although they belong to a community that is just four decades old, in a sense they continue a millennia-old human tradition of ritually or symbolically recreating the past as a way of understanding who we are.

Many observers have tended to compare reenactors with the historical record they try to reproduce. Viewed this way, reenactors inevitably come up lacking, because it is obvious that nothing—no amount of careful hand-stitching, no studying of obscure drill manuals—can actually turn a twentieth century American into a British dragoon or a Continental infantryman.

It should be clear already, however, that my own view of reenactment is somewhat different. From my perspective in the field of anthropology and cultural performance, reenactment appears less as an impossible attempt to step into the past, and more as a complex ritual response that blends past and present realities.

Anthropologists and others have long realized that ritual and public display offer important insights into the workings of human societies. More recently, some scholars in the field of cultural performance have seen that this kind of behavior not only reveals

important cultural information, but also gives people a chance to struggle, negotiate, and articulate differing visions of identity. In the process, many things can change. Public perceptions, cultural allegiances, and power relationships may all be affected by what happens on the stage of public display. (For the theoretical background of this view, see Turner 1974, 1982.)

This study of Revolutionary War reenactment at national parks, then, is more than a survey of how a particular type of volunteers interacts with the National Park Service. I have tried to provide a window into what happens when two groups with passionately held visions of history—visions that sometimes overlap, and sometimes clash—try to interpret the past together.

My own study of avocational reenactment began in 1992, when I was an adult undergraduate at Vermont College. I focused intensively on the Civil War reenactment community during my master's degree work, also undertaken at Vermont College, during which I carried out a two-year participant-observation project among Civil War reenactors in New England.

My fascination for this subject stems in part from the fact that I am not myself American. I lived in Canada until my mid-20s, and since moving to the U.S. in 1983 I have sought to understand national and cultural patterns that in many ways are very foreign to me. Reenactment reveals a great deal about a particular kind of masculine, military, American ethos. At the same time, it shows some of the ways in which many different types of people attempt to come to terms with the complex legacy of American history, and with the equally complex demands of our own time.

### **Research outline**

Beginning in March 1999, I spoke with key National Park Service staff at many Revolutionary War parks to find out how this study could be most useful to them. With their comments, I developed a four-page survey instrument that I distributed to more than 150 reenactor units during the summer of 1999, receiving over 60 responses.

My original hope was to hear from reenactors with a broad range of opinions about the National Park Service, and from those who did not participate in events at national parks as well as those who did. However, perhaps predictably, the great majority of survey responses were from units who had attended park events in recent seasons. The few surveys I received from non-park-affiliated units contained only partial data, making it difficult to use their information. **Reenactor data and comments included in this report, then, do not reflect the Revolutionary War reenactment community as a whole, but only that part of it currently associated with national parks.**

My initial planning for this study also included making a calendar of upcoming reenactor events at Revolutionary War parks throughout the national park system for spring and summer 1999, from which I chose three events to use as case studies:

- April 17, 1999  
“Battle Road” event organized by Minute Man NHP and the Battle Road Committee
- May 21-23, 1999  
Encampment at Kings Mountain NMP with the King’s Own Patriots
- June 19-21, 1999  
Garrison weekend with units of the Continental Line at Saratoga NHP

Each case study included some advance preparation and contact with key park staff and reenactor organizers, after which I attended the event (and, in some cases, pre- and post-event meetings as well) and conducted brief audience surveys and follow-up interviews with park staff and reenactors. The case study sections were reviewed by the park staff and reenactors who organized the events that I observed.

In addition to these three site visits, I toured several southern Revolutionary War parks, talked with many reenactors and park staff by telephone, and monitored reenactor web sites and listserves on the Internet.

### **General Comments**

While this project addresses specific questions about Revolutionary War reenactors at national parks, these questions arise in NPS interactions with reenactors of any period of history, or, indeed, with any external group seeking access to parks. I have attempted to frame this report so that it will be useful in considering broader issues, including:

- accommodating differing meanings within the same natural or memorial landscape
- reaching different publics with the same interpretation, or the same publics with differing interpretations
- creating partnerships with groups who have complex and evolving relationships with the sites administered by the National Park Service

### **Definitions**

At the outset it may be helpful to clarify my understanding of some terms that will be used frequently in this report:

#### **Encampment**

An event at which reenactors set up their tents and remain for some time (usually a Friday evening through a Sunday afternoon), as opposed to an event lasting only a few hours and not involving tents and camp life.



**Impression**

A reenactor's role or character. For example, a reenactor may choose a military impression, a washerwoman impression, etc.

**Living history**

This is a somewhat broader term than “reenactment,” covering a wide range of professional and avocational costumed historical interpretation. In a more specific sense, a “living history” event is usually centered around non-battlefield activities.

**Policy-makers**

I use this term to refer to policy-makers at the National Park Service's Washington D.C. offices (specifically, in this case, the Office of History and the Office of Interpretation), rather than to policy-makers at individual parks.

**Reenactors**

Although there are different types of people who present the past through costumed interpretation, my use of the term “reenactor” is intended specifically to refer to the avocational community that has emerged in the U.S. and elsewhere since the 1960s. Reenactors themselves refer to their activity as “the hobby,” but they recognize that reenactment is an extraordinarily demanding and complex activity, far more so than most hobbies. My choice of the term “avocational” is intended to reflect the fact that while reenactment is distinct from most reenactors' everyday lives, it is nonetheless central to their sense of identity and community.

My focus in this report is almost entirely on reenactors who portray soldiers and military life. There are two primary reasons for this focus:

- Avocational reenactment began and continues to be centered around portrayals of battle and military history. The central ethos of the reenactment community is strongly masculine and military.
- The relationship between the National Park Service and the reenactment community has been shaped by ongoing debate about how to portray wars and battles, from the mechanics of weapons handling to the larger politics of commemoration. Because this issue looms so large—indeed, it seems safe to say is the central concern prompting this project—it has been the primary focus of my investigations.

However, it is important to note that there is a substantial minority of women among Revolutionary War reenactors, along with many men who take civilian roles. In many ways they are given short shrift in this report, for which I apologize in advance. These non-military reenactors often add valuable elements to the interpretive programs in parks as well as at general reenactor events, and their capacity for broadening reenactment's appeal and range should not be underestimated, despite my own lack of emphasis on it here.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Revolution presents an opportunity for national parks and reenactment groups to reassess a relationship that is both close and problematic. Some possible areas for exploration that have arisen from this study are:

- What do parks and reenactors really want from one another? What are they willing to do to achieve their goals? When disagreements arise, do they reflect underlying issues of safety, authenticity, preservation, values, or communication style? Clarifying these points is an important step toward improved relations.
- How can parks and reenactors work together to find alternatives to simulating battle on NPS lands? Innovative “amenities,” imaginative use of park history and resources, and use of off-park sites for battle reenactments are all strategies that have been used successfully at Revolutionary War parks.
- The increasing effectiveness of reenactor umbrella organizations may offer an opportunity for the Park Service to form a new type of partnership with the reenactment community.

### **Section I**

#### **The Role of Reenactors at National Parks**

Reenactors occupy multiple roles at national parks. Are they primarily park volunteers, with attendant responsibilities? Or are they members of the public, continuing a longstanding tradition of public commemorative performance? In this latter sense, they are “traditional users” who utilize parks for ritual purposes central to their construction of individual and group identity.

It is also important to note that there is no absolute dividing line between parks and reenactors. Many Revolutionary War reenactors are experienced educators or interpreters, while many National Park staff have participated in “living history” activities at parks or as reenactors themselves. They share many techniques and concerns, and they strive to reach the same public.

Given this multiplicity of roles, it is important for everyone involved to clarify the basis for reenactor participation in events at parks.

### **Section II**

#### **Values and Perceptions**

Despite their many shared interests, reenactors and the NPS differ significantly in their ideas about the appropriate commemoration of battles and wars. NPS policies prohibiting simulated warfare are the major bone of contention. Both groups seek to honor the memory of those who fought in the American Revolution, and share many of the same

interpretive techniques. But the value systems underlying their commemorative strategies are often very different.

As a result of these conflicting value systems, visitors to reenactor events at parks sometimes receive inconsistent interpretive messages. Most of the surface disagreement between parks and reenactors is expressed in terms of words such as *safety* and *authenticity*, which can carry various interpretations and which are often used to mask differences in values.

The battle over battle reenactments has become the central focus for many in the park/reenactor relationship. But this study, along with recent research in the field of conflict resolution, suggests that the two sides are not as polarized in reality as they perceive themselves to be. While their differing value systems do exist and must be taken into account, this is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to improved park/reenactor relations.

### **Section III**

#### **Performance, Preservation, and Communication**

Successful park/reenactor relationships focus on three important areas:

- **Performance:** Looking at concrete issues of presentation creates a common language that allows parks and reenactors to negotiate their respective agendas. Some of the ways that this language can be used include:
  - recognizing that “authenticity” is a highly variable term for both park interpreters and reenactors
  - recognizing and utilizing differing levels of performance skill among reenactors
  - using physical and other park resources to create innovative interpretive scenarios
  - recognizing existing interpretive strategies that are shared between reenactors and parks, and jointly understanding how these work as performances
- **Preservation:** Reenactors and parks are more likely to find common ground if park policies and concerns are clearly linked to preservation of park resources.
- **Communication:** Strong park/reenactor relationships incorporate several communicative strategies, including:
  - ongoing communication
  - clear and consistent communication within as well as between reenactor units and park staffs
  - an understanding among park staff of reenactors’ improvisational style
  - a park atmosphere that is welcoming to reenactors

## **Section IV**

### **Reenactor Organizations**

Park-by-park and unit-by-unit relationships do not take into account the growing importance and influence of reenactor umbrella groups. Reenactors are increasingly in demand at historic sites, and reenactor organizations are increasingly skillful at organizing events and negotiating with sponsors and hosts. Some parks are beginning to build relationships with umbrella organizations as a way of streamlining communications, recruiting larger numbers of reenactors, and ensuring that park events are considered by reenactment groups whose calendars become busier each year. The Park Service may want to consider building on these relationships on a wider basis, perhaps as part of a system-wide dialogue on some of the areas outlined above.

## **Section I**

### **THE ROLE OF REENACTORS AT NATIONAL PARKS**

Unlike most other visitors or volunteers at national parks, reenactors occupy multiple roles. They may fill more than one role at once, or move from one role to another. Because of this unusual situation, it is important for both reenactors and parks to clarify how they understand these positions.

#### **Reenactors as VIPs**

Most parks consider reenactors to be a part of their Volunteers-In-Parks programs. In the 1998 study, 79% of responding parks reported that they had enrolled reenactors as VIPs.

This status may be quite formal. Some individual reenactors or units are established, long-term volunteers at particular parks. They have ongoing contact with park staff, and may present regular programs or encampments. Often these volunteers act as liaisons between the park and the reenactor community, or form the nucleus of larger groups of reenactors who participate in events at the park.

- At Minute Man NHP, a core group of reenactors presents regular public programs on a volunteer basis. These same volunteers have organized a larger group of “pickets,” who interpret for visitors during larger-scale reenactor events at Minute Man (see page \_\_\_\_).
- His Majesty’s 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot acts as the “official park unit” at Saratoga NHP, setting up one or more small encampments each year and participating in many special events at the park.

In other cases, the volunteer relationship may be more informal. When they were asked what activities they had participated in at national parks, only 16% of responding reenactors listed “enrollment as VIPs,” compared with the 79% cited by the parks. What this suggests is that parks are counting all participants at reenactor events as volunteers, while the individual reenactors themselves may not be aware of this status. This reflects the fact that at the great majority of reenactor events, only the “top brass” are involved in making the arrangements with sponsors or hosts, while the “rank and file” are usually quite blissfully unaware of these negotiations, and remain focused on activities on the field and in the camps.

Whether or not the VIP relationship is a formalized one, it is clear that many reenactors come to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment to nearby parks, or to sites with strong historical connections to the history of the group they portray. In some cases, these connections extend to more than one generation in a family of reenactors.

- Two members of the Battle Road Committee at Minute Man NHP began reenacting as boys with their fathers, both of whom were active at the park and in the broader reenactment community during the national bicentennial.

Like many facets of the park/reenactor relationship, this closeness and sense of ownership cuts two ways. It can tremendously enhance the park's interpretive program, but it can also heighten conflicts when they do arise. In many ways, reenactors ask to be treated as peers of the park's interpretive staff, by virtue of their expertise at living history and their dedication to educating the public or assisting a particular park. As one respondent to the reenactor survey put it:

*We need to be treated as professionals who are there to enhance the educational opportunities for visitors to the parks rather than being treated as potential vandals who need constant oversight.*

Yet no matter how experienced or committed reenactors may be, they are not Park Service employees and are not accountable in the same way that park staff must be. "We always tell reenactors, 'It's a hobby for you, but for us, it's our careers,'" one staff member at Minute Man NHP told me.

Reenactors appear to accept this essential split most of the time. But when conflicts arise, they may try to use their long-term volunteer service as a form of leverage. Several reenactors, like those quoted below, suggested to me that parks should be willing to make an exception to the no-opposing-forces rule for occasional special events (such as anniversaries), in light of the number of hours of skilled and dedicated volunteer service reenactors provide at other times.

*I understand the caution and concerns associated with the administration and guidelines from the Government and am willing to work within those parameters. However, for "anniversary" commemorations, I believe that as long as the Public is kept in "safe" spectator areas, attention should be focused on representing the historical aspects of the Battle as closely as possible.*

*The site is pristine—National Park Service is doing a fine job returning site to its 1775 appearance. They are cautious re. military actions—but can ease up on this in 2000 without violating National Park directions I'm sure.*

### **Reenactors as members of the public**

Although parks consider reenactors primarily to be volunteers, reenactors also see themselves in another role: as members of the tax-paying public with public rights of access to national parks. Just as they may be exceptional volunteers because of their level of skill and commitment, many also feel that their passion for history and commemoration strengthens their claims for access based on their rights as citizens.

This feeling came across very clearly in reenactors' comments on the survey form:

*The NPS has forgotten who the parks are for, the public.*

*Park belongs to all of us tax paying citizens of U.S., not government or Park Directors.*

*I am prepared to tolerate [dismissive] behavior from private enterprises—but certainly not from those representing our government.*

*If the NPS wants more re-enactor participation at their taxpayer supported sites they should open their “policy” for review and revision with re-enactor representation in all discussions. If they want us to abide by their rules, we should have a say in their creation. “No taxation without representation.”*

It is worth noting here that the reenactment community, by and large, is predisposed to question or resist government regulation.<sup>1</sup> Reenactors frequently link their present-day beliefs with the history they represent. For many, reenactment becomes a way to make statements about individual rights and freedoms, including the right of access to important national historical sites and to forms of commemoration that express their particular visions of what it means to be an American.

- Revolutionary War reenactors in New England led a successful lobbying effort in the spring of 1999 to add an amendment to a new Massachusetts gun control law that would have placed many restrictions on the use and storage of antique and reproduction weapons. Reenactors used their public visibility, and their importance in the regional heritage tourism economy, to promote the amendment. They also made skillful use of the iconic figure of the citizen-soldier, and linked their lobbying efforts with the historical reasons for the inclusion of the second amendment in the U.S. constitution.

Reenactors, then, are members of the public as well as park volunteers. But it is not always clear when they are occupying one role, and when the other. Long-time volunteers may switch to presenting themselves as members of the public when they come into conflict with park policy or personnel. One reenactor, noting what he saw as a contradiction within the Park Service, was indirectly pointing out the multiple roles that reenactors themselves play at parks:

*As the Park Service was started to “protect” natural lands, this mentality today seems to translate to “protect from reenactors” at many sites. The Park system seems to have a contradictory policy of protecting lands from the public while providing access to them for the public.*

Are reenactors “the public”? Or are they park volunteers? In fact, they are both. And they occupy a third role as well, which further complicates their relationship with the NPS.

### **Reenactors as traditional users of parks**

Reenactors form a small but distinct (and highly-visible) sub-culture within American culture as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Paying homage to the past, especially to the soldiers who fought in America’s wars, is an integral part of what this culture does. In this sense, they can be considered traditional users of the historic sites in the care of the National Park Service.

This important point requires a deeper look into how reenactor culture has evolved, how it functions, and how it contributes to reenactors’ sense of identity.

#### ➤ **Origins and history of reenactor culture**

As I have already noted, cultures throughout human history have reenacted important events as a way of orienting themselves in time and space. Although Americans have often wrestled with whether their “exceptional” new nation should embrace the past or repudiate it (Kammen 17), they very quickly adopted traditional forms of commemoration, and have continued to practice them ever since. Performance or reenactment has been a part of that tradition almost from the nation’s beginning.

- In 1822, 20 survivors of the fight on Lexington Green helped to reenact the event for an audience. Iconic scenes from the Revolutionary War (epitomized by the “Spirit of ‘76”) have long been a part of patriotic commemoration.
- The national centennial in 1876 saw many types of historical performance and reenactment. Companies of “minute men” were formed in towns throughout eastern Massachusetts, many of which have operated more or less continuously since then. These groups have traditionally participated in Patriots Day events in Lexington and Concord, and they continue to be involved in the “Battle Road” event discussed in Case Study A of this report. In Rome, NY, a spectacular reenactment of the siege of Fort Stanwix was the finale of the town’s centennial celebrations. Featuring a dazzling pyrotechnic display against a night sky, it no doubt involved many Civil War veterans, in the same way that early Civil War centennial reenactments involved veterans of World War II and Korea.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, **historical pageantry** emerged as an extremely popular form of public commemoration in the U.S. Because it foreshadowed many aspects of contemporary reenactment (including some of the struggles we see in the NPS/reenactor relationship today), it is worth examining briefly here.

Pageant organizers believed that coming together in shared performances of history could help communities and individuals to reach a common understanding of



citizenship in the face of many changes and competing visions of what it meant to be an American. Pageants emphasized local histories, and produced a largely uncritical but very active and deeply-felt connection to local stories and their larger national context. Participating in pageants was seen as a positive alternative to more passive forms of entertainment and education (such as radio and movies).

Like living history programs at parks today, many pageants focused on home-front or non-martial scenes when depicting wars. Pageant-master Virginia Tanner, who organized the 1927 sesquicentennial pageant commemorating the battle of Bennington, raised points that resonate strikingly with current NPS policy:

*For the battle itself, I have not tried to show two opposed forces deliberately hacking and killing each other, which to all intelligent men must always seem a wasteful and stupid procedure. Rather have I tried to paint a vivid series of war strategies, and battle heroisms, gathered from local traditions, against a grim background of war's clamor and din.* (Bennington pageant program, 1927, p. 7)

At the same time, pageant organizers were aware that the spectacle of battle could make for riveting theater, and that the public often wanted to see it. Percy MacKaye, a prominent pageant-master, recognized the carnivalesque attraction of battle scenes, which combined the appeal not only of “collective service, but color and rhythm.” Admitting that people seemed to crave this kind of experience, MacKaye wondered whether it was possible to create equally stirring spectacles of peace. Perhaps pageants, if they were inspiring and colorful enough, might even function as a “substitute for war” (Glassberg 208).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, this kind of thinking came to seem painfully naïve, as did pageantry’s optimism about the present and future flowing in a progressive, orderly way from the past. Pageants became increasingly nostalgic in character, focusing more on visual spectacle and historical authenticity than on moral lessons. By the time of World War II, pageantry as a popular form of cultural performance had all but disappeared.

- Pageantry’s surface similarities to contemporary reenactment can be seen in records of the immense sesquicentennial pageant held on the Saratoga battlefield in 1927. Newspaper photos show hundreds of uniformed men (albeit with modern rifles and cartridge belts) in scenes that might almost be found in any present-day reenactor “mega-event.”

At the same time that pageantry flourished, a separate sub-culture of historic weapons enthusiasts was forming in the U.S. Groups such as the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association (founded in 1933) and the North-South Skirmish Association (founded in 1950) were dedicated to the restoration and use of black-powder weapons. (Both groups remain active today.) Eventually, some of these men began

to pursue an interest in the broader historical context of these weapons, focusing mainly on frontier “mountain men” or on the Civil War (Anderson 136-8).

The **Civil War centennial** (1961-65) provided the catalyst for the formation of today’s reenactor community. Despite a cool response from the federal Civil War Centennial Commission, many organizations (mostly at the local level) held reenactments of Civil War events. The North-South Skirmish Association, which was already reenacting the war in a limited sense, found itself prominently involved in many of the larger “national” events during these years.

- The **centennial of the first battle of Manassas** was commemorated in 1961 with about 3,000 reenactors, half from the North-South Skirmish Association and the rest from the National Guard. The event attracted about 35,000 spectators, and set the tone for NPS/reenactor relations for many years to come.

The 1961 Manassas event looms large in the oral history of reenactment for both reenactors and staff. Anderson (143) quotes a *New York Times* report of many cases of heat stroke and two minor injuries during the “fighting.” Many reenactors, though, have spoken to me of this and other Civil War centennial events as being much bloodier, with many serious injuries and even (in some reports) deaths.

While these reports are not accurate, they do reflect an awareness that in the early days of avocational reenactment, safety standards were lax, and many on the field were just there to “play soldier” and have a good time. Many of what I will call “first generation” reenactors were veterans of World War II or Korea, who seemed to be recreating their own military experiences of combat and camaraderie, rather than events from the more distant past.

Immediately following the Manassas centennial, NPS policy-makers began to take a hard look at reenactment, and to write policies to regulate it on national park land.

Between the end of the Civil War centennial in 1965 and the start of the **national bicentennial**, interest in reenactment dwindled. Most Americans were not eager to watch or participate in reenacted battles when the nation was involved in a costly and controversial real war in Vietnam.

By the start of the bicentennial, the Vietnam conflict was over. But it had raised troubling questions for many Americans about national ideals, policies, and history. These questions were linked with widespread reassessments of many aspects of American culture, including power relationships based on race and gender. The younger men who entered “the hobby” during the bicentennial years had come of age during this turbulent time, and it shaped their views—and the reenactment community—in very important ways.

For these “second generation” reenactors, reenactment was not just a game. Many were children of World War II veterans, who grew up expecting someday to serve their country in war and to experience the kind of national pride and purpose that their parents had shared. The national experience during Vietnam had shaken that expectation, and left many men and women of this generation (even those who did serve in the military) with unresolved doubts about their national identity.

Reenacting was a way for them to feel connected to a version of America’s military and social heritage that they could be proud of. At the same time, it allowed them to create present-day communities that helped to soften many of the sweeping social changes taking place in everyday life. In my view, reenactment in its current form is essentially a product of the social conditions that shaped the “baby boom” generation.

Reenactors of this generation were much more serious about standards of safety and authenticity. For the first time, women began to become involved in reenactment, reflecting changing gender relationships outside “the hobby.” Continuing an overall trend throughout reenactment’s history, reenactor performances reflected ever-broader social contexts, including more civilian “impressions.” The central emphasis, though, was still on military life and history. While camp life and community have always been the social center of the reenactor community, battle reenactment remains its performative centerpiece.

As with the Civil War centennial, many of the Revolution’s major events were recreated during the bicentennial years. NPS regulations prohibiting opposing forces and simulated casualties were by now in place, restricting the kinds of reenactor activities that could take place on national park land. NPS bicentennial events tended to be less theatrical than those held elsewhere, the major exception being the culminating encampment at Yorktown.

➤ The **Yorktown bicentennial** was commemorated at a five-day encampment that attracted 180,000 visitors (including American and French heads of state). 2,500 reenactors and more than 1,000 camp followers from 23 states participated (Anderson 146-7). The success of the Yorktown event was aided by the historical facts of the battle. A static encampment was a logical way of portraying the siege at Yorktown, and the battle’s most striking moment—the British surrender—could be reenacted without violating the NPS “no opposing forces” policy. Although lasting hard feelings were created by other NPS restrictions—notably on artillery firing—the 1981 Yorktown event is still cited by many reenactors as one of the most memorable moments in reenacting.

➤ A “**civil religion**”

Reenactors frequently joke about their own dedication, referring to reenactment as being less of a hobby than a religion or an addiction. Like most reenactor jokes, though, this one has an undercurrent of truth.

Reenactment *does* function in many ways like a religion—perhaps what Robert N. Bellah (1988) has called a “civil religion.” Its many components work together to give reenactors a sense of their own identity as Americans, as interpreters of history, and as living connections to a venerated past. These components include:

- ◆ a sense of a spiritual connection with ancestors or forebears who are seen as models for present-day behavior
- ◆ a strong connection to sacred sites, particularly battlefields
- ◆ a set of performative conventions for expressing this veneration
- ◆ a sense of guardianship for the stories of the American past, and for the sites associated with those stories
- ◆ a way to revisit times of origin (for example, the founding of the nation, or its rebirth during the Civil War)
- ◆ a feeling of being connected to collective history and values
- ◆ a social network that provides support and community extending far beyond the time spent at weekend encampments
- ◆ a link to other civic, historical, and memorial organizations

Access to significant historical sites is an important part of the kind of homage that reenactors pay to the soldiers of the past. As one reenactor put it, explaining to me why reenactors needed to find creative ways to work with their hosts, “Ultimately if the public doesn’t support it, museums and parks won’t invite reenactors, and we won’t have places to play.” He added that encampments in farmers’ fields and other private property do not resonate with reenactors in the same way that battlefields and other important sites do. Many reenactors talked to me about their search for “compelling” sites and scenarios. Original sites, by their nature, are far more compelling to reenactors than places with no historical pedigree. “It has to be the site that makes the most difference,” wrote one respondent to the 1999 survey.

In this desire to recreate historical events on the sites where they actually occurred, reenactors are continuing a very longstanding tradition of public commemorative performances at “sacred” sites. This fact, along with reenactors’ tremendous personal investment in their community, and their sense that they are acting as their historical models would have wished them to, mean that their position at parks goes beyond their role as members of the public or as park volunteers. They are, in addition, **traditional users of the park’s ethnographic resources.**

The NPS’s Cultural Resources Management Guideline for ethnographic resources defines traditional users as those who view park resources as “traditionally meaningful to their identity as a group and the survival of their lifeways” (p. 160). For Revolutionary War reenactors, Revolutionary War parks are ceremonial sites where they celebrate significant events that “carry considerable symbolic and emotional weight” (157) and where reenactors can test themselves against the examples of revered ancestors.

## The park/reenactor continuum

There is no absolute dividing line between what parks do and what reenactors do. Rather, there is an area of considerable overlap between the two communities.

- Many Revolutionary War reenactors work or have worked in the fields of historic preservation, interpretation, or education.

The King's Own Patriots, whose encampment at Kings Mountain NMP forms Case Study B in this report, is made up almost entirely of people in history-related professions, with many collective years of experience in interpretation and preservation.

The current and recent past leaders of the Brigade of the American Revolution, the oldest reenactor umbrella organization, work in the field of historic preservation.

- Many National Park Service staff have participated in "living history" activities in some way. Many have worked as costumed interpreters at national parks or elsewhere. Still others are or have been avocational reenactors themselves.

In the 1998 study, 63% of responding Revolutionary War parks reported one or more reenactors among their staff (Stanton 17). Many of these park-employed reenactors are extremely active in the reenactment community and in liaison relations between avocational reenactors and other organizations.

- Several Revolutionary War parks sponsor their own reenactment units.

Minute Man NHP works closely with a group called Prescott's Battalion, comprised of reenactors from several local units.

Colonial NHP has organized a park-sponsored artillery unit, Lamb's Artillery.

Saratoga NHP has created a group called the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire, whose members are full-time or seasonal rangers. The seasonal rangers I spoke to in June 1999 were also avocational reenactors in other units. One was a high school history teacher as well, illustrating the many possible layers of overlap in history-related fields.

It is difficult to draw clear lines between a National Park ranger who is also a reenactor, and a reenactor who is also a professional museum interpreter, or between a reenactor group that volunteers regularly at a park and is considered a "park unit," and a "park unit" made up of seasonal rangers who reenact with other groups as well. Clearly, Park

Service employees have a greater level of obligation to the National Park Service than do non-employees. But in terms of expertise and knowledge, techniques and goals, the differences are far less distinct.

Nor is either community—reenactors and the NPS—completely unified in its opinions. In the following section we will see that there are certain underlying value systems that characterize each group. But even there, it is possible to see shades of gray. Although reenactors on the whole are enthusiastic about reenacted battles, it is possible to find those who admit to feeling somewhat troubled about the effect that these performances have on audiences. And some park staff spoke to me about their concern that the NPS itself sometimes sends mixed messages to visitors—for example, portraying stylized battle scenes in its orientation films yet refusing to allow reenactors to present their own style of battle portrayal.

### **A shared public**

The public is an important and complicating part of the park/reenactor relationship. For both parks and reenactors, it is essential that people should come and witness what they do. For parks, this is a central part of their mandate as public agencies. But reenactors, too, need the public.

As a form of cultural performance, reenactment has its “backstage” as well as “onstage” aspects. Many of the satisfactions of reenacting come from the social life that takes place behind the scenes, particularly around campfires at night when camps are closed to visitors. And reenactors do occasionally hold events (usually tactical exercises or other types of training) that are not open to the public. But these aspects in themselves would not draw people into “the hobby.” For reenactors, public performance is always the main event.

It is important for several reasons.

- As it does for parks, the presence of an audience validates what reenactors do. Public attendance confirms that reenactors’ performances and beliefs matter to the culture at large.
- Reenactors recruit from among the spectators who come to see them, replenishing their ranks.
- The public’s affirmation becomes a way of pleasing the absent but vividly-imagined ancestors reenactors are seeking to honor. Reenactors worry that important stories and heroes are being forgotten; public attendance at reenactor events is a way of ensuring that they are not.

Answers to the survey question “Would you consider [your most recent national park event] a successful event?” revealed how important the public’s response is to reenactors. 60% of the reasons cited by reenactors involved public reaction:

*Visitors expressed satisfaction and attendance despite 100+ degree heat indices was good.*

*This was a successful event because we were able to interact and share with a large number of visitors from a variety of countries.*

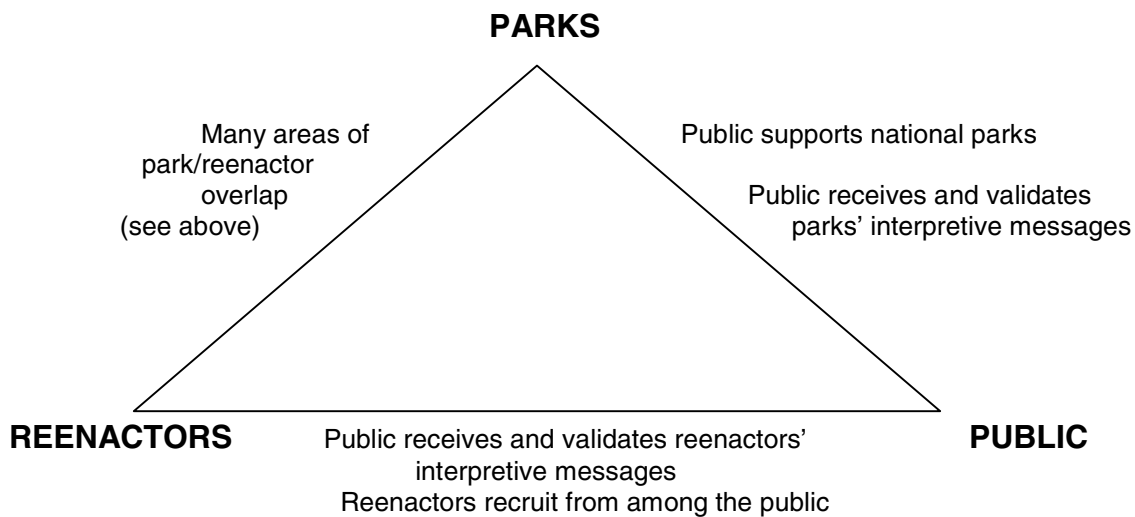
*The weather provided a large turn-out and we recruited two new families totalling eight members.*

*Good participation by the public, even in very cold weather.*

*Visitors went away with a better understanding of period.*

## Conclusion

There are many areas of overlap in the three-way relationship among national parks, reenactors, and the public, as the diagram below shows:



There are many gray areas between parks and reenactors, and also between reenactors and the public. And parks and reenactors share a public, which serves as an audience for interpretive messages that sometimes overlap, and sometimes conflict.

Given the complexity of the relationship, everyone involved needs to clarify the basis for reenactor participation in events at parks. Currently, most parks seem to view reenactors primarily as volunteers. However, all organizations that rely on volunteer labor know that high-quality volunteers, while they are not paid, *do* involve certain costs. These costs may be tangible (for example, staff time spent coordinating reenactor/volunteer activities). Or the exchange may be more subtle, involving intangible rewards and satisfactions.

In the NPS/reenactor partnership, where so many Revolutionary War parks rely heavily on reenactors in their interpretive programs and where reenactors themselves play several different roles, it is crucial for the NPS to try to understand what motivates reenactors, and what they are looking for in exchange for the time they donate to the park. As the following section will show, it is when park staff do not understand reenactor motivation—and when reenactors do not understand the reasons for park policies—that conflicts arise.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some distinct differences among reenactors of different time periods. My research suggests that most Civil War reenactors, for instance, are politically more conservative than their Revolutionary or French and Indian War counterparts. However, the community as a whole tends toward a *laissez-faire* approach, and actively resents or resists any imposition of what they perceive to be “political correctness,” especially involving gun control or military displays.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the decentralized nature of the reenactor community, it is difficult to know the total numbers of reenactors in the U.S. Civil War reenactors often estimate their community at about 40,000 people; *Travel Holiday* magazine put the figure at 20,000 in 1989 (Cullen 186). About 25,000 Civil War reenactors participated in the 1998 135<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the battle of Gettysburg, a figure which certainly represented a great majority of the community, according to anecdotal evidence. A guess of 30,000 for Civil War reenactors, then, seems reasonable. The Revolutionary War reenactment community is much smaller. Based on evidence collected during this study (primarily from census figures gathered from the major Revolutionary War reenactor umbrella organizations), it seems likely that there are currently 5-7,000 Revolutionary War reenactors in the U.S. Allowing for a smaller number of reenactors of other periods, and not counting the other types of historical recreation I have already defined as outside the scope of this study, the total reenactor community is probably 35-40,000.



## Section II VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

### The battle over battles

Despite the many overlapping areas described in Section I, reenactors and the NPS do differ significantly in their ideas about appropriate commemoration of battles and wars. The central disagreement focuses on NPS policies prohibiting reenactors from portraying opposing lines or from simulating casualties and deaths.

When Revolutionary War reenactors were asked in the 1999 survey how their relationship with the NPS could be improved, the great majority of comments focused on these regulations:

*Most recreated units are first and foremost battle reenactment groups. NPS guidelines to the contrary, if you do not allow battle reenactments as part of the weekend's activities, the units will simply not come, ours included! This is why we spend all that money on our uniforms, camps, horses, trailer expenses, and travel time: we like to do battles... I did not raise as large a group as I have by setting up tents and cooking stew. If you want us and other groups there, include a battle reenactment as part of the schedule.*

*Although NPS had justifiable concerns about safety during the Bicentennial (justified due to numerous safety problems during the Civil War Centennial a few years earlier), Revolutionary War reenactors have had a long period of excellent safety... For this reason, opposing tacticals and simulated casualties should be permitted on NPS Rev War sites.*

*I believe that as long as the Public is kept in "safe" spectator areas, attention should be focused on representing the historical aspects of the Battle as closely as possible, i.e. opposing troops OK.*

*I have seen both good and bad at National Parks. Although I agree in principle with most of what is said and done, I believe there should be a compromise on the "battles" so that the public could view on the grounds where these events took place. We preserve sites but it seems we should show the circumstances of why.*

Revolutionary War parks and reenactors have a common set of goals: to honor the memory of those who fought in the American Revolution, and to communicate to the public their sense of how important this history is. But the two groups use very different strategies to achieve that goal.

Reenactors can and do find many satisfactions in smaller events where battle reenactment is not the central focus. However, a big part of the attraction of most events is the chance to participate in a battle. Reenactors seek ways to immerse themselves in the alternate realities they so painstakingly create, and few situations can match the multi-sensory experience of being on a huge outdoor “stage” in the midst of gunfire, smoke, shouting, and confusion.

Not only is this a way to step outside present-day reality, but it symbolically duplicates the characteristic that reenactors most admire in their historical models: their willingness to risk their lives in battle. Just as combat is a crucial test of a soldier’s courage, the simulation of combat is a central form of homage for reenactors.

Recent comments from Revolutionary War reenactors on an Internet list illustrate this sense that reenacting battles is a form of honoring the dead:

*[I want] to remind myself what type of people I am representing and [have] a reminder of why I should appreciate their efforts and honor them. I would also like to honor them by showing people closely what really happened at many actual battles. Not just do I want to show them, but I like this also for myself. I personally get more revved up and excited when I get to participate in an event, where I can actually think to myself for a few hours that I am here (whether it be fighting Yorktown, Monmouth, or Guilford Courthouse). The feeling of actually doing the movements of those battles would allow me to feel the moment and its importance. (Royal23ROF)*

*We at least have to try to be the “mirror image” of our forefathers so that others may have a glimpse of the former times. We owe it to our posterity. (danlambert)*

In many ways, reenactors feel that they are speaking on behalf of the original soldiers by portraying them through reenactment. They feel a strong sense of affinity for “ordinary” soldiers, rather than the well-known generals and heroes. Perhaps reaching for an experience of camaraderie and common purpose that the Vietnam era denied them, or perhaps reacting against historical revisions that have cast American militarism in a negative light, reenactors feel they are speaking on behalf of the common soldiers who have fought in all of America’s wars.

Further, they are very certain that their efforts would be (or, in some mystical sense, are) appreciated by those long-dead soldiers. Rallying the notoriously contentious Civil War reenactment community to participate in the 1992 Turner Entertainment filming of “Gettysburg,” an influential reenactor urged his peers, on behalf of their ancestors, to put aside their concerns about payment:

*Money be damned. Remember the Paymaster scene in “Glory” when the [black] troops were paid less than others? “Tear it up!” they cried.*

*They didn't desert or walk away. They said that the money wasn't the real issue. Let's forget about the money as a major issue. Let's fall in and do the job that we can do. The boys in the cemetery nearby want their story told.* (LeBoeuf)

Policy-makers and many others at the National Park Service view reenacted battles in a very different light. For them, reenacting a battle is not an appropriate way to honor the memory of those who originally fought. Park Service staff spoke to me about several levels of misgivings about the subject.

- First and foremost, many NPS personnel are troubled by the impossibility of ever truly recreating combat. This is not to imply that they wish it *could* be recreated—rather the opposite. Because it is so impossible—and undesirable—to replicate battle, they see no sense in making an attempt that can only fall short of the reality, and that can never convey even a fraction of war's destructive horror.
- Aside from these underlying objections to reenacted battles, staff at parks point out many logistical and interpretive difficulties inherent in this type of performance. The black powder ranger at Saratoga NHP believes—and tells visitors—that “Reenacted battles are *for* reenactors,” not for the viewing public. It can be extremely difficult to guarantee good sight lines, coordinated timing, and audience comprehension of what is happening on the field. The constraints of geography and the need for preservation may also work against the creation of plausible scenarios. At Minute Man NHP, for example, it has been extremely difficult for reenactors and park staff to portray the unusual running battle that took place in 1775 so that reenactors have a sense of reality while visitors have some idea of what they are seeing.
- Finally, many park staff members are concerned about the “carnavalesque” atmosphere that tends to be created at battle reenactments. Spectators, like reenactors, often become caught up in the noise, the smoke, and the spectacle of brightly-clad performers moving across a broad outdoor stage. Just as reenactors may experience an exhilarating sense of “time travel” during a well-executed battle reenactment, the audience tends to respond more with appreciation or excitement than with reverence or empathy. Like any performance, battle reenactments can be extremely stimulating, and it is this very quality that the NPS seeks to mute and control.

Interestingly, personal experience of combat does not seem to determine a person's position on the question of reenacted battles. There are combat veterans among the ranks of Revolutionary War reenactors, and also among NPS policy-makers and park staff. There are both veterans and non-veterans in both groups. Rather, the difference in views is a reflection of differing sets of values, as we will see below.

## Safety

On the surface, safety seems like a simple issue for reenactors. No one wants to watch or participate in reenactment if there is a serious risk of being hurt. But reenactor concern over safety is more than pragmatic. Reenactors make a fetish of safety-consciousness, and often seem to be in competition with each other to see whose standards can be the strictest.

The reason is quite simple. Safety is what separates the *symbolic* pursuit of reenactment from the *literal* pursuit of war. A concern with safety does more than keep everyone safe—it signals to the performers and the audience that they are operating in a symbolic realm, not an actual one. As a Civil War reenactor explained to me, “Safety is the line.” Like most reenactors, this man actively pursued experiences where, as he said, “the window opens” between imagined and concrete reality. But reenactment’s emphasis on safety was what allowed him to feel secure enough to attempt this kind of mental and emotional shift.

It is misleading to picture all reenactors as “time trippers,” searching for the “high” of alternate realities. In fact, the great majority of reenactors are extremely clear about the lines between past and present, and their brief flashes of “feeling how it must have been” are not the same as believing themselves literally to have been transported into the past.

In fact, those who *do* become lost in an imagined world tend to be shunned by most units—precisely because someone who becomes too caught up in the moment while carrying a black-powder weapon is a hazard to everyone around him. People who forget that they are performing threaten the entire performance. “We see safety and authenticity as our main points, but safety is the first one,” a board member from the Brigade of the American Revolution said to me. “If someone isn’t safe, then authenticity doesn’t matter.”

Safety, then, is a crucial concern to reenactors. In most cases, it is reenactors, not spectators, who are likely to be injured by dirty or improperly-handled weapons. As the reenactor community grows more cohesive (see Section IV), it also becomes more effective at policing its membership. Some reenactor units and umbrella organizations have more stringent safety regulations than the National Park Service. The Northwest Territorial Alliance, for example, sets a smaller maximum powder charge than is allowed by NPS black powder rules.

Reenactor units utilize a variety of strategies to train their members in safety techniques. Some that were listed most frequently by survey respondents during this project are:

- a training/probation period before full membership
- ongoing training sessions for all members, at events and/or off-season
- a mentorship, sponsorship, or “buddy” system for recruits
- use of umbrella organization or NPS safety standards

Yet many reenactors feel that their safety records are not respected by those at the National Park Service. Beyond that, most believe that NPS policies prohibiting battles are rooted in concerns over safety, as these quotes from the 1999 reenactor survey show:

*It is my hope that by doing small shows at sites and demonstrating adherence to NPS safety regs that one day the NPS might allow opposing force tacticals at sites.*

*Review and enforcement of safety regulations should be examined so that opposed forces tacticals may be conducted at NPS sites.*

*It is my sincere belief that the American Revolution re-enactor—unlike the Civil War re-enactor before us—has proved himself safe and trustworthy to do a battle re-enactment or tactical demonstration on an NPS site without significant risk... The longer the NPS treats American Revolution re-enactors as un-trustworthy, the harder it will be to get good events at NPS sites.*

*I am not fond of the NPS policy regarding fighting battles and opposing forces, but I understand. I feel that units strive for safety too, and battles fought on the site should be allowed.*

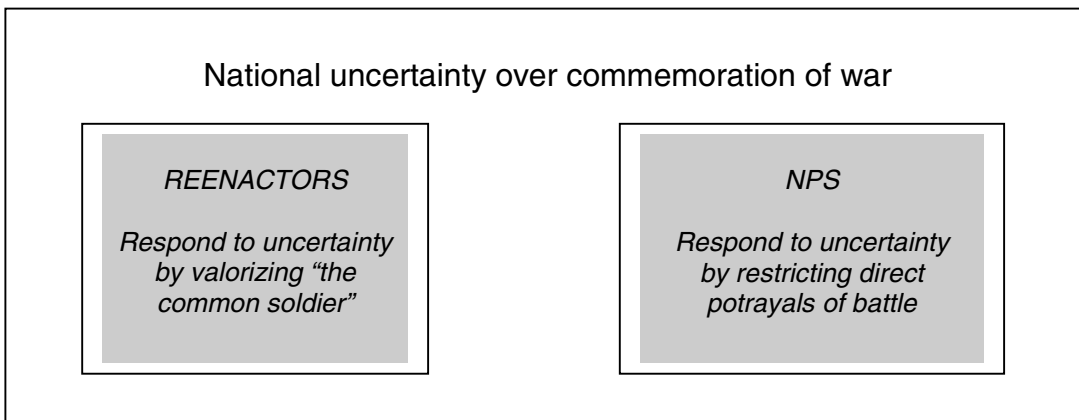
Leaving aside the question of whether Revolutionary War reenactors suffer because of a poorer safety record among Civil War reenactors, it is clear that the NPS policies on opposing lines and simulated casualties are linked closely in reenactors' minds to NPS concerns about safety. If reenactors can just establish their trustworthiness in this respect, many believe, the NPS will eventually relent and allow battle reenactments on the consecrated lands in its care.

### **Differing systems of values**

As I have shown in Section I, the NPS and reenactor communities overlap in many significant ways. They form a continuum, rather than two distinct groups. However, especially toward the edges of this continuum, reenactors and parks draw on quite different value systems. These values are expressed in reenactors' performances, and in NPS interpretations and policies.

Before looking at these different sets of values, it is worth noting they arise from the same cultural context. Since World War II, and especially since Vietnam, Americans have had to face many questions about how they view themselves, their heroes, and their wars. Militarism and the commemoration of war has become extremely problematic, as the national controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibit demonstrated.

Both avocational reenactment and National Park Service policies are responses to this national process of questioning and reassessment, as the diagram below illustrates:



### Reenactor values in performance

Reenactors pursue two primary goals: to honor the memory of the past, and to create a present-day community that reflects their own perception of past values.<sup>1</sup> These two goals are linked, especially in the intense masculine atmosphere and camaraderie of reenactment. Through their central focus on the world of the “ordinary” soldier, reenactors affirm the cultural importance of citizens doing their duty, of men serving in the military, and of the action of the individual in the wider society.

This last point is perhaps the most important. Themselves citizens of an ever more globalized society in which individual actions seem to matter less and less, reenactors use their “hobby” to insist that individuals *do* matter. Their of historical material reflects the way they grapple with this troubling tension.

By the eighteenth century, individual soldiers had already become mere human units in military tactics that favored mass and uniformity. Yet there was still room for personal initiative, in ways that became less common or impossible during highly-mechanized twentieth century wars. In the eighteenth century, a still-loyal Benedict Arnold could lead a daring charge at Saratoga to save the battle for the Continentals; ordinary farmers could pick up muskets and change the course of world history at Old North Bridge in Concord. Even the later Civil War gives reenactors scope for showing individual gallantry and courage within immense armies.

Searching for a way to feel honorable, dutiful, and connected to the society and the nation, reenactors put themselves into an imagined military setting, rich with real-life camaraderie and even aspects of hardship and sacrifice. (Although

reenactment truly is a picnic compared with war, there are nevertheless some hardships involved in sleeping in a tent on a sub-zero night or walking for hours in a hot sun in wool clothing while carrying a heavy load of gear.) This performance is a way to make contact with an experience that many reenactors feel is central to their identity—an experience that the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made problematic at best.

The values that come through in reenactors' performances, then, center around ideas of:

- duty, especially civic and military duty
- a separation of that duty from questions of ideology
- unapologetically “old-fashioned” gender roles
- valorization of the experiences of “ordinary” soldiers
- an intense focus on the experiences of the individual

All of these are values that have been challenged during the past four decades. Feminism, the anti-war activism of the Vietnam era, approaches to history that put once-marginalized groups in the center of the story—all have eroded American certainties of the 1940s and 1950s.

On the surface, it may seem as though reenactors are trying to escape these challenges by attempting to step into a simpler world where lost ideals or values still exist. My research, however, suggests that the matter is by no means this simple.

Despite its surface preoccupation with material detail and vicarious military experiences, the reenactment community also grapples with many of the real-life questions raised by recent shifts in American social life. They do so through the performative medium that they have created themselves, using a language of “authenticity” to come to terms with difficult issues around gender, race, and the construction of history. (This language of “authenticity” will be discussed in more detail in the following section.)

### **NPS interpretations and policies**

It is important to note that current NPS policies and interpretations have been shaped by the same social changes as reenactors' performances. If parks and reenactors overlap in their characteristics and some of their techniques, they also share a common set of cultural references, which have to a large extent shaped their views and presentations of history. This fact is important because it sheds light on the underlying reasons for NPS policies on reenactment, reasons which reenactors do not currently grasp.

There is no doubt that these policies originated in concerns about safety. Policy-makers of the early 1960s believed reenactments did have value for interpretive

purposes, but that the benefits were outweighed by potential hazards to the participants, the spectators, and parks' physical resources. Following the 1961 Manassas centennial reenactment, and a second event at Antietam National Battlefield in 1962, staged battles were prohibited at national parks.

However, from the beginning it appears that there were other, unexpressed concerns about whether recreated battles were an appropriate way of commemorating wars.<sup>2</sup> As time passed, the ban on portraying opposing lines was questioned and challenged by reenactors and by some within the Park Service. This prompted policy-makers to begin to articulate some of their previously-unstated objections.

These centered on the concerns already listed above:

- the impossibility of conveying the reality of war through reenactment
- the “carnavalesque” atmosphere created at battle reenactments

A 1975 version of the reenactment policy offered no direct explanation of these points, suggesting that reenactors' and others' challenges to it arose later, perhaps as reenactment became more popular and better-organized during the bicentennial years. By 1988, a revision of the policy made the NPS case more bluntly, stating that reenacted battles “**generate an atmosphere inconsistent with the memorial quality of the battlefields and other military sites**” under the Park Service's care.

For many reasons, NPS approaches to interpretation and memorialization have tended to reflect a more critical and direct response to the many social and historiographical challenges of the past 40 years. It is beyond the scope of this study to try to identify the various historiographical shifts within Park Service interpretation in recent decades. However, it seems likely that the Park Service's nature as a public agency has compelled it to respond to social changes in a way that reenactment, being a private and decentralized enterprise, has tended to do more indirectly and on its own terms. Park Service interpretation has been shaped by the need to answer to many different constituencies, making its presentations necessarily more diverse and multivocal.

Although there are still many points of overlap on the interpretive front lines, the overarching value systems of the two communities are quite different. Reenactors insist that the individual's experience is central and inviolate; parks (at least on a policy level) take a more critical, contextual approach. NPS interpretation does stress the importance of visitors making personal and emotional connections with history. But NPS policy-makers draw the line at reenacted battles, because they believe personal and emotional responses tend to work against the ability to take a critical view of war.



Many reenactors believe that NPS policies were written by office-bound bureaucrats with no personal experience of war. One respondent to the 1999 survey wrote:

*The regs should be re-written by people who know the real values (and limitations) of reenacting, NOT by bureaucrats!*

Another took a stronger stance:

*It seems that the only “policy” the NPS currently has towards Rev. War reenactors is a set of black powder safety rules that have sprung from some uninformed lawyer’s hellish vision of half-crazed, armed and irresponsible men bent on mayhem.*

However, the policies were created and are upheld in many cases by people with direct experience of military life and even of combat. Many of the original policy-makers of the 1960s were veterans of World War II; some of their successors are Vietnam-era veterans, whose experiences have left them loath to sanction any activity that equates war with play.

The reenactor who wrote the last quote above is a Vietnam combat veteran; so is the National Park Service’s chief historian, who strongly upholds the NPS ban on reenacted battles. As noted above, reenactors’ and park staff’s experiences are often strikingly similar, and were shaped by the same wider cultural context. But reenactors and NPS staff tend to draw different lessons from the past four decades of American life—or rather, they work toward accommodating the changes of those decades in different ways, using techniques that are sometimes similar to express values that are often very different.

### **Actual vs. assumed differences**

In speaking with reenactors during this project, I frequently asked, “What do you think are the reasons for the NPS policies on reenactment?” Almost invariably, reenactors pointed to safety concerns. They were not receptive to the idea that more deep-seated commemorative questions might be at the heart of the “no opposing lines” rule.

This apparent lack of understanding, coming from a group of people who are otherwise extremely articulate and perceptive about what they do, may seem surprising at first. To me, however, it suggests two interpretations:

- Focusing on safety concerns may be a way for reenactors to feel that they have some control over their access to sacred sites. Many hope and believe that an excellent safety record will eventually convince the NPS to loosen its restrictions on reenactment at national parks.

- Reenactors tend to negotiate their problems indirectly, through the medium of performance. (See Section III for more detail on this point.) The reenactment community can be very outspoken and articulate, but I believe that it prefers to use performance to mask the issues that trouble it most—particularly the loss of ideals and values that once shaped their sense of individual and national identity. The powerful emotional connection that motivates reenactors may make it difficult or impossible for most to analyze this aspect of what they do.

Only one of the 1999 survey respondents suggested that safety was not the reason for the NPS policies:

*Overly restrictive rules regarding: battle demos on park property, musket use and inspection, black powder/cartridge safety and use, time between artillery shots, etc., are presented as matters of “safety,” but I suspect—everyone suspects—they were written largely to preclude any meaningful use of reenacting as an interpretive tool at NPS sites.*

Yet even this respondent—who may be articulating undercurrents of thought that were not apparent to me in other reenactors’ responses—saw the NPS policies as being motivated by hostility toward reenactment, not by any philosophical stance on appropriate forms of commemoration.

In their survey comments, many other reenactors expressed a sense of feeling unwelcome or unappreciated at national parks:

*It appears to me that reenactors are generally a mistrusted, misunderstood and under-used resource in relation to the NPS.*

*I find it amusing that Williamsburg and countless state historical sites, in the south, are beating at our door for event support, but the NPS, which is entrusted with the preservation and education about our national heritage, ignores or mistreats us.*

*Too many times reenactors have been looked at as the enemy by some parks. Of course, when this occurs, reenactors respond in kind.*

Yet the great majority of units responding to the survey (82%) have participated in recent events at national parks. Many of these units have strong and ongoing relationships with at least one park.

The appeal of the original historical sites in the NPS’s care is clearly an important reason why reenactors continue to attend park events despite their dislike of NPS policies. However, looking at the entire list of reasons reenactors gave for participating in park events, an interesting pattern emerges:

It gives us an opportunity to reenact on actual historic sites.	88%
<b>We have good relationships with NPS staff through park or other reenactor activities.</b>	<b>73%</b>
<b>Parks invite us to their events.</b>	<b>71%</b>
<b>We have a longstanding relationship with certain parks.</b>	<b>65%</b>
It is a learning opportunity for us.	50%
We reach a broader audience by working with parks.	48%
Parks offer interesting facilities or equipment.	42%
It brings prestige to our unit.	40%
Our umbrella organization is involved in park events.	37%
Parks offer interesting scenarios.	29%
The parks pay us a fee.	12%
It is an opportunity for us to recruit new members.	6%
Our unit has a connection to the actual battle.	4%
We act as liaison between park and other units.	2%
It is part of our public service as a state-sponsored unit.	2%
Several parks are geographically close to us.	2%
It is a teaching opportunity for us.	2%

Listed immediately after actual historic sites—before any mention of interpretation, money, audience, or umbrella organizations—are reasons that involve the relationships between reenactors and NPS staff. And these survey results show that the majority of responding units do have strong relationships with national parks despite their comments about feeling undervalued or misunderstood by the NPS. 88% of the units who responded to this survey were planning to attend NPS events within the coming season.

I have been focusing here primarily on reenactors' perspectives. But the 1998 NPS study that preceded this project revealed a similar pattern. When we initially spoke with staff at Revolutionary War parks about their experiences with reenactors, we heard many anecdotal comments about the frustrations and difficulties of holding reenactor events at parks. Most of these difficulties stemmed from reenactors' desire to stage battles. A smaller number involved reenactors whose portrayals were demonstrably inaccurate in some way. Park staff also raised some concerns about safety issues

However, when we quantified Revolutionary War parks' opinions on reenactors, their responses were much more positive. 44% of responding parks reported that reenactor activity at their parks was increasing; no parks reported a decrease. All the parks felt that reenactors did benefit their interpretations. Asked why they worked with reenactors, parks replied:

They enhance the park's interpretive program.	100%
They enhance the park's visibility with the public.	94%
They provide resources not available to us otherwise.	94%
They draw visitors to the park.	88%
Local reenactor groups have a longstanding relationship with our park.	69%

continued/

Reenactors pressure us directly for access to the park.	13%
Reenactors pressure us indirectly for access to the park.	6%
They provide training, knowledge, and skills.	6%

Like reenactors, parks seemed to draw immediate attention to the negative aspects of their working relationship, when that relationship is in fact quite a positive one. How can we explain this inconsistency? Recent work in the field of conflict resolution may provide some useful ideas for addressing this question.

Researchers who have studied antagonistic groups (for example, opponents and supporters of the death penalty) have confirmed that we tend to see our own versions of reality as more reliable than others'—that is, we feel we are rational and reasonable in our opinions, while those who oppose us are biased, egotistical, or misinformed.

Beyond this, however, some researchers (for example, Robinson, Keltner, Ward & Ross) have found that most of us have a tendency to see those in opposing groups as being more extreme than they actually are. Even more important, most of us view ourselves as having more moderate positions than the other people in our own groups.

This suggests an interesting possibility. If most people in opposing groups feel that they occupy a more moderate, middle ground than their opponents or even than their own associates, perhaps there are far fewer people holding the extreme positions than everyone assumes. Perhaps, in fact, those extreme positions exist more in the collective imagination than in reality.

There is no doubt that many in the reenactor community and within the NPS see the park/reenactor relationship as an adversarial one. And actual conflicts clearly do exist within the relationship, as the case studies in this report will show. Parks and reenactors often operate out of different value systems, which leads to disagreement about how wars and battles should be commemorated.

Yet the evidence gathered during this project also shows a strong and continuing connection between the two groups, and even areas where they seem to blend into one another. While their differing value systems must be taken into account, this is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to improved park/reenactor relations.

Having looked at some of the hidden barriers to improving those relations in this section, we will turn next to some concrete ideas for maximizing parks' and reenactors' similarities, and for negotiating their differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Reenactors give many other reasons for what they do: a love of learning about history, educating the public, a desire to escape the twentieth century temporarily, etc. But I believe that these are secondary, and support the two primary goals of honoring American soldiers and creating a present-day community based on idealized past values.

<sup>2</sup> For background on the evolution of NPS policies on reenactment, I am grateful to Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley and Bureau Historian Barry Mackintosh, who shared with me their recollections and interpretations of these policies.

### **Section III**

## **PERFORMANCE, PRESERVATION, AND COMMUNICATION**

Sections I and II of this report have looked at some of the complications and conflicts in the NPS/reenactor partnership. Section III will begin to focus on how that partnership actually functions, and how parks and reenactors can and do find common ground.

Successful relationships between parks and reenactors seem to focus on three important areas:

- performance
- preservation
- communication

### **PERFORMANCE**

As soon as they put on eighteenth century clothing and attempt to step into eighteenth century reality, Revolutionary War reenactors run into the predicament all historians encounter sooner or later: the impossibility of ever escaping our own time and culture as we attempt to understand other times and other cultures.

Reenactors are very aware of this dilemma. Because they are performers, they grapple with it through the medium of performance, particularly by using the concept of “authenticity.” This concept becomes a kind of language, through which reenactors negotiate many kinds of conflicts. Focusing on this language of authenticity can be a way for national parks and reenactors to create shared presentations despite some of their underlying conflicts.

#### **Authenticity**

Authenticity—a certainty that our historical facts are correct and more or less in balance with one another—is a central concern among reenactors, as it is among most people who work with the presentation of history. But reenactors understand this term in a specialized way, which is worth examining here.

The reenactor community tends to divide itself into three categories of authenticity:

- “farbs” (reenactors not deeply concerned with authenticity)
- “authentic” or “mainstream” reenactors
- “hard-core” or “super-authentic” reenactors

These categories are quite fluid, and vary according to who is doing the categorizing. But in general the community ranges from those who are content with a general approximation of the clothing and manner of the past, to those who are in search of as close an experience of historical reality as they can possibly

achieve. In general, reenactors are concerned mostly with material accuracy, although some reenactors add depth to their performances by using mannerisms, language, and other intangible artifacts from the past.

The “cutting edge” of authenticity moves continually toward greater historical detail and complexity, pushed by the standards of the “hard-cores” and sometimes by influences from outside the community.

- Films may influence reenactor performances. Until the 1992 film “Glory,” there were virtually no African-Americans in the reenactor community. Today there are many within the Civil War reenactment community, a smaller number among Revolutionary War reenactors.
- Several NPS rangers told me that challenges or suggestions from parks had prompted some reenactors to re-examine their own portrayals, and to correct inaccuracies in their “impressions.”

The great paradox of authenticity, of course, is that it is necessary to strive for it, while knowing that it is impossible to achieve. No matter how much time reenactors spend duplicating the material realities of the past, they still inhabit the present. Questioned about this, most reenactors are quite clear about the limitations of their efforts, and about the essentially theatrical nature of what they are doing. As one respondent to the 1999 survey put it:

*We can never reenact any part of history, per se. We can give some sort of theatrical impression, but that is all.*

Another man, who reenacts both the Civil War and Revolutionary War periods, wrote to me about his understanding of “authenticity”:

*I do this as an art form. My impression is just that, my impression. I study this stuff, and I do what I feel I want to express... It's not natural for me to try to get inside the mind of my 19<sup>th</sup> century counterpart. What's natural for me is to project my own personality onto that time period.*

One member of the King’s Own Patriots, the group discussed in Case Study B, told me that she enjoys “the sense of experiencing the past in a very modified way.” Although they differ in how they express this concept, nearly all the reenactors I have spoken with have been quite clear about the fact that they are performing a version of the past, not stepping into it literally.

## Authenticity as a language of negotiation

Just as they may use issues of safety to mask underlying questions about values, reenactors often use issues of authenticity as a way of talking about many different kinds of conflict.

- Whether women should be allowed to portray soldiers is a perennial debate within the reenactor community. My research into Civil War reenactment suggests that most of the negotiation over the issue has been framed in terms of authenticity: How accurate is it to have women “disguised” as soldiers? Do the women who attempt this “impression” carry it off convincingly? If not, are they any less convincing than male reenactors who are overweight or obviously inaccurate in some other way? Clearly, what is really taking place here is a contemporary struggle over gender. But reenactors’ public discussion of the subject is generally kept within the framework of authenticity, perhaps because this blunts the edge of the contemporary tensions and allows for some kind of consensus to be worked out.

In the case of the NPS/reenactor partnership, the most contentious issue is the ban on battle reenactments. Yet here, too, the language of authenticity may be helpful in reaching some kind of consensus.

As I have already noted in Section I, the reenactor community is not a monolithic entity, but a group of people with varying opinions. Despite the importance of battle reenactments to reenactment as a whole, there is still discussion within the community about the effect that this kind of performance has on an audience.

Excerpts from a recent discussion on the RevList, a Revolutionary War reenactor listserv, illustrate how some reenactors approach this volatile subject:

*I have seen reenactors put on ridiculous death scenes, speeches, exhortations, etc. ...I have seen people falling wounded and then propping themselves up to watch the rest of the battle, causing laughter in the crowd. I have seen people whose interpretation of wounds or even the act of dying has caused people in the crowd to laugh. I can see why NPS doesn't want this sort of thing. It does dishonor those who fought and died... This boils down to: When casualties are done right, it's too real for most people to take; when it's not done right, it's laughable. Neither one is acceptable. Perhaps there is a middle ground... (jpryan)*

*I suspect that this will be wildly unpopular in some quarters, but I submit that if our objective is to demonstrate to the crowd the effect of musketry or cannon fire on a body of soldiers in a given formation, simply having the casualties kneel in place at*



*appropriate moments would have all the pedagogical value required, especially if reinforced by the commentary of a competent narrator... I don't advocate kneeling casualties as the solution. No, no, no. The request was for middle ground, and I'm only trying to help find some. (cts3)*

*[Reenacted battle] trivializes nothing. In fact, I really think that after the battles, the casualties shouldn't come back to life, but, should be hauled off the field, to the morgue or hospital...with bloody bandages covering their "wounds." We portray war. War is an ugly business. It should be portrayed as such. We do honor to the men who fought by retelling their tale and telling that tale in grim detail. To sanitize this history is to do a disservice to the men who fought for their beliefs and the public, whom we ostensibly seek to educate. (coldstream)*

*Let's face it. The spectators get a pretty sanitized view of war [through reenactment]. My Dad (Omaha Beach 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave) thinks the two reenactments he saw were pretty tame. He complimented me on how we kept it from being too realistic so the kids could watch it. He thought it was tame on purpose and he has I think the right idea... [T]he crowd isn't going to get transported back in time to any real sense of what happened... It's symbolic anyway. (The\_Culinary\_Artist)*

Throughout this exchange, and others like it that arise from time to time among reenactors, the focus is on issues of performance. What degree of realism are reenactors looking for? Does the reenactment convey to the audience what they hope it will? If not, what techniques might convey it more precisely? Given the essentially symbolic nature of reenactment and the limits of "authenticity," what is the best way to represent and honor the soldiers of the past? The language of authenticity and performance is a way for reenactors to work out these and many other questions about how and why they commemorate war.

### **The NPS and authenticity**

There has perhaps been a tendency for some NPS staff, by virtue of their professional or official status, to view Park Service interpretations as inherently more authentic than reenactors'. Particularly if this view is expressed in a condescending manner (see "Communication," below), it may contribute greatly to reenactors' perception that they are not valued or welcomed by the NPS.

It is crucial for parks to remember, then, that the language of authenticity is just as relative and problematic for Park Service interpreters as it is for reenactors. All representations of history are just that—representations, not realities. When they

perceive good reasons for it, both parks and reenactors are capable of turning a blind eye to authenticity.

- Safety concerns nearly always work against authenticity. Elevating musket barrels, removing rammers, not using bayonets, establishing a minimum time between cannon shots—all of these precautions are observed by reenactors as well as parks. Although the degree may differ (for example, the NPS’s rules on cannon firing are much more stringent than reenactors’), the simple need to keep spectators and participants safe means that authenticity must be sacrificed.
- The use of narration, especially over a public address system, always works against the idea that spectators are seeing “actual” or “authentic” versions of the past. Yet narration can help reenactment to work as both education and performance, making it a useful enough tool that it is frequently employed by both parks and reenactors.
- Parks and reenactors are always looking for ways to capture and hold visitors’ attention. Some means of doing this are not authentic, but are popular enough that they are used anyway.

An example is the presence of the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Fife and Drum Corps at Minute Man NHP. This group, made up mostly of young people from Michigan, has been appearing at Patriots Day events in Massachusetts for almost 20 years. There was no historical 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Regiment (since there was no Michigan during the Revolution) and the group’s clothing—fringed hunting shirts and trousers—is highly inappropriate for early Revolutionary New England. Moreover, their performances at Minute Man—parading and playing for the audience before the “soldiers” arrive—are intended to entertain and divert the audience, not to represent any of the historical events of April 19, 1775.

However, the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan seems accepted by both reenactors and park staff, probably because the group is very popular with audiences. Music is a valued component of reenactments, partly because it creates an appropriate atmosphere, and partly because it can—as the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan successfully does—keep an audience happy during sometimes-lengthy pauses in the program. Moreover, the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan is itself a local tradition on Patriots Day; it has a history of its own, even if it does not relate directly to eighteenth century history.

In this case, I heard no comments from park staff or reenactors about “farby” clothing or interpretive techniques that entertained without educating.

Like reenactors, then, national parks work within flexible definitions of authenticity to create representations of history that are approximate at best. If parks can recognize this as an existing piece of common ground with reenactors, it may help both groups to communicate more skillfully in the language of authenticity through which reenactors negotiate their own conflicts and questions.

### **Other issues of performance**

#### ➤ **Different levels of performance skill among reenactors**

Just as there are different levels of authenticity among reenactors, there are differing levels of performative skill. Some reenactors are primarily interested in “blowing powder” or socializing, while others are looking for opportunities to portray “first-person” characters or to hone their interpretive skills.

Sometimes the same reenactor may want to pursue different aspects of reenactment at different events. Some of the “pickets” (designated interpreters) at Minute Man NHP like to “fight” at other events, but choose to act as interpreters at the Battle Road event. Members of the King’s Own Patriots told me that they enjoyed the contrast between large-scale events, which were more spectacular, and quieter weekends like their encampment at Kings Mountain NMP (see Case Study B), where they could work on making accouterments, honing their impressions, and speaking with visitors.

National parks should recognize this range of interests and skills among reenactors, and consider it in planning for reenactor events at parks.

- One reenactor suggested that parks and other sites should consider blending professional or semi-professional historical actors with avocational reenactment groups. For instance, drawing on the story of Major Patrick Ferguson in the Carolinas, this reenactor envisioned a muster scene in which Ferguson, portrayed by a skilled reenactor or professional living historian, issued his infamous “pissing summons” to a group of somewhat-reluctant recruits, portrayed by reenactors. This scenario would offer several things:
  - inherent dramatic interest
  - a way to include many of the park’s interpretive themes (for example, the complexity of divided loyalties in the Carolinas during the Revolution)
  - a way for actors/reenactors of differing skill levels to participate in a lively and unusual scenario, something that most reenactors enjoy
  - a chance for interested reenactors to learn new interpretive skills and historical information

➤ **Using historical resources to create innovative scenarios**

Reenactors assemble their historical performances from many different materials, but they are particularly excited by primary sources, which can give them new or obscure glimpses into past realities. National parks, with their access to NPS and other historical resources, are a potential source of information that reenactors can use to add depth to their impressions and to create interesting scenarios.

These scenarios need not center on battles to attract reenactors. As one RevList member commented recently, “I don’t feel you have to burn powder to experience a thrill up your spine” (Rcoyle). If park staff can think about performance and recognize the specific kinds of performative skills reenactors bring to parks, they may be able to find ways to design scenarios that will further parks’ interpretive missions while appealing to reenactors as well.

- The Chief Ranger at Ninety-Six NHP, himself an experienced living historian, investigated the period when Ninety-Six was a regional judicial seat, an aspect of the area’s history that had not been adequately represented in the park’s interpretation. He used his research to develop “judicial dramas” that are held occasionally on the back porch of the park’s eighteenth century log cabin.

These scenarios offer reenactors interesting theatrical roles, provide opportunities for visitors to become part of the event, and deepen everyone’s understanding of Ninety-Six’s historical context.

- Minute Man NHP holds similar “town meetings,” run by an experienced reenactor who is a regular park volunteer.
- During my research among Civil War reenactors, one of the most striking scenarios I participated in was a train ride from a newly-reopened station south of Boston. To commemorate the revival of the train line, the hosts had arranged a reenactment of the trip to Boston made by the first Massachusetts regiment to answer Lincoln’s call for troops in 1861. We disembarked at South Station, marched through the downtown streets to a rally in Faneuil Hall, then progressed to a ceremony at the State House.

The participating reenactors were excited by the novelty of the scenario, the access to important historic sites, and the day-long immersion in an alternate reality. Admittedly, this event required a great deal of planning by both the organizers and the reenactor leaders, but the consensus afterward was that the effort had been worthwhile.

If parks can use their resources and connections to create innovative scenarios involving reenactors, they can accomplish many things:

- ongoing relationship-building with interested reenactor units
- sharing of resources between parks and reenactors
- working within the language of authenticity
- increased depth in reenactor interpretation at parks

### ➤ **Parks as stages**

If reenactors are performers, then the places where they appear become stage settings. At national parks, reenactor activities are shaped by the physical landscape, and also by the history of what took place there. This point will be examined in more detail in the case studies in this report, but it is worth noting here as well.

- Among Revolutionary War parks, Minute Man NHP is perhaps the most constrained by its geography and history. A narrow, wooded strip of land bordered by a busy road, it offers almost no open land, a battle scenario that took place on the run, and very limited parking, sight lines and viewing areas. To complicate matters, the symbolic importance of the site attracts large numbers of reenactors and visitors, especially during anniversary years.

Reenactors and park staff must maneuver among these obstacles, along with the NPS restrictions on reenactor presentations, as they plan for the upcoming 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lexington/Concord battles. Minute Man's case is an extremely complex one, and there is no easy answer to the difficulties that organizers of this event face. But looking at shared problems of performance may enable them to find common ground in an often-contentious atmosphere. Asking the question, "What could make this work more effectively as a performance?" could be a way to work around issues of geography, policy, and differing commemorative strategies.

### ➤ **Recognizing existing common strategies**

At the root of NPS policies on reenactment is a concern about undermining the solemnity of the NPS's approach to memorializing battlefields and other important sites. Reenacted battles, in particular, are unacceptable to NPS policy-makers because of the atmosphere of spectacle and entertainment that they create. Not only are most reenactors enjoying themselves during battles, but the public also tends to enjoy watching them.

However, it is important to note that on the front lines of NPS interpretive programs, many parks employ techniques that lead to a similarly entertaining experience for visitors. It is a fact of historical interpretation and of performance in general that audience attention must be grabbed and held. And the best ways of grabbing and holding attention tend to be theatrical and entertaining: the noise and flash of musket fire, the use of humor or exaggeration, etc.

- At Saratoga NHP, I watched the park's own unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire, holding a mock firing demonstration with young visitors. Led by the park's black powder safety officer and one of the seasonal rangers, a group of boys and girls shouldered toy wooden muskets and learned the basics of the Revolutionary War manual of arms.

The atmosphere of this demonstration was very light-hearted. It was clearly intended to be entertaining as well as educational for both the children and the adults watching them. Ironically, the nearby reenactors had just completed a quite serious session of drilling and firing, which had not been effectively interpreted for the audience. In this case, it was the park staff who were using the techniques of humor and theater to draw visitors into the scene.

National Park Service policies are clear about drawing their interpretive line at turning battles into entertainment or spectacle. But it is important to note that some forms of NPS interpretation—like the rifle demonstration at Saratoga and other parks—rely on many of the same techniques and effects that are present in reenacted battles.

Because of their differing value systems, NPS policy-makers draw their line just short of depicting actual battle, where reenactors draw theirs on the other side of it. But while drilling is obviously not as violent or momentous as battle, it is a related activity, not an entirely separate one. Revolutionary War recruits could be miserable, reluctant, or frightened during training, just as they could be during battle. Is it, then, any more appropriate to turn training into an enjoyable spectacle? Any form of living history—including forms that national parks have accepted and used for many years—raises questions about the extent to which we can or should portray the emotions and conflicts of the past.

These questions are more sensitive in the case of portraying something as extreme as combat. They are further sharpened by the perceived adversarial relationship between the NPS and avocational reenactors. But as I have already suggested, parks and reenactors are not as adversarial or as separate as they often seem. And their uses of living history, while prompted by differing value systems, can lead to similar questions about the benefits and effects of living history as an interpretive tool.<sup>1</sup> If parks and reenactors can talk frankly about the places where their use of living history overlaps, they may be more successful in creating shared presentations.

The repertoire of living history techniques has become quite standardized (even, as some reenactors have suggested to me, clichéd): there is the musket- or cannon-firing demonstration, the display of arts or crafts, the informal explanation of cooking techniques or other aspects of camp life, and so on.

Although these types of display are far from novel to the interpreters who perform them, they still get the basic interpretive job done. They are ways of attracting visitors' attention, stimulating their curiosity, and perhaps helping them to sense some new kind of connection with historical realities. Although avocational reenactors and NPS staff may

ultimately have different ideas about the messages they want to convey through their presentations, they agree on the need to capture visitors' imaginations as a first step toward understanding those interpretive messages.

- Several reenactors and park rangers spoke to me about their use of the “same old firing demonstration.” One ranger pointed out that while it hardly gave visitors a sense of the bigger historical picture, the noise and smoke did convey some sensory information about the past. Beyond that, he felt that the noise of weapons firing often startled visitors into attentiveness and then curiosity about what they were seeing and hearing. Having accomplished that much, interpreters could then begin to talk more about issues and context.

The key to finding common ground around issues of performance, as we will see in the final part of this section, is for parks and reenactors to communicate clearly and frequently, and to be open to a discussion of the advantages (the noise that captures visitors' attention) and the potential problems (the carnival atmosphere that detracts from the solemnity of honoring the dead) of representing history through performance.

Framing the discussion in terms of interpretive goals and strategies may be the best way to maintain a dialogue around the difficult issue of battle reenactment. The fact that many reenactors do approach historical interpretation with at least some degree of performative skill means that there is a door open to discussion of the issue. For example, consider the quote below, from a 1999 survey respondent:

*So many of the historical reenactments of any size at national parks focus around a military incident or battle location. To have a program at one of these sites and not be allowed to reenact the scenario that led to the establishment of the park diminishes the impact of the program for the reenactors. It's similar to reenacting a historical race at Indianapolis Speedway, but the cars are not allowed to move.*

While there may be underlying differences in values between this reenactor and the National Park Service, he is expressing his views in terms of the performative realism of scenarios at NPS sites. And with the discussion framed in that way, there may be new avenues for negotiation and accommodation.

## **PRESERVATION**

### **The “bigger is better” mentality**

There is an assumption among reenactors that event sponsors are always hoping for the largest possible numbers of reenactors and spectators. As one respondent to the 1999 survey stated:

*Easing [the battle] prohibition would increase attendance at NPS hosted*

*events by both participants and visitors as well as increasing our activities at other times. It would make everyone feel better about NPS events in general. The huge scale of recent WBTS [War Between the States] events like Gettysburg 135<sup>th</sup>, Antietam 135<sup>th</sup> and so on—and the money made on them—are proof of the potential for revenue and for publicity that the parks are missing because of draconian policies that hamstring our opportunities to perform. Were there problems, accidents, etc. at the WBTS mega-events? Yes. Did they still turn handsome profits for the sponsors? Yes. Live and learn.*

While they often enjoy small events for the opportunities to socialize and relax, reenactors themselves tend to experience their biggest thrills at the “mega-events,” where large-scale illusions of historical reality can be created and sustained. And large audiences are an important part of reenactors’ sense that what they are doing is culturally valuable and valued.

Further, and with good reason, reenactors recognize that parks, museums, and other historical sites need to attract visitors in order to justify their existence to their respective funding sources. Increasingly, reenactors are becoming savvy about their own role in the “heritage tourism” economy. Another respondent to the reenactor survey pointed to successful large-scale collaborations between Parks Canada and the Revolutionary War reenactment community, including a 1999 event in Nova Scotia that attracted 2,000 reenactors from the U.S. and Canada:

*Last time they held this event, there were over 80,000 spectators. In addition to the prestige this brings to the site, that is approximately \$800,000 in revenue to local businesses in a remote corner of Canada. While not all events need to be this large, I believe that this demonstrates how both reenactors and Park staff can work together.*

However, large reenactor events—and the large crowds they can draw—have the potential to be extremely destructive of physical resources. Parking, foot and car traffic, reenactor camps—all take their toll on a park’s landscape. If the weather is bad, physical damage is compounded. I attended large-scale Civil War reenactments on rainy weekends that left deeply-rutted tracks, hastily-built gravel roadways, and mud bogs where hundreds of vehicles had had to be towed out of parking lots that had become swamps over the course of the event.

Staff at national parks shudder at these scenarios. Entrusted with the care of unique historical landscapes for which they feel responsible to succeeding generations of Americans, they are rightfully cautious about sanctioning public events that could damage those landscapes in any way. In this, as in many other ways, they share a concern with reenactors, who also revere these landscapes and passionately believe in the need for their preservation.



However, few park staff members brought out concerns about preservation in the park/reenactor exchanges that I observed during this study. Most negotiations that I witnessed focused instead on safety, education, and authenticity—all of which, as I have suggested, are issues that tend to create artificial divisions between parks and reenactors. Where there is unquestioned agreement—on the need to preserve parks’ physical resources—park staff were surprisingly silent.

Perhaps this issue goes unremarked because it is so obvious. But it is precisely *because* it is obvious—because it provides immediate and practical common ground on which parks and reenactors can meet—that parks should emphasize it more.

- At Minute Man NHP, reenactors follow the route of “Battle Road” through Boston’s western suburbs. Most of this route is heavily developed now, but the NPS has painstakingly been restoring the national park portion of it to its 1775 condition. This adds greatly to its appeal for reenactors, who can experience much more of a sense of historical reality in the woods than on a paved commercial street.

However, the restored landscape is also physically more fragile, with unpaved surfaces, stone walls, and limited parking and access areas. To create the illusion of historical reality, many of the conveniences of the twentieth century have been set aside, making it problematic for Minute Man to host large events, especially those, like Battle Road, involving a sequence of performances at multiple sites within the park.

Most of the discussions I observed at Minute Man NHP focused on the more contentious issues of safety, education, and authenticity. It is possible that if park staff at Minute Man and elsewhere were able to find ways to involve reenactors more closely with their preservation programs, reenactors would be in a better position to understand and accept parks’ concerns about hosting large-scale events.

- At Saratoga NHP, a park that currently has very good relationships with its reenactor partners, I asked the Chief of Interpretation what strategies she uses to support NPS policies to reenactors who question them. She explained that she often links the policies to preservation issues, emphasizing the Park Service’s dual role as conservators as well as interpreters.

Like most national battlefield parks, Saratoga is laid out with many stops along a lengthy tour road. Parking areas at the tour stops are not designed for large numbers of vehicles. Events that attract crowds mean that cars must park on the grass, which puts a strain on the physical fabric of the park even if the weather is cooperative.

Saratoga’s Chief of Interpretation feels that it is important to share this kind of concern with reenactors, and to work out the resulting logistical issues jointly.

In a sense, this is also an example of a park that is thinking performatively. Parks are stages for reenactors, but they are also fragile and sanctified places. If both parks and reenactors are thinking in those terms, they are more likely to create joint performances that will express their shared sense of the importance of these landscapes.

## COMMUNICATION

The need for good communication is implied in virtually every section of this report. Over and over again, parks who have good relations with reenactors told me about the amount of time they invest in communicating with units in their regions. And when reenactors were asked in the 1999 survey how relations between the NPS and the reenactor community could be improved, many of them mentioned communication:

*Talk with reenactors about program/scenario ideas, and about standards.*

*Communication is always the barometer in relationships.*

*The Chief Ranger and Superintendent of Castillo de San Marcos have consistently been wonderful to work with; staff relates well to re-enactor community; open dialogue and reception to suggestions, etc. – good communication.*

*Just [keep] the lines of communication open.*

In analyzing what kinds of strategies made for successful communication between parks and reenactors, I identified several key areas, which are discussed below.

### ➤ **Ongoing communication**

Long-lasting relationships between reenactors and parks are created when there is communication throughout the year, rather than just around the time of specific events.

- Fort Stanwix NM, a park that relies heavily on reenactor groups in its interpretive programs, has participated in regional reenactor meetings to coordinate event schedules and other concerns in the area. Fort Stanwix also works closely with two local units, who act as unofficial liaisons between the park and other reenactor groups in the region.
- A planned 1999 event at Valley Forge NHP illustrates the importance of maintaining regular communication between the reenactment community and national parks. One particular local unit has been involved for several years in presenting the park's annual "march out" of the troops each June.

This year, the park decided to invite wider participation by units in the area, and sent letters to a list of units about the event.

However, there was no follow-up or personal contact with the reenactors, with the result that none (including the original unit) responded to the invitation and the “march out” was led instead by a park ranger in eighteenth century uniform. Park staff recognized that their contact with reenactor units needed to be much more personal and continuous, and the park is now making efforts to establish closer and more ongoing communication with local reenactment groups.

➤ **Clear and consistent messages**

As noted above, neither parks nor reenactor groups are monolithic structures. There is a range of opinion within both groups, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting. When either group sends an inconsistent message to the other, confusion and bad feeling can result. Clarity and consistency, even when the messages being sent are unwelcome, seem to go a long way toward creating better relationships between reenactors and parks. Good communication *within* parks and reenactor groups, then, seem to be as important as good communication *between* them.

- At Saratoga NHP, the personalities and expertise of the park staff seem to fit together in a way that creates a particularly broad yet unified approach to working with reenactors.
  - The Chief of Interpretation, who is not a historian by training, views reenactors as a highly-skilled component of the park’s volunteer program.
  - The black powder safety officer, an experienced living historian who has been closely associated with many Revolutionary War reenactment groups for many years, is particularly good at articulating NPS policies to visitors and reenactors alike.
  - Other park staff are themselves reenactors, creating an important piece of the continuum of common interests between parks and the reenactment community.
  - Maintenance and protection staff at Saratoga seem to have a strong interest in reenactor activities, making personal contact with reenactors when they are at the park.
  - Reenactors report that they feel very welcomed at Saratoga. It was the park most often mentioned by units responding to the 1999 survey (nearly one-third of the responding units—19 out of 62—had participated in events there) and many of these units spoke very positively about their

experiences at the park. This positive response is not because reenactors feel they can come any closer to reenacting battles at Saratoga—on the contrary, park staff are extremely clear about their support for NPS policies. But although the policies themselves are still unpopular with reenactors, it seems that the park’s clarity and consistency on the subject adds to Saratoga’s popularity with a community of reenactors who tend to value plain speaking and straightforward face-to-face dealings with people.

- Park/reenactor relations at Minute Man NHP offer an interesting comparison with those at Saratoga. Like Saratoga, Minute Man views reenactors as a valued and skilled part of its volunteer program. And at Minute Man, too, park staff and reenactors overlap, with some current or former reenactors on the staff and some closely-affiliated reenactors (including second-generation Minute Man volunteers and former Eastern National employees) among the reenactment groups associated with the park.

However, over the course of the past year, reenactors have begun to believe that there is a split within the park. They see the interpretive staff as being much more reenactor-friendly, and protection staff as uninformed or hostile to reenactors. This perception has become widespread within the close-knit Revolutionary War reenactor community; I heard it echoed from reenactors throughout the U.S. after it had first been voiced by reenactors in New England. In my conversations with staff at Minute Man, however, it was apparent that protection and interpretative staff were much more unified than reenactors believed.

Some leading reenactors responded quite publicly and antagonistically to the idea that protection staff at Minute Man had taken control of the Battle Road event away from interpretive staff. This antagonism—which was not shared by all of the reenactors involved—further strained relations with the park, and has added to the difficulties of planning next year’s very large-scale Battle Road event.

In each phase of this process—the initial misunderstandings at the 1999 event, the reenactors’ public challenges, and some “unofficial” responses to those challenges by park staff—inconsistent messages from both park staff and reenactors have compounded the problems inherent in planning and running this extremely complex event. The planning process continues to move forward, however, largely due to the fact that there *does* seem to be clear and consistent communication between the park Superintendent and the chair of the reenactor committee, the two people at the center of the process.

It is obviously much easier to achieve across-the-board consistency in a smaller, less strained setting. But the events at Minute Man (described in more detail in Case Study A) point to the need for both park personnel and

reenactors to agree among themselves—about expectations, limitations, and goals—when they come to the table to plan for reenactment events at national parks.

➤ **Understanding reenactors’ improvisational style**

The idea of “play” permeates reenactment, and often confuses those outside the community. The atmosphere of reenactment is one of jokes and improvisation, where history, popular culture, and personal experiences are woven together to create a community that is somehow real and imagined at the same time.

This atmosphere can lead observers to conclude that reenactors are just “big kids playing with guns” who are not really serious about what they do. Park protection staff and black powder safety officers, in particular, have tended to be nervous (for obvious reasons) about reenactors’ often-playful approach to depicting history. However, nothing could be more misleading than to conclude that because they are playful, reenactors are not reliable or serious.

To understand this paradox, we need to consider once again how performance works, and to look at the specific materials out of which reenactors create their particular kind of performance.

➤ **Performance itself is “in play.”**

To take on another character or step into an imagined reality, it is necessary to separate ourselves somewhat from definite, literal, everyday realities, and to cultivate a state of mind rich with possibilities and alternatives. In performance—what scholar and director Richard Schechner has called “at once the most concrete and evanescent of the arts” (123)—many things are “in play.” Performers play with their own identities, and with the borders between past and present, illusion and reality.

To create a convincing performance, then, performers must first of all be willing to experiment with those things. The constant verbal and practical joking that goes on among reenactors is an integral part of this process of creation.

➤ **Reenactment is an improvisational kind of performance.**

All performances require performers to be willing to experiment and “play.” But improvisational types of performance—like reenactment—require an added ability to think on one’s feet, and to respond instantly to cues and changes of direction.

As I have noted above, not all reenactors are highly-skilled performers. Many are just as happy to stay in the background. But many more—the majority, I would argue—delight in the challenges of being “in character” and acting out a role in the ongoing, multi-level performance that takes place at reenactor events.

Each level of this performance has a different intensity, and a slightly different set of conventions. Reenactors “act” differently depending on whether they are sitting around a campfire at night, speaking with visitors, staging a complex military maneuver during a battle reenactment, or taking part in a memorial ceremony. Safety, audience, intent, and many other factors influence how loosely or tightly the performance will be “scripted.”

But even in formal or somber situations, reenactors still work best when they have some room to respond to what is happening around them. Reenactor performances combine planning and structure (sometimes a great deal of planning and structure) with the understanding that what happens on the field will probably be a little different than what was planned.

As reenactor organizations become more effective and integrated (see Section IV), community leaders are more able to trust that other commanders will respond safely and appropriately to last-minute surprises. This built-in trust, and the years that most reenactors have spent improvising with one another on many levels, create an atmosphere where everyone on the field can enter into the spirit of the performance. They can do this because there is neither too much looseness (which can result in danger to everyone) nor too much rigidity (which can kill the sense of play and imagination that are needed to step into their historical roles).

- Again, Minute Man NHP faces extraordinary challenges because of its limited space and the large numbers of reenactors and visitors who attend the annual Patriots Day events. Park staff and reenactor leaders respond to these constraints by extremely detailed planning and rehearsal processes. Ironically, though, this may contribute to the strain, rather than alleviating it.

At the 1999 event, miscommunication among park staff and reenactors resulted in a planned scenario at Old North Bridge being halted. Reenactors felt strongly that safety was not at issue, and that they should have been allowed to make a quick adjustment and continue with the scenario. As one Battle Road Committee member put it,

*If you drop a line in the middle of a play, you improvise and keep on going. You don't yell 'Fire!'*

This incident created a great deal of concern among reenactors, who felt that it illustrated the National Park Service's lack of trust in them. In my interpretation, the incident was symptomatic of a larger difference between reenactors' improvisational, often-playful manner, and park staff's more literal, procedural style.

Parks need to recognize the real achievements of the reenactor community in creating increasingly large, complex, and safe performances, and to realize that a certain amount of latitude or "play" is necessary for a reenactor performance to be successful.

- A weapons inspection at Kings Mountain NMP provided an example of how park staff can enter into reenactors' improvisational spirit without losing sight of safety concerns. The encampment I visited featured a single unit of loyalist militia, portraying poorly-trained and equipped men recently enlisted into royal service.

When the black powder safety officer discovered one reenactor's musket barrel to be dirty during his morning inspection, he shook his head sadly and remarked, "Well, what can you expect with militia?" The reenactors took up this joke in historical context, pleading lack of time and training, while at the same time acknowledging that the musket needed to be and would be cleaned.

Both park staff and reenactors later remarked to me that this was an instance where a park ranger pointed out a potential safety problem without seeming heavy-handed or authoritative. He created an opportunity where everyone could acknowledge the problem, ensured that it would be addressed, and framed the whole exchange in the kind of historical role-playing that reenactors naturally practice and respond to.

As the unit commander in this case phrased it, "*Manner matters.*" Reenactors' manner is almost always laced with humor and improvisation, which in no way detracts from the seriousness with which they pursue their visions of the past.

#### ➤ **Creating a park atmosphere that is welcoming to reenactors**

During the course of this study I heard many suggestions from reenactors and parks about ways to create appealing events despite the ban on battles. Some of these are ambitious; others are quite small. All involve some understanding of what motivates reenactors: a hunger for information about and immersion in

historical realities, a wish to be taken seriously as historical interpreters, and a desire for relationships built on mutual trust and respect—values that reenactors see as characteristic of the past they represent.

➤ **Additional amenities**

Beyond the standard “amenities” of wood, water, straw, and portable toilets, there are many things parks can do that are greatly appreciated—and remembered—by visiting reenactors.

- Ninety-Six NHS, a park that prides itself on being extremely “reenactor-friendly,” built showers several years ago for reenactors to use while they are encamped at the park.
- At the Saratoga encampment I attended, reenactors noted gratefully that maintenance staff at the park had taken the time to split some kindling along with the usual load of firewood, making fire-starting much easier when reenactors set up on Friday evening.
- Many reenactors mentioned parks that had supplied at least one communal meal during the encampment. Not only does this make reenactors’ planning and logistics easier, but it provides an opportunity for socializing and camaraderie that includes both reenactors and park staff.

➤ **Access to park resources**

- At an encampment at Washington’s Birthplace in 1999, the park allowed reenactors to use a reproduction wagon to make their “refugee” impression more authentic. Reenactors were delighted with the effect of this prop, which added depth to their portrayal and attracted the attention of many visitors.
- Staff at Kings Mountain NMP took reenactors from the Kings Own Patriots to view a historic house in the park that is not usually accessible to visitors. These reenactors were pleased by the invitation, partly because many of them were involved in historic preservation, and partly because it indicated their status as something closer to “insiders” at the park.
- Many reenactors mention Fort Stanwix NM as an appealing place, largely because participating in events there gives them a chance to camp in a fully reconstructed 18<sup>th</sup> century fort. Always in search of places where they can immerse



themselves in historical settings, reenactors are attracted to sites where they have access to original or reconstructed buildings or landscapes.

(It should be noted that this can occasionally add to park/reenactor tensions, as in the case of Minute Man NHP. Minute Man's "Battle Road" reconstruction, in the midst of Boston's suburban sprawl, is an appealing setting for reenactor events, to the point that reenactors are even more eager to try to recreate original battle scenes there on Patriots Day.)

➤ **Other perks**

- One of the things that most reenactors look forward to at encampments is the chance to visit sutlers—the "historical shopping mall." Since sutlers cannot set up to do business at national parks, discounts at park bookstores are a perk that is valued by many reenactors, who are avid collectors and readers.
- Gestures of hospitality and appreciation by park staff are noted and remembered by reenactors. Ninety-Six NHS is known for its park-sponsored "jollification" after the park is closed to the public. Parks that have provided period music or refreshments after hours leave a lasting impression with reenactors. These parks are recognizing that beyond the shared public interpretation that parks and reenactors present, they can also be partners in the convivial side of reenactment that is equally important for reenactors.
- Cowpens NB recently presented a plaque to the unit that acts as a liaison between the park and other units in the region. The presentation was scheduled for the busiest visitor time during a weekend encampment, providing public recognition for the reenactors' efforts.

➤ **Educational opportunities**

As noted above in the section on "performance," reenactors create their historical performances out of many different materials, including a great deal of research into primary sources and material culture. Parks that share this type of information with reenactors can enhance the overall quality of their interpretive programs while strengthening their relationships with reenactors.

- One park superintendent told me about offering information to a reenactor who was struggling to make a reproduction of a rare historical weapon. When the superintendent recognized the reenactor's level of seriousness and skill at this project, he issued an invitation to view an original of the weapon itself, which was in the park's collection.
- A reenactor respondent to the 1999 survey suggested that national parks should give reenactors "something they can't get at other events," for example:

*It would be great to have a section of the redoubt built, and full campfire pits. As an example: Fort Stanwix. Reenactors like to go there because they get to experience living in a fully operational fort.*

*[Parks could offer] seminars by renowned experts, called a "war college." Perhaps Henry Cook could speak about uniforms, George Neumann about artifacts, George Juno about weapons. It would help us reenactors obtaining information and copies of artifacts and documents.*

He added, "If you give reenactors something, they will give back," an idea that has been confirmed by the sense of reciprocity in many successful park/reenactor relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are a different genre than living history, park orientation films may also raise questions about the depiction of battle. Most of the orientation films I viewed showed somewhat stylized battle scenes, often using the very reenactors who are prohibited from portraying combat at parks. From a performative standpoint, this type of symbolic representation of battle is not entirely unlike a battle reenactment. While opposing lines are not directly portrayed in the films, the impression of battle is definitely created. The main difference, in fact, may be that in the films, viewers cannot see the "dead" soldiers getting to their feet at the end. Because production values are different in film, more of an illusion of reality can be created. But it is still an illusion. It is not surprising that visitors are sometimes confused or disappointed by the fact that reenactors cannot depict battle scenes, when parks' own presentations may have created an expectation to the contrary.

## **Section IV**

### **REENACTOR ORGANIZATIONS**

#### **Reenactor umbrella organizations**

The trend toward corporatization is increasingly apparent in the reenactor community, shaping reenactors' activities and how they relate to other groups in the field of history.

Although recreational black powder groups like the North-South Skirmish Association and the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association existed as long ago as the 1930s, the first "umbrella" group of avocational reenactors was the Brigade of the American Revolution (BAR), founded in New York state in 1962. For some years, there was a definite split in both the Revolutionary War and Civil War reenactor worlds between those who aligned themselves with organizations like the BAR and those who remained steadfastly outside them. Many individual units resisted the "umbrellas," preferring to keep all unit decisions in their own hands.

In recent years, however, it has become clear that the national and regional umbrella groups are central players in reenactment. Groups not affiliated with an umbrella organization are finding that they may be excluded from some popular events, or that they are shunted to one side during military scenarios because they are not part of the large-scale structures assembled by the umbrella groups. To be a full participant in reenactment, it is increasingly necessary for units to belong to one of these groups.

Nearly all (90%) of the units responding to the survey from this study reported that they belonged to at least one umbrella organization. Just over half (52%) belonged to a single umbrella group. 31% belonged to two different umbrellas, and 7% to three or more. Of the units who reported multiple memberships, the most common pattern was for them to hold membership in the BAR and one other group.

Early umbrella groups (the BAR being a notable exception) tended to be fairly unstable, as their leaders grappled with the tensions between independent local units and the need for a centralized structure that could support military and logistical maneuvering involving thousands of people.<sup>1</sup> But over almost forty years, reenactors have found ways to resolve those tensions and to work with one another and with non-reenactor groups.

Because the growth of the umbrella organizations has direct implications for the National Park Service's dealings with Revolutionary War reenactors, it is worthwhile here to describe the four primary umbrella groups currently operating in the Revolutionary War reenactment community.

➤ **Brigade of the American Revolution (BAR)**

From its beginnings in 1962, the BAR sought to raise standards of safety and authenticity within the whole Revolutionary War reenactment community. This mission alienated (and continues to alienate) some units who resent any type of centralized authority or who reenact primarily for fun. However, the group is remarkably stable, and includes perhaps one-third to one-half of all Revolutionary War reenactors in the U.S., a statistic that suggests it offers substantial benefits to its members.

The BAR hosts encampments, tactical exercises, flintlock competitions, craft demonstrations, and annual training schools and seminars. It publishes a regular newsletter, the *Brigade Courier*, and a quarterly educational journal, *The Brigade Dispatch*. Current membership is about 2,200 reenactors from about 130 units in the U.S., Canada, and Britain.

Member units represent many of the armies that fought during the Revolutionary War, as well as civilians of the time period. The bulk of BAR membership is drawn from three geographical areas centered around New York City, Cleveland, Ohio, and Greensboro, North Carolina. About half of the BAR's member units belong exclusively to the BAR, while half also hold membership in at least one other umbrella organization.

The BAR is governed by a national board made up of ten members elected by the entire membership. Board terms are two years, and most board members typically remain in office for two to five terms. Regional boards oversee the two geographical regions, one in the northeast and a newly-chartered southeast region.

To be admitted as BAR members, groups must carefully document their unit history, clothing, and accouterments. This emphasis on documenting small details has earned the BAR a reputation among some reenactors as “thread counters” or “authenticity Nazis.” But BAR leaders are proud of their reputation as sticklers for accuracy, and of their sense that they have been instrumental in improving standards for the entire reenactor community. Once admitted to the BAR, a unit is covered by the umbrella group's insurance policy.

The BAR has no organizational policy on National Park Service events, although one BAR rule does create potential problems for the NPS. The BAR specifically prohibits women portraying “disguised” female soldiers, while the NPS, after a 1991 lawsuit challenging a similar policy at Antietam National Battlefield, must allow women in uniform to take the field. Otherwise, the BAR and NPS have worked together productively at many parks.

URL: <[www.brigade.org](http://www.brigade.org)>

### ➤ **The British Brigade**

The British Brigade was founded in 1985, as its current leader put it, “to build a little team spirit between British reenactors and train them to be more efficient on the field.” Like many umbrella organizations, it was a response to the fact that large-scale military maneuvers simply are not possible without some type of coordinated command structure. Its emphasis remains on the military aspects of reenactment, unlike the BAR’s more comprehensive approach to education and authenticity.

The British Brigade can currently field up to 800 reenactors from 35 units. Its membership is strongest in the northeast, but it also includes groups from the southern U.S., Canada, and one in England. To join, a group must include at least six men, uniformed alike, who are willing to give the brigade leadership control over what happens on the field during an event.

Like the BAR, the British Brigade is a non-profit organization in the state of New York, governed by a board of directors made up of the commanders of each of the 35 member units. The board chooses the brigade officers each year, including an overall field commander. Only two men have held this top position in the organization’s 14-year history. Other board officers hold positions based on eighteenth century military practice (paymaster, adjutant, quartermaster).

The Brigade hosts two or three events each season, sometimes trying new venues but also returning to places they have enjoyed in previous years. Most of their efforts are coordinated with their brother organization, the Continental Line. The British Brigade also maintains informal but close relations with the BAR.

URL: <[www.BritishBrigade.org](http://www.BritishBrigade.org)>

### ➤ **The Continental Line**

The Continental Line was formed shortly after the British Brigade. When the Brigade made a reenacting trip to England in 1987, a group of Continental reenactors joined them to portray the American side. The camaraderie that developed during this trip led to the decision that it would be worthwhile to have a parallel umbrella group that could both organize Continental units and coordinate events with the British Brigade. From an original nucleus of ten units, current Continental Line membership has grown to 65-70 units.

The Continental Line is essentially a confederation of independent groups. It is run by a board of directors headed by a chairman who serves for two years. This position tends to be filled alternately by reenactors from each of the group’s three regions: north, mid-Atlantic, and south. An adjutant and three departmental coordinators complete the board.

Board members are elected by the membership, with regional coordinators elected by members in their own regions. The chairman selects members for an authenticity committee, as well as liaison officers who maintain official contact with the British Brigade. Continental Line units must furnish their own insurance.

Like all umbrella organizations, the Continental Line struggles with the very American question of how to balance unit autonomy with the need for centralized structure. Unlike the BAR, which prides itself on maintaining very strict organizational requirements for members, or the British Brigade, whose leader admits, "We'll fight for democracy, but we don't practice it," the Continental Line attempts (at least in principle) to leave as much authority as possible at the unit level. Its emphasis is on tactical leadership, and its administrative structures are set up primarily to support efficiency on the field, with a secondary goal of raising authenticity standards for its membership.

Each of the three Continental Line departments holds one or two events per year, generally hosted by a local Line unit. On a national level, the Continental Line usually coordinates two large events per year with the British Brigade. In 1998, the two organizations joined with the BAR and Parks Canada to stage a large-scale event in Quebec City, which many reenactors have pointed to as a model of inter-umbrella cooperation. The same groups ran a similar and highly-successful event in the summer of 1999 at Fortress Louisburg, Nova Scotia.

#### ➤ **Northwest Territory Alliance (NWTa)**

The Northwest Territory Alliance serves as an umbrella for more than forty midwestern Revolutionary War reenactment units. Founded around the time of the national bicentennial, the NWTa now includes about 1,700 military and civilian reenactors from throughout the midwest.

To be admitted as members, units must document the authenticity of their unit history, regulations, clothing, and accouterments. During the first year of membership, new units must field a minimum number of soldiers at NWTa events. Based on the size of the unit, the NWTa determines how many officers the group may field.

The NWTa is run by a board of directions made up of one representative from each of the member units. The board meets bimonthly and is run, like the Continental Line, as an administrative rather than a military hierarchy. The overall commander has a military title but an essentially administrative role. Military command is conferred by the board of directors, usually to a known group of people who have worked closely together in the past.

The NWTA has an extremely busy schedule of encampments, hosting upwards of a dozen events each year. Each of these typically draws 150-200 reenactors. By far the biggest NWTA event is the Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous, held each Memorial Day weekend in Vincennes, Indiana and described in more detail below.

Because of its geographical distance from the east coast, the NWTA is somewhat distant from national “reenactor politics,” which tend to be based in the east. However, many NWTA units do belong to at least one of the other major umbrella groups, and the NWTA and BAR host one joint event each season. As the umbrella organizations become more national in scope, and as the Internet facilitates communication across distance, midwestern Revolutionary War units seem increasingly connected to their more numerous eastern counterparts.

URL <[www.nwta.com/main.html](http://www.nwta.com/main.html)>

### ➤ **Other umbrella organizations**

There are several smaller and generally more regional umbrella groups, including:

Southern Crown Forces

<[www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Quarters/1829](http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Quarters/1829)>

The Virginia Line

<[www.wlu.edu/~valine](http://www.wlu.edu/~valine)>

Burning of the Valley Military Association (New York state)

Historic Florida Militia

Living History Association (Vermont)

<[www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/9463](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/9463)>

This last organization has attracted a national membership primarily by offering affordable insurance policies for reenactment units.

### **The growing role of the umbrella organizations**

As often happens within communities, reenactors are discovering that structures created for one purpose—in this case, for organizing large-scale military-style performances—may be useful in other situations. Reenactors have become activists in causes connected with history, and the infrastructures of the umbrella organizations have allowed this far-flung community to speak in more unified and effective ways. Ironically, the new technology of the Internet has had an enormous effect in unifying a group of people whose aim is to rediscover the values and lifestyle of the distant past.

Most reenactors strongly prefer to maintain the avocational, non-commercial nature of reenactment. Only 12% of survey respondents in this study said that being paid a fee was

a factor that influenced their decision to participate in events at national parks. And most unit budgets remain modest: of the 49 units who supplied budget figures for this study, 80% had a total budget of \$2,000 or less.

But reenactors do recognize their community's potential to leverage money and attention for causes that are important to them. And they increasingly see and make use of the "in kind" value of their appearances. One reenactor active in the leadership of the Continental Line reports that he tells communities interested in sponsoring reenactments that "We're a cheap date—you can put a minimal amount of money into amenities for the reenactors, and a lot of money into promoting the event to attract big crowds, and everyone will be happy." The umbrella organizations have played an important role in helping reenactors to raise their public profile and expand their range of activities into the areas listed below.

### ➤ **Public policy and preservation**

Reenactors have taken an active role in public debates and efforts around historic preservation and other policy issues. They have long been vocal in working to save historic sites (especially battlefields) threatened by development. The sizeable profits from most Civil War "mega-events" are now channeled into battlefield preservation.

As already noted in Section I, in the spring of 1999, reenactors became involved in a public policy issue that touched more directly on their own activities. When the Massachusetts legislature approved a new gun law that would have made trigger guards and other safety features mandatory on all weapons in the state, reenactors from throughout New England led a highly-publicized and successful lobbying effort to add an amendment for historical weapons.

### ➤ **Mass media**

Many reenactors have been involved in film and television projects, from nationally-released films like *Glory* and *Gettysburg* to smaller local productions. The History Channel, indeed, is sometimes jokingly referred to as the Reenactor Channel because of its frequent use of reenactors in staged recreations. Recently, many Revolutionary War reenactors were involved in the filming of the upcoming big-budget movie *The Patriot*, starring Mel Gibson as a fictionalized version of Francis Marion.

A broad coalition of Civil War reenactor organizations came together around the filming of the 1992 movie *Gettysburg* to negotiate with the producers, Turner Network Television. Although they were unsuccessful in their original demands for reenactors to be paid as skilled extras, the coalition did wrest a \$100,000 contribution toward historic preservation from TNT.



### ➤ **Heritage tourism**

As the reenactment community matures and builds connections with other groups in the heritage world, reenactors are gaining a sense of themselves as an important part of a wider field. They recognize their ability to draw crowds and attention, and they are becoming more savvy about their marketability in the heritage economy.

Many reenactor groups have established working relationships with commercial enterprises and high-profile heritage organizations. One Revolutionary War unit surveyed in this study had participated in Philadelphia's new "Lights of Liberty" sound and light show. Many units had connections with Colonial Williamsburg, either through regular participation there or through unit members employed at Williamsburg.

### ➤ **Parks Canada**

The partnership between Revolutionary War reenactor organizations and the Canadian national park system is worth noting here for several reasons:

- Some of the largest and most popular Revolutionary War reenactment events in recent years have been held at Canadian national parks.
- This partnership provides a model for looking at how reenactor umbrella organizations work with a national park system.
- It suggests that reenactors are thinking more broadly about the history they present and about the wider heritage field.

Although at first glance it may seem surprising for American Revolutionary War reenactors to be creating a partnership with national parks in another country, the connection reflects the fact that at the time of the Revolution, all of the disputed territory was still British North America, without the national borders that we recognize today. Reenactors savor the chance to reenact on the Plains of Abraham (as they have done twice at recent events in Quebec City) or at Fortress Louisburg in Nova Scotia, because it gives them a better sense of the world that existed before today's borders were drawn. Many reenactors point out—and try to reflect—the international character of the American Revolution, perhaps as a way of grasping the complex politics of the era, perhaps as a way of reflecting our own increasingly global sense of culture and politics.

Reenactors rate the recent Parks Canada "mega-events" highly. One survey respondent listed the amenities that had made reenactors feel welcomed and valued:

*Some things Parks Canada has done to make this a truly successful event include providing meals for the participants, providing additional events for the public, transporting individuals to and from the airport, providing*

*a complete information packet including instructions for crossing the border, hotels to stay in and the like, a supplemental volunteer staff to service the almost 2,000 reenactors.*

Many reenactors who attended the Quebec City events commented on the widespread publicity effort that the city and the park system had coordinated. Television publicity, prominently-displayed billboards, placemats at city restaurants featuring reenactors' images, and other PR strategies brought in enormous crowds of spectators. Some reenactors commented to me that American national parks do not seem to see themselves as engines for heritage tourism to the same extent that Canadian parks appear to.

Finally, battle reenactments are allowed at Parks Canada events, capping their appeal for reenactors.

### **The Spirit of Vincennes: A park/umbrella partnership**

The annual Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous in Vincennes, Indiana is an example of a highly-successful and long-lasting collaboration between a national park and a reenactor umbrella group, in partnership with civic and other organizations.

Started during the bicentennial in 1977, the Vincennes event commemorates George Rogers Clark's successful raid on a frontier fort. The annual commemoration is a city-wide celebration, centered around a Revolutionary War encampment at George Rogers Clark NHP. The event is now organized and run by a non-profit organization, the Spirit of Vincennes, Inc., made up of representatives from all the groups involved.

Four to five hundred members of the Northwest Territory Alliance (NWTAA) camp on the national park for the weekend, staging battle reenactments on land adjacent to the park. This land was purchased around 1980 by the Spirit of Vincennes, Inc., using money raised primarily through fundraising efforts at the annual encampment. The land has now been donated back to the city, which leases it to the event organizers each year. This arrangement has been central in securing the city's support and involvement, a factor (as at the Quebec City events described above) that participants point to as important in the success of the event.

Reenactors and park staff speak of the Spirit of Vincennes with pride and enthusiasm. This is clearly a true community festival involving a wide-ranging partnership among many complementary groups.

Most important for the purposes of this study, it seems clear that the strong connections between the national park, the reenactor umbrella group, and the city have provided a framework for solving the problem of how to attract reenactors to national parks when battle reenactments are not allowed on NPS land. George Rogers Clark NHP is not the only national park that has experimented with holding reenacted battles on nearby

property. But the Vincennes arrangement is unique in that it is permanent, and that it was based on the shared efforts, over time, of many groups of people. The “battlefield” in Vincennes is not a second-best solution to a vexing park/reenactor problem. Rather, it is a public collaboration that emerged from a strong relationship between reenactors and a national park, and that has further strengthened that relationship.

Spirit of Vincennes URL: <[users.bestonline.net/fdough/spirit.htm](http://users.bestonline.net/fdough/spirit.htm)>

This is clearly not the only model that might be used to approach the question of how national parks and reenactor groups can work together more productively. But it strongly suggests several ideas that may be helpful to other parks and to the NPS as a whole:

- Rather than working on unit-by-unit relationships, parks (or the NPS as a whole) should look to the reenactor umbrella organizations as a way to build broader coalitions.
- Finding solutions to current park/reenactor tensions is something that will take time and an investment of effort on the part of everyone involved.
- Both reenactor groups and parks have the potential to mobilize wider interest and support through the various networks they belong to.

### **Reenactor demographics**

A final aspect of the Revolutionary War reenactor community to consider here is the generational change that is beginning to take place within its leadership. At both the unit and umbrella group levels, reenactors born after the baby boom/Vietnam era are starting to emerge as leaders.

Survey data gathered during this study shows that current reenactor leadership is still very much made up of “baby boomers.”

- The average age of survey respondents was 49.
- 72% of all respondents were over the age of 40.
- A substantial majority of respondents (also 72%) were commanders of their units, and many were also active in umbrella groups as well.

However, data on the overall membership of Revolutionary War units shows that the majority of the community is made up of younger reenactors:

- The 17-40 year old age group was largest in 60% of responding units.
- The 40+ age group was largest in 40% of units.

While reenactor leadership is still made up of “baby boomers,” then, these “second generation” reenactors are no longer a majority in the overall reenactor community.

Because reenactment, like all forms of cultural performance, is shaped by changing conditions in the culture that produces it, this generational shift has implications for the character of the community, and for its dealings with organizations like the National Park Service.

For “second generation” reenactors, reenactment often seems to be a way to reconnect with the values and patriotism of the immediate post-World-War-II years, and these values have shaped their performances in important ways. The younger “third generation” reenactors who are beginning to take leadership roles in the community came of age after the era of Vietnam and the turbulent social changes of the 1960s and early 1970s. While all reenactors value patriotism, camaraderie, and historical knowledge, “third generation” reenactors seem to do so in a new ways.

If “baby boomer” reenactors seek to connect with personal visions of honor and integrity in troubled times, their younger counterparts seem motivated more by a desire for community in an ever more fragmented world. Both desires are heartfelt, and share a sense of connection to past communities—especially military ones. But the specific generational tensions that shaped “baby boomer” reenactment are less evident among younger reenactor leaders.

These are large generalizations, which I have not yet quantified or investigated in any methodical way. If they are correct, however, it seems likely that a shift within reenactor leadership—especially at the umbrella level—may present an opportunity for a new type of dialogue between the reenactment community as a whole and the National Park Service. Building on the frameworks created by “second generation” reenactors, these younger men and women are thinking in terms of “skill sets,” broad (even global) networks of communication, and other increasingly sophisticated means of pursuing their avocation.

Reenactment is becoming more corporatized, and it is at the level of the umbrella organizations that the National Park Service may be able to engage in meaningful discussions of the problems and the opportunities presented by the park/reenactor relationship. For instance, although it is crucial for the NPS to clarify that its black powder policies are not *only* about safety, it seems possible that some broad-based dialogue of the parts that *are* safety-related could greatly strengthen and energize park/reenactor relations.

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<sup>1</sup> At the recent 135<sup>th</sup> anniversary event at Gettysburg, for example, more than 20,000 Civil War reenactors portrayed the three-day battle in “real time,” staging scenarios that in some cases replicated the original numbers of combatants on the field. The event was coordinated by a coalition of reenactor and preservation groups that had worked together previously on “mega-events” and had learned a great deal about the logistics of such immense productions.

## Section V

### CASE STUDIES OF REENACTOR EVENTS AT NATIONAL PARKS

#### Case Study A

#### “Battle Road 1999” at Minute Man NHP

April 17, 1999

#### Introduction

Many of the underlying affinities and differences between national parks and reenactors are revealed at the Battle Road event. This case study will illustrate many of the issues already discussed, including:

- the role of reenactors as traditional users of sites now in the NPS’s care
- the importance of avocational reenactors in regular park interpretive programs
- the need for clear lines of communication within and between parks and reenactor groups when they negotiate with each other
- the necessity of building and maintaining direct relationships between park staff and reenactors
- the emergence of national umbrella groups as leaders in planning and running major events
- the appeal of preserved and reconstructed landscapes for reenactors (which can create connections with parks, but may also create tension when reenactors wish to use these landscapes for their own style of battle commemoration)
- how reenactor performances are shaped and limited by park history and geography
- the difficulty of trying to create “ceremonial” reenactments that lack the character of either ceremonies or reenactment

#### The battle

The events of April 19, 1775 are among the best known and best loved in the history of the American Revolution. Paul Revere’s Ride, Lexington Green, Old North Bridge and the “shot heard round the world”—these iconic moments have been central to popular understanding of the Revolution for more than two centuries.

The events of Lexington and Concord began with a surprise raid by 800 British soldiers on caches of arms hidden in Concord, Massachusetts. After a night march from Boston, the British column passed through Lexington early on April 19, unaware that Paul Revere had warned the town’s citizens of their approach. 77 armed “minutemen” awaited the red-coats on the town common to offer at least a show of resistance to the British military presence.

Participants' accounts suggest that the British intended only to surround and disarm the minutemen, while the colonists were on the point of dispersing. But in the tension of the moment, an unauthorized shot was fired. British regulars began to fire at will, leaving eight Americans dead.

The columns continued to Concord. Minutemen from several surrounding towns mustered there, as British soldiers searched for the now-relocated weapons and set the town's liberty pole on fire. Convinced the whole town was being burned, the minutemen decided to make a stand at the North Bridge on the Concord River.

As the two sides faced each other across the bridge, the British fired a volley and killed two Acton minutemen. The Americans returned fire, leaving a handful of British soldiers dead or wounded. These casualties had immense symbolic importance for both sides. Americans had been killed defending their homes; British soldiers had been fired on as they defended the lawful government of the colonies. Other towns have claimed that earlier confrontations constituted the *real* "shot heard round the world," but for most Americans then and now, the fighting at Lexington and Concord marked the true beginning of the American Revolution.

Surprised at the extent of the colonists' resistance, the British began a retreat along a road that became a strange battlefield, only a few hundred yards wide and 16 miles long. Beginning at Meriam's Corner, two miles from the North Bridge, they were harried by colonial militiamen, who were still continuing to gather throughout eastern Massachusetts. The regulars, trained for rigid battlefield maneuvers, were ill-equipped to fight back against enemies who sniped at them from behind natural cover. At the end of an exhausting march that cost them 273 dead and wounded men, the British reached safety in Boston, leaving the colonists with a tale of heroism and sacrifice that quickly became part of an emerging national consciousness.

### **Commemoration at Lexington and Concord**

As the symbolic birthplace of the nation, Lexington and Concord have always been centers for commemoration and veneration. Much of this activity has focused on the iconic figure of the minuteman. In his study of Americans and their "sacred" battlefields, Edward Linenthal describes

...the public construction of a uniquely American image of warriors, the minutemen, described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1835 as "poor farmers who came up that day to defend their native soil," acting "from the simplest of instincts."

These instinctive warriors were ceremonially perceived as men whose New England origins nurtured republican principles that protected them from the moral pollution of old-world warriors. Consequently, the minutemen became a powerful cultural model for generations of Americans at war and at peace... (Linenthal 11)

Some form of reenactment has been included in commemorative activity in Lexington and Concord since the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In 1822, twenty survivors of the Lexington fight helped to recreate the event on the town green. In the later part of the century, ceremonial companies of minutemen were formed in many of the towns that had contributed soldiers in 1775. A minuteman group was founded in Lexington in 1874 in anticipation of the national centennial, only to disband in 1876. Records of celebrations in Lexington and Concord in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest that these minutemen companies have long been a prominent feature of local parades and ceremonies, especially during major anniversary celebrations.

The Lexington Minute Men reorganized in 1910, and have operated continuously since then. Some other town minuteman companies have similar long-term histories; others were reactivated as the national bicentennial approached. It seems likely that the popularity of historical reenactment during the Civil War centennial prompted some of this activity. In 1962, for instance, the town of Concord decided to sponsor “the mustering of a new company of militia to be known as the Concord Minute Men” to be active in schools and at civic events. More than 100 men answered this call for volunteers (Linenthal 17).

These town minutemen companies are important precursors of today’s avocational reenactors. Rather than seeking to immerse themselves in past realities, as contemporary reenactors do, the ceremonial minutemen have tended to function more as fraternal organizations, with close ties to other civic groups. Their claim of “authenticity” comes not from painstaking attention to material detail, but from a sense of lineage that directly connects them—sometimes by blood ties, more often simply through long-term residence in the area or membership in a minuteman group—with the citizen-soldiers of 1775.

A Council of Minute Men coordinated the joint activities of these groups for several years, but has become inactive within the past decade. Leaders from the newer avocational reenactment community have emerged to take over the council’s role. A loose affiliation of regional reenactor leaders, the Commanders’ Roundtable, now acts as an organizing body for regional events involving large numbers of reenactors (including the town minuteman companies).

In 1894, Massachusetts declared April 19 a state holiday, Patriots Day. Today the holiday falls on the Monday closest to April 19, and has become associated for many people with the running of the Boston Marathon and the opening of the baseball season. However, a significant structure of patriotic commemoration continues in and around Boston. Lanterns are hung in the steeple of Old North Church; Paul Revere’s ride is recreated; major civic parades are held in Concord, Lexington, Arlington, and other towns; ceremonies take place at North Bridge; and the “battle” on Lexington Green is reenacted at dawn in front of an immense crowd.

Revolutionary War reenactors in eastern Massachusetts, particularly those who portray minutemen, get very little sleep on Patriots Day weekend. Their activities intersect with many other levels of commemoration. Most march in at least one civic parade, and some

town minutemen companies observe their own rituals as well. The Acton company, for instance, marches along the route taken by the Acton minutemen in 1775. The Sudbury Minutemen make a similar pre-dawn march to North Bridge, held devoutly on April 19 no matter what day of the week it falls on.

The primary reenactment of the weekend, known as “Battle Road,” is actually made up of several segments in Concord, Lincoln, Lexington, and Arlington. These may occur on different days, depending on what else has been planned for the weekend. Although it occurred first historically, Lexington Green is usually recreated on the holiday Monday, as part of the town’s Patriots Day celebrations. Other segments typically include a ceremonial version of the confrontation at Old North Bridge, staged battles on town land in Concord and Lexington, scripted “commemorative ceremonies” along the portions of Battle Road within Minute Man NHP, and a final battle reenactment (sometimes held on a different day) at the Jason Russell House in Arlington.

An important feature of the park segment of this event is that it is not park-sponsored, but held under a special use permit filed by reenactors. The park recognizes the weight of local tradition and visitor expectation around this event, and waives the usual permit fee despite the extremely high cost in staff hours.

Every 25 years, commemoration of the Lexington/Concord events becomes national in scope. New and existing organizations within the civic and historical communities in the area have been planning for the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary in April 2000 for some time. (For example, see the web site for Lexington’s Commission 2000 <[www.2000lexington.com](http://www.2000lexington.com)> which centers on the annual civic parade and the dawn reenactment on Lexington Green.)

Reenactor organization around the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary began with a 1997 proposal from the then-coordinator of the northern department of the Continental Line, a national umbrella organization (see page 56). This proposal spurred discussion between the Continental Line and the Commanders’ Roundtable about hosting a large-scale reenactor event on Patriots Day weekend in 2000. A new group, the Battle Road Committee, was formed to coordinate the project. The head of this committee, a long-time town minuteman member, is also deeply involved in planning Lexington’s anniversary celebrations.

The Battle Road Committee identified two existing areas that they wanted to address before they felt the regional reenactor community could host an ambitious national event. First, the town minuteman companies had a long-standing claim to leadership and participation in Patriots Day activities, but their standards of safety and authenticity were very different from those of the avocational reenactors who made up the majority of the committee. Second, probably because of the town companies’ central role in Patriots Day events, reenactor units portraying British soldiers had never been integral to the planning of Lexington/Concord events.

The second issue was easily handled by inviting representatives from British units to join the Battle Road Committee. The first, which has been more contentious, has involved a multi-year process of collaboration, education, and occasional coercion, during which



most of the town minuteman groups have made gradual changes in their clothing, accouterments, and drill, in order to meet the more exacting requirements of the Battle Road Committee. (See information at <[www.ziplink.net/~mrkmcc/resources.htm](http://www.ziplink.net/~mrkmcc/resources.htm)> or <[www.ai.mit.edu/people/sfelshin/BRY2K](http://www.ai.mit.edu/people/sfelshin/BRY2K)> for copious information on these requirements and on the organization of the event.)

The committee has also worked very closely with Minute Man NHP to plan the 1997, 1998, and 1999 events. Discussion of that collaboration, and of the current state of planning for the 2000 event, will follow below.

### **Formation of Minute Man NHP**

Minute Man National Historical Park was established in 1959, after a coalition of local, state, and federal groups sounded an alarm about the threat that Greater Boston's development posed for the historic landscape of Lexington, Concord, and the "Battle Road." This route, now known as Route 2A, connects the city with its affluent northwestern suburbs. By the 1950s it had become, and continues to be, a busy two-lane thoroughfare, closely connected with several major highways. Hanscom Field, a U.S. Air Force base, abuts the road in Concord, adding to the ground and air traffic in the area. A proposal to add commercial flights at Hanscom Field is currently creating renewed concerns about preservation and traffic.

The enabling legislation for Minute Man NHP created the 900-acre park as a way to offset encroaching development. Minute Man park, the legislation stated, would provide "for the preservation and interpretation of the historic sites, structures, and properties lying along the entire route...where significant events occurred on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1775" (*Minute Man Messenger* 1). The park is also charged with the preservation and interpretation of parts of Concord's nineteenth century literary past.

Like most historical parks, Minute Man is a compromise between preservationists' dreams and present-day realities. The park contains the property around Old North Bridge, which includes a Visitor Center and administrative offices. The bridge itself and the paths leading to it, however, are retained by the town of Concord to ensure free access for town commemoration at the site.

After a gap of two miles, the park begins again at Merriam's Corner, just outside Concord Center. A 5½ mile trail links Merriam's Corner with Fiske Hill in Lexington. A second Visitor Center was built in 1975 near the eastern end of the park. Other important sections of the historical landscape, notably Lexington Green, remain in other hands. This geographic fragmentation, and the commercial and residential development that continues throughout the area, make Minute Man a somewhat disjointed property, preserving isolated eighteenth and nineteenth century islands in the midst of a busy twentieth century sea.

An important and sometimes controversial focus at the park in the 1980s and 1990s has been the restoration of a portion of Battle Road within the park to its "1775 character"

(Linenthal 34). This ambitious plan resurfacing and landscaping the section of road in the park, rehabilitating several historic structures (such as the Hartwell Tavern), and gradually removing the most intrusive signs of the twentieth century. Because this project has absorbed a great deal of staff energy and time, as well as unsettling the physical landscape of the park over a period of several years, it has inevitably affected the park's focus on other special projects, such as the annual Battle Road events.

Even under normal conditions, Minute Man's geography and history create many special challenges for the planning of large-scale public events, especially those involving reenactors. Unlike most battlefield parks, Minute Man offers few open spaces or encampment sites. The battle took place on the run, along a narrow and wooded road. Sight lines are often poor, and potential viewing areas cramped. Parking is limited. Traffic along Route 2A can make it difficult to get in and out of the park. With no obvious central area that is easily accessible, visitors, park staff, and reenactors must all shuttle from one venue to the next during any commemoration of the Battle Road events. The result is a feeling of restriction and complexity that adds tension to an already-intricate and emotionally-charged event.

The park and area reenactors have made concerted efforts to find alternate ways to use "living history" in park interpretation. The park sponsors its own unit, Prescott's Battalion, which represents a local militia company and is made up of reenactors from many local units. This group and several other closely affiliated with the park appear frequently at the Visitor Centers and Hartwell Tavern, depicting drills, musters, town meetings, and other activities from the standard "living history" repertoire. Local reenactors are very much a presence in the park's interpretive programs: of the 30 special programs held at Minute Man in 1999, 21 involved Revolutionary War reenactors.

Reenactors associated with Minute Man NHP have also developed an innovative role known as the "picket." Created as a way of providing interpretation and crowd control during public events, this role makes use of reenactors who are not in the military ranks. The pickets stand at the rope line before and during scenarios, answering questions and explaining what is happening on the field.

However, the strong ongoing relationship between Minute Man NHP and local reenactors is weakened by the inherent problems that arise around the annual Patriots Day events. The more "authentic" the environment at Minute Man becomes, the less tolerant reenactors seem to be of the patently unhistorical "ceremonies" that emerge from their compromises with NPS policy. Many seem to see the Battle Road event as a potential trade-off for the many hours they spend volunteering at Minute Man each year. The park's geography limits its options for hosting large reenactor presentations, and the story of the fight at North Bridge and the British retreat along Battle Road offers few scenarios that do not involve battle. And that story—especially during major anniversary years—resonates deeply with reenactors and the public, heightening the importance of Patriots Day commemorations. Maneuvering cautiously among all of these considerations,

Minute Man NHP and the Battle Road Committee are faced with the unenviable task of trying to create a unified public performance out of many contradictory pieces.

## **Battle Road 1999**

### ➤ **Planning and organization**

As noted above, reenactor activities at Minute Man NHP are only one segment of a larger series of reenactments on Patriots Day weekend. Conversely, the reenactors are just one of many groups using the park for commemorative purposes around April 19. Both the park staff and the reenactor coordinators, then, are working within larger contexts as they plan the “Battle Road” event at the park.

For both groups, planning begins with a post-mortem of the previous year’s event. The 1998 and 1999 events were part of the Battle Road Committee’s extended preparation for the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The committee decided to survey reenactors and visitors at the April 1998 event, and they used this data (which closely mirrored audience and reenactor data collected in this report) to plan for 1999. During the winter of 1998/99 they also reviewed questions of timing, transportation, scripting, etc., and sponsored workshops and lectures designed to help reenactors (particularly the town minuteman companies) raise their standards of authenticity.

Both the committee and the park recognized that the 1999 event would be a dress rehearsal for a much larger performance the following April. In January 1999, park staff and committee members met to talk about planned scenarios and to visit the three proposed sites: North Bridge, the “Bloody Angle” and Hartwell Tavern (a venue not previously used for this event), and a portion of Nelson Road and Trainor Field near the Minute Man Visitor Center. At this meeting, the reenactors’ initial proposal was discussed and refined.

I attended a second walk-through in March 1999. Representatives from each of the 35 participating local units were invited, along with “picket” leaders and park staff. In retrospect, organizers felt there had been perhaps too many people at this meeting, and that resulting miscommunication may have contributed to misunderstandings during the event itself.

The March rehearsal lasted for several hours, and covered each of the sites (inside and outside the park) that would be used for the April performance. Specific details of timing, locations and angles for firing, and spectator viewing areas were discussed at each site within the park.

Both the park and the committee publicized the Battle Road events. In publicity materials, activities within the national park were clearly listed as “ceremonies,” while those on other properties were described as “reenactments”—a distinction, as my audience surveys showed, that spectators did not always understand.

➤ **Event report**

I observed all of the reenactor activities at Minute Man NHP on Saturday, April 17, as well as two of the battle reenactments held on non-park land in Concord and Lexington.

The day began early, with NPS staff and reenactors meeting at Old North Bridge shortly after 6 a.m. The reenactors arrived on buses chartered by the Battle Road Committee. Early visitors began to stake out their positions at about 6:30 a.m., joined shortly by the pickets, who took up their positions along the rope lines.

One park ranger who frequently acts as a liaison with reenactor groups was present in a British uniform, enabling him to accompany the reenactors unobtrusively. Other interpretive rangers were on the site as well, including some from nearby national parks who were assisting with black-powder inspections and becoming familiar with the event in anticipation of next year's much larger Battle Road activities. The superintendent was also in attendance. The park's protection staff took the lead in coordinating activities within the park.

The many tensions of Patriots Day weekend—long days, complex schedules, heightened expectations, heavy traffic on narrow roads, unpredictable weather—were evident throughout the day. The program began at 7:30 a.m. with a brief fife and drum performance followed by a volley fired by the massed British troops at the foot of the bridge. This ceremonial volley was intended to represent the shots fired at the advancing colonials, who were then scheduled to return fire ceremonially from across the river. The British turned and retreated, some of them making quite a convincing show of being frightened.

However, there was no answering fire from across the bridge, and no apparent reason for the redcoats to have run away. Many spectators around me expressed amusement or confusion about the lapse. After several minutes, the colonial forces finally started across the bridge, to rousing applause from the audience. As a “ceremony,” the scenario lacked any clear ceremonial intent; as a representation of what happened historically at North Bridge, it seemed illogical and static.

It turned out that there had been a disagreement between park rangers and the colonial forces on the other side of the bridge. There is still contention over the cause of the problem, suggesting that two different sets of expectations were operating. NPS staff believed the plan was being changed unexpectedly, while reenactors have stated that it was their understanding that the scenario would include “street firing,” or firing while on the march. With the crowd waiting and the dispute unresolved, the reenactors ended up not firing as usual at the foot of the bridge, but just marching over the bridge to complete the scenario. The friction caused by this mix-up affected relations between the rangers and reenactors for the rest of the day, and has continued to be a source of disagreement in subsequent meetings between the park and the Battle Road Committee.

The second segment of the day was the Meriam's Corner reenactment, held on conservation land owned by the town of Concord. Park staff were on hand to observe and to oversee parking at the nearby NPS lot, but this part of the event was organized and run entirely by the reenactors. During the nearly hour-long wait before the battle reenactment started, the pickets spoke to visitors along the rope-line, and the fifes and drums of the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan performed for the audience.

At 9:35 a.m., the action began at the north end of the field. Like most reenacted battles, this one took place at a fairly stately place, with little simulated urgency or fear. I counted about 300 reenactors on the field, with colonials slightly outnumbering British. Although there were "casualties," none remained on the ground by the time the battle had moved to the southern end of the field; they seemed to be surreptitiously rejoining their units as the scenario moved. As the colonial forces left the field, they gave three cheers, which the crowd responded to enthusiastically. This part of the event lasted just over half an hour.

There was a gap of about 90 minutes before the next scene, which took place at Hartwell Tavern in the restored section of the park. This was the scene that had not been tried before, and it proved to be the most problematic. The plan was for the reenactors to begin firing and marching in the woods at the "Bloody Angle," several hundred yards west of the tavern. The crowd, waiting in an enclosed field across from the tavern, was supposed to gain a sense of the approaching battle, followed by the sight of redcoats retreating quickly along the road, pursued by colonial militia in the woods.

The scene unfolded as planned, but it was extremely brief. Without a cohesive narrative to tell people what was happening, the hoped-for sense of urgency turned into mere confusion. Many people had waited for close to an hour for a scene that lasted only a few minutes; some unhappy visitors had been searching in vain for the earlier segments, and had finally located this one only to be badly disappointed by it. Again, the combination of "ceremonial" musket fire and a representation of battle maneuvers did not create a credible result. On the spot, park staff agreed that the Hartwell Tavern scenario needed to be rethought for the following year.

The final two segments within the park took place contiguously along a stretch of road behind the Minute Man Visitor Center in Lincoln. There was another pause of about an hour while the reenactors ate lunch and visitors gathered at one end of the Nelson Road. The viewing area at this site was extremely restricted, and the scenario was again unsatisfying for spectators, who were able only to hear shots fired in the distance, and then to watch as the redcoats marched along the road and on to the next area.

At the final location, Trainor Field, a long row of British soldiers lined up to fire a volley in unison, while distant colonials could be seen crossing the field and climbing the bluff at the far eastern end of the park. Most of the reenactors boarded their buses shortly afterward (a few were marching the entire route on foot) and the park segments of the event were completed.

I finished my own day by viewing the “Concord Hill” reenactment, held at Hastings Park in the center of Lexington. This site offered excellent sight lines and access, but the modern setting, with nearby traffic, buildings, power lines, and a central gazebo were in striking contrast to the more atmospheric landscape within Minute Man park, illustrating the difficulty of finding settings that are both convenient and historically appropriate.

As before, the pickets were at the rope-lines to speak to spectators, and the massed field music played for some time before the battle scenario began. The reenactors performed the half-hour battle scenario at Hastings Park with great enthusiasm, in front of an audience larger than the ones gathered at previous sites. In this case, because spectators were much closer to the action, the “casualties” stayed on the ground until the end of the scenario, then stood and rejoined their units.

The reenactors boarded their buses at about 3 p.m., on their way to the last part of the Battle Road event, at Tower Park in Lexington. Many would participate the next day at a reenactment and parade in Arlington, followed by the dawn reenactment and a long parade in Lexington on Monday. At Minute Man park, a group of 1,500 boy scouts would arrive the next day after recreating the march of the Acton Minute Man. On Monday, half a dozen commemorative events were scheduled at the park, including a dawn cannon salute and the Concord town parade.

#### ➤ **Audience survey**

The Battle Road event provided an unusual opportunity for me to speak with visitors. Unlike typical reenactor events, centered around an encampment with a varied schedule of events during the day, Battle Road offered enclosed viewing areas and distinct episodes of reenactor activity. Because people gathered well in advance of the reenactors’ arrival, I was able to observe the crowd as a whole, and to talk to people before they actually saw the reenactor presentations.

I spoke with visitors before each of the three reenactor segments within the park:

18 individuals or groups at Old North Bridge

17 at Hartwell Tavern

14 at Nelson Road/Trainor Field

After each of the 49 brief in-person surveys I conducted, I asked if people would be willing to mail back a short follow-up questionnaire. 30 of my respondents (61%) did so. (See Appendix D for survey questions.)

My questions centered on visitors’ expectations and experiences. As at the other parks I studied, I was interested in what had motivated people to come to the event, and in what they had enjoyed or found disappointing about it.

**Number of people in party**

1	21%
2	33%
3	10%
4	16%
5	8%
6 or more	12%

37% had been to Patriots Day events at Minute Man NHP before.

1 previous visit	33%
2-3 previous visits	28%
more than 3	28%
not sure	11%

25% of survey respondents knew some of the reenactors present.

Many people mentioned more than one reason why they had come to the Patriots Day activities. The following list includes the major reasons and the number of times they were mentioned:

Interest in history	20
Curiosity	13
Educational reasons	9
Accompanying reenactors, or interested in seeing reenactors	9
Children were interested	7
Beauty of area/good weather	5
Live nearby or always attend	3
To relive childhood memories	2
Touring the area	2

**What part of the event are you most looking forward to?**

Reenactor activities (musket firing, seeing soldiers in historic setting, music, costumes, etc.)	22
Battle/reenactment	19
A specific segment of Battle Road event (segments in park mentioned 4 times, outside park mentioned 9 times)	13
All of it	7

Not sure	5
Experiencing history	5
Enjoying the park or area	4
Commemorating an important event	1
Educational value	1
Visiting with friends or family	1

➤ **Follow-up surveys**

**Which segments of the April 17 event did you attend?**

North Bridge (MIMA)	14
Meriam's Corner (Concord)	14
Hartwell Tavern (MIMA)	17
Nelson Road (MIMA)	10
Trainor Field (MIMA)	4
Concord Hill (Lexington)	11
Tower Park (Lexington)	10

**What part did you enjoy most?**

Reenactor activities (music, marching, battle, musket firing, large number of reenactors, etc.)	23
Specific segment of event	17
Hastings Park	8
Meriam's Corner	4
Tower Park	4
North Bridge	1
Interpretation/explanation by NPS rangers or pickets	11
All of it	8
Being in park/on historic site	3

**Was there any part that you found disappointing?**

Sight lines obstructed by landscape or NPS staff	9
Wanted to see battles reenacted	7
Too long/too short (primarily at Hartwell Tavern)	7
"Ceremonies" unrealistic	5
Needed better maps/signs/directions/parking	4
Wanted more interpretation/context	3
Needed amplification for interpreters/pickets	2
Reenactors' acting was unrealistic	2
Wanted to see cannons fired	1
Wished Hartwell Tavern had been open	1
Meriam's Corner battle was dull	1



100% of respondents stated that the reenactors were an important part of their visit to Minute Man NHP.

73% felt that the reenactors presented a realistic depiction of the past. 27% felt that the reenactors' depiction had been "somewhat realistic."

### **Follow-up and planning for Battle Road 2000**

Park personnel and the Battle Road Committee have held several follow-up meetings and discussions since April 1999. They agree that there are still important questions to be worked out before next year's planned large-scale event will be acceptable to both the park and the reenactors.

The handling of the misunderstanding during the Old North Bridge scenario has been of central concern to both groups. Battle Road Committee members have seen the problem as a clash between NPS interpretive and protection staff. At historical parks, they believe, interpretive staff should take the lead in managing historically-oriented events, particularly those involving reenactors. They see their own interests and approaches as being naturally aligned with those of interpretation, and are concerned that protection rangers see reenactors primarily as safety hazards rather than interpretive volunteers.

Park staff do not share this view of the situation, pointing to many points of cohesion between interpretive and protection personnel within the park, and to a shared sense of staff support for NPS policies and values. They do feel, however, that the April event revealed some lapses in communication between individuals, among park departments, and between the park and reenactor commanders. In particular, because of staff changes in the park, a new protection ranger was introduced and placed in control of the event at the March walk-through, leaving virtually no time for him to build up the kind of relationship of trust that seems to be essential for successful reenactor events at parks.

At a meeting I attended at Minute Man in early May, key park staff and members of the Battle Road Committee addressed these and other questions. People spoke quite frankly at this meeting, and exposed many of the underlying difficulties that parks and reenactors face in working together—difficulties that are often close to the surface with the Battle Road event. These issues included:

- the power of original battle sites to attract reenactors
- a sense that liaison groups like the Battle Road Committee greatly help park/reenactor relations by streamlining communications and building direct relationships between key reenactors and parks
- a recognition that reenactor motivation, park interpretation, and visitor satisfaction are often at odds with one another
- a sense among reenactors that they are not essentially trusted by the NPS
- the need to find logistical and performative solutions to problems (for example, establishing a central command post to facilitate communication for Battle Road)

- the persistence of reenactor belief that NPS black powder policies are primarily about safety, not values

Shortly after the May meeting, some in the regional reenactor community felt the park had not conceded enough, and that it was time to mount a more concerted lobbying effort to gain greater control of the Battle Road event. One reenactor posted a strongly-worded message on a Revolutionary War reenactment listserv, suggesting that reenactors should try to galvanize public support for their views on Park Service policy. Some in the reenactor community seemed ready to answer this call to arms, which drew heavily on the iconography of the minutemen, framing the struggle as one between freedom-loving individuals and an unresponsive federal government. Others, particularly on the Battle Road Committee, distanced themselves from the suggestion that they supported any public confrontation.

At the center of the planning process, particularly between the park superintendent and the chair of the committee, there remains a solid commitment to negotiation that has thus far kept the two sides at the table talking to one another. Whether it is possible to hold a large-scale event on an important battleground that will satisfy reenactors, visitors, and the park, is the question that Minute Man staff and the Battle Road Committee are still trying to answer.

## **Case Study B**

### **The King's Own Patriots at Kings Mountain NMP**

**May 21-23, 1999**

#### **Introduction**

The small-scale encampment at Kings Mountain NMP offered some insights into some different facets of reenactments at national parks, including:

- the use of reenactors as a basic way of attracting visitor attention, especially at a park whose history is not well-known
- the importance of park staff being able to communicate with reenactors in the often-playful idiom used by the reenactment community
- the many points of overlap between avocational reenactors and the field of historic preservation and interpretation
- other points of overlap between historic sites, reenactors, and commercial or mass media enterprises such as the History Channel

The Kings Mountain event also underscored some points already raised, such as:

- reenactors' role as traditional users of parks, continuing a long-standing tradition of historical performance at these sites
- the appeal of original historical sites for reenactors

- the fact that reenactors have become an extremely recognizable feature on the commemorative landscape, as shown by the fact that even casual or recreational visitors to Kings Mountain had encountered reenactors in other settings

### **The battle**

Although they are little-known even in the region, several small-scale Revolutionary War battles in North and South Carolina had a significant impact on the war's outcome. The cluster of national parks in the Carolinas—Guilford Courthouse, Cowpens, Ninety-Six, Kings Mountain—preserve sites interpreted as crucial turning-points in the fight for American independence.

By the late 1770s, colonial and British armies had fought to a standstill in the north. Believing many southern colonists to be loyal to the crown, British commanders turned their attention south. By mid-1780 they had secured Georgia and most of South Carolina, and were planning to move north into populous Virginia. They recruited heavily as they went, raising a loyalist militia to counter the patriot militia in what had become truly a regional civil war.

This strategy began to fall apart in the fall of 1780. The British were unable to retain control of areas they no longer occupied, and the ferocity of some British soldiers and commanders—notably Banastre Tarleton and Patrick Ferguson—swayed many people to join the patriot side, if only for protection. When the headstrong Ferguson moved into the “back country” of the western Carolinas, attempting to subdue local populations with threats and demands, settlers on the frontier rallied to fight him.

A small army of about 1,000 militiamen assembled during a march through Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Ferguson pulled back to Kings Mountain, a forested hill at the edge of the Blue Ridge. His 1,100 men—themselves colonial militia, not British regulars—camped on what seemed to be a defensible position at the summit. But attacking patriot militiamen made good use of the wooded terrain to cover their advance, while the defenders were unable to see their enemies or to make use of their most effective weapon, the bayonet.

After an hour of heavy fighting, Ferguson was shot dead and his men discouraged and disoriented. Ignoring white flags of truce, the patriots continued to slaughter loyalists who were attempting to surrender, leaving 225 dead, 163 wounded, and 716 prisoners. The victors lost only 28 killed, 62 wounded. Bitter partisan feelings in the region came out in the harsh treatment of the Tory wounded, prisoners, and supporters in the area, giving an aspect of vigilantism to what was already an ugly neighbor-against-neighbor struggle.

Despite the social turmoil of the war in the Carolinas by this point, the battle of Kings Mountain had clear and immediate military results. The victory spurred recruitment for patriot militias throughout the region. General Cornwallis, shaken by the loss of

Ferguson, one of his most effective commanders, halted his planned advance into Virginia.

While he regrouped, the southern department of the Continental Army grew stronger under its new commander, Nathanael Greene. A series of costly and crucial engagements—at Cowpens in January 1781, Guilford Courthouse in March, and the siege of Ninety-Six later that spring—sapped British strength and resolve. Leaving the Carolinas unconquered, Cornwallis withdrew to Virginia in 1781, where Washington’s army, reinforced by the French, forced a British surrender at Yorktown.

### **Commemoration at Kings Mountain**

Like the New England minutemen, the “overmountain men” of the Carolinas backcountry have come to represent the natural courage and democratic impulses of the American citizen-soldier. “The phenomenon of Patriots spontaneously organizing under the leadership of militia colonels to track down Ferguson’s force exemplified the self-sufficiency and emerging democracy of the American frontier,” as the official Historic Resource Study for Kings Mountain NMP states (Blythe 31).

Commemoration at Kings Mountain has tended to center around this ideal of frontier democracy. The first marker was placed on the site in 1815, a very early example of public honor for American war dead. A centennial association bought a 38½-acre portion of the battlefield in 1880 and erected a monument on the summit of the mountain. A local DAR chapter took over custodianship of the site shortly afterward, and was responsible for the large granite obelisk raised in 1909 in memory of the patriot forces at Kings Mountain.

The sesquicentennial of the battle, in 1930, attracted an enormous crowd, including then-President Hoover. A pageant was staged, depicting dramatic and allegorical episodes based on the 1780 battle. During this time another battle was taking place, between those who believed the site should become a national military park and those who felt it was already sufficiently memorialized. In 1931, supporters of the park were successful, and Kings Mountain National Military Park was established under the jurisdiction of the War Department. The property was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933 (Blythe 60-63).

An important feature of this national park is that federal and state governments originally envisioned it as part of a 10,000 recreation area. Between 1937 and 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps worked under NPS direction to develop the property as public parkland. 6,000 acres were deeded to South Carolina in 1940 as a state park, while 4,000 acres remained in the national military park.

The relative obscurity of the Kings Mountain battle, and the enticements of both the federal and state parks, mean that a large number of visitors to Kings Mountain are there as hikers, bikers, or campers, rather than as historical pilgrims. Unlike Minute Man NHP, Kings Mountain’s function is as much recreational as historical. Moreover, it is

deep in Civil War territory. Interpretive staff—and reenactors—often find themselves imparting what one reenactor referred to as “remedial history,” educating visitors about the bare outlines of the Revolutionary War in the south.

Local residents made regular use of the park for commemorative purposes after 1931, often staging historical pageants and other community events in the park’s amphitheater and grounds. The Kings Mountain Little Theater regularly produced pageants there through the 1950s and 1960s, a tradition that concluded with a final performance during the national bicentennial.

As at Lexington and Concord, a newer form of historical performance was already emerging as the pageant tradition faded. In 1975, as part of local bicentennial celebrations, a group of residents decided to recreate the 220-mile march of the patriot militiamen who had mustered to fight Ferguson’s forces. This march has become an annual event, and was the impetus for the 1980 designation of the route as a national historic trail, the Overmountain Victory Trail.

Starting on September 23 each year, marchers spend some or all of a two-week period walking and/or driving south to Kings Mountain, where they participate in ceremonies at the amphitheater and U.S. monument. Most wear period dress, and perform “skits” for spectators along the route, acting out debates that might have occurred among the original marchers.

Some members of the Overmountain Victory Trail Association are also avocational reenactors as well. The Company of Overmountain Men, a local reenactor unit, participates in the annual march, and also encamps at the park in August during the Kings Mountain Forum, an event started in 1998 and featuring academic presentations and living history displays.

Kings Mountain NMP did not include avocational reenactors in its interpretive programs until after the bicentennial years had ended. In the early 1980s, staff budget cuts and the arrival of a VIP who was also a reenactor prompted the park to begin building a working relationship with one or two reenactor groups in the area. The current Acting Superintendent, who is also the park’s black powder safety officer, sees reenactors as a way to attract visitor attention and to begin interpreting some of the complexity of the Revolutionary War in the Carolinas.

The park currently has good relationships with six to eight reenactor units in the area, and hosts several events involving reenactors each year. Most, like the one described below, are small-scale weekend encampments.

### **The King’s Own Patriots**

This somewhat unusual group of reenactors portrays a loyalist militia unit from the Carolinas. Their paradoxical title (they are also sometimes known as the North Carolina

Volunteers and as the Hillsborough District Militia) suggests that they are trying to engage some of the subtler layers of the American Revolutionary War story.

The group was founded in 1997 by two museum professionals who began reenacting recreationally during the national bicentennial. Both were dissatisfied with their current units, and shared a desire to interpret the loyalist militia experience in the south, what one of them called as “messy, ambivalent, non-linear” aspect of the war that they felt had not yet been portrayed well in reenactment.

With about 16 current members (13 men, 3 women), the group is still establishing its own style and finding its place in the southern Revolutionary War reenactment community. Although the North Carolina-based unit portrays southerners, most of its key members are natives of the north or midwest. It has recently joined the Brigade of the American Revolution, and its commander now heads the BAR’s new southern department.

Arrangements for the May encampment were very simple. Other reenactors who appear regularly at Kings Mountain and other national parks in the region suggested to the King’s Own Patriots’ commander that the park was a venue worth considering for a living history encampment. The commander contacted the Acting Superintendent, and they discussed dates and possible locations for the camp and demonstrations. Although units usually camp on the lawn behind the Visitor Center, the May encampment was set up in a clearing in the woods about 100 yards from the building. Members of the unit had worked with several other national parks, and were familiar with NPS black powder rules.

More than this, the unit’s membership includes a very high proportion of people with experience in museums and preservation work. The commander is trained in history museum administration and is currently Chief Curator at the North Carolina Museum of History. His wife, who makes much of the unit’s clothing, is also trained as a museum curator and has worked at Sturbridge Village and elsewhere; she is now a consultant in historical textiles and works in the Architectural History and Preservation Section for the North Carolina Department of Transportation. The group’s co-founder was trained in history and archaeology and worked in museums in North Carolina until he was offered work sculpting military miniatures, which he describes as “doing my hobby for my living.” Of the remaining four group members at Kings Mountain, one is an architectural restoration contractor, another a skilled artisan who is considering going into museum work. Some other unit members not at the May encampment are employed at Colonial Williamsburg and other regional historic sites.

Even for the Revolutionary War reenactment community, which contains many places of overlap with historical professions, the King’s Own Patriots are extraordinarily knowledgeable about the field of historical interpretation. This group, then, offered an unusual opportunity for me to speak with people who crossed the line between avocational reenactment and professional interpretation. Because this was such a small event, I was able to interview each unit member individually. Some of the ideas that emerged from these conversations are listed below:

- Reenactors need to work with historical parks and museums to find living history scenarios that are appealing and challenging for all concerned. If reenactors want to have access to important original sites, they must work with the custodians of those sites to make living history a useful interpretive tool, rather than a stale set of conventions.
- Some kind of narration is crucial to effective living history presentations.
- These reenactors had unusual insight into parks' and museums' desire for accountability from volunteer interpreters. One unit member suggested that a way to attract accountable reenactors would be for historical sites (perhaps a regional cluster of national parks) to invest materially in reenactor groups (for example, providing equipment or resources that would be beyond reenactors' usual reach, which could be sold to the reenactors at a reduced cost after an agreed-upon length of time). Paying at least a small fee to effective reenactor groups is another way of achieving accountability and reciprocity.
- Parks and museums need to identify ways (perhaps hiring someone to research and script scenarios) to develop and maintain living history standards that are in harmony with the site's interpretive theme and landscape.
- Revolutionary War reenactors could do more to recruit African-American members, to create a more accurate and diverse portrayal of the armies on both sides of the struggle.

### **Event report**

The Kings Mountain encampment followed the shape of most reenactment events. The unit set up its camp on Friday evening, performed for the public all day on Saturday and most of the day on Sunday, then broke camp and left for home late Sunday afternoon. I visited with the reenactors shortly after they arrived on Friday, observed and interviewed them on Saturday and Sunday, and left shortly before they did on Sunday afternoon. I also spoke with the Acting Superintendent, viewed the orientation film in the Visitor Center, and conducted brief audience interviews among visitors to the encampment on both days.

As at many reenactor events, each day was organized around drilling, firing demonstrations, and mealtimes. The firing demonstrations followed a typical pattern: the unit commander gave commands to the men and also interpreted what they were doing for the spectators. (These were groups of from 8 to 42 people, with an average of 18. Park attendance for the weekend was 600-700 a day, a fairly typical turnout for the time of year.)

The Acting Superintendent commented to me that while the typical firing demonstration is not very interesting to those who have seen it once or twice, musket firing is always a way to get people's attention. It provides a definite activity that people will gravitate toward, and makes enough noise that it cannot be ignored. Once visitors' attention has been caught, they often stay to learn about other, more complex issues.

The reenactors brought up some of those issues during their interpretation over the course of the weekend, but the majority of what they said during demonstrations was about weapons and tactics. At some demonstrations the unit leader did also talk about who they represented, and what might have motivated a South Carolinian colonist to take up arms for the king. Many people seemed intrigued by this, and by the red ribbon the reenactors wore in their hats to mark them as loyalists.

At the weapons inspection on Saturday morning, the Acting Superintendent pointed out that one reenactor's musket barrel was dirty and needed to be cleaned. After noting the problem, however, he added sadly that he supposed you couldn't expect much from militia. The reenactors immediately picked up on this comment, taking it in the spirit of historical joking that they use among themselves much of the time.

Some unit members mentioned afterward that they had recently attended an NPS event where the black powder safety officer had handled a similar situation in a much more heavy-handed manner, which had left some bad feeling among the reenactors. The Kings Mountain incident, on the other hand, illustrated how park staff can share some of reenactors' improvisational approach to historical performance while remaining very attentive to NPS safety regulations. This use of humor is more than just a matter of personal style. It is a way of entering into reenactors' own often-playful idiom, and of seeing them as part of a shared enterprise—with a shared concern for safety and authenticity—rather than as a potentially-dangerous outside group.

While the men drilled and fired, the commander's wife cooked and sewed. This was a great attraction for many visitors of both sexes. During some firing demonstrations, as many people stayed around the cook fire to talk as went to watch the firing. Many of the male reenactors in this unit also sew, and they spent a good part of the weekend working on new clothes for themselves, an object of some curiosity to visitors.

During the afternoon on Saturday, the male reenactors marched to the top of Kings Mountain to look at the battlefield and do some firing demonstrations at the summit. Most were unfamiliar with the battle, although some had been learning about it recently. Like most reenactors, the King's Own Patriots are excited about learning, and I had the sense that the opportunity to become acquainted with a battle's history on the original ground was extremely appealing to them.

At the U.S. monument, they stopped to talk to a large group of Boy Scouts, then progressed to the centennial monument at the summit. Here they re-encountered a very knowledgeable visitor who had spent quite a lot of time earlier talking with them in their



camp. Ever recruiting, they furnished him with one of their hats and did their best to enlist him, to no avail.

Because there were few other visitors on the mountain top, they spent their time practicing their own drill, resting in the shade, and discussing ideas for possible future events at the park. With more unit members present, they felt they could have two small encampments, one representing patriots at the foot of the mountain, and the other representing loyalists at the top. With their generic civilian clothing, the group can easily portray either side. This, they thought, might help visitors to understand how similar the two sides really were, and how bitter the divisions in the Carolinas were during the Revolution.

Late on Sunday morning, the camp was visited by park staff and by a producer from the History Channel, who had been filming for a series on “battles of the frontier” during the Revolution. Park staff saw this as a good way to publicize the little-known events at Kings Mountain. Reenactors hoped to impress the producer with their knowledge and authenticity; work as film and television extras has become an important source of income for many reenactor groups. The producer, a former reenactor himself, told me that he recruits reenactors based on “body language and attitude,” meaning that he looks for people who appear natural and comfortable in their presentation.

At the end of the weekend, members of the King’s Own Patriots seemed to judge the weekend a success. They had spent two beautiful spring nights in a nearly-pristine historical environment, explored a new battlefield, made a connection with a new national park and a television producer, and had a chance to drill, talk with visitors, and socialize with one another.

### **Audience surveys**

Talking with visitors at Kings Mountain was somewhat problematic because of the arrangement of the reenactor camp. Not everyone followed the path that passed by the encampment, and not all who did noticed that the reenactors were there, or chose to stop. Rather than speaking with people before they encountered the reenactors, I found that I had to catch them just before and just after firing demonstrations.

Because these crowds formed and dispersed quickly, and were generally small, I was not able to complete as many audience surveys as I had planned at Kings Mountain. I spoke with 24 individuals or groups, of whom 14 (58%) returned the follow-up survey to me in the mail.

Although the number of respondents was small, their responses were quite consistent.

- 75% had been to Kings Mountain before.
- 75% of repeat visitors had been to the park three or more times.

Unlike Minute Man NHP, where the majority of visitors cited history-related reasons for visiting, most Kings Mountain visitors were there for recreation. Their reasons and number of times each was mentioned were:

Hiking/camping/scouting/biking	11
To check out the park	4
Looking for something to do	3
Interested in Revolutionary War history	2
Interested in reenactors/living history	2
Educating children	2
Volunteering in park	1
Visiting family/friends	1

Only a few people (17%) knew in advance that there would be Revolutionary War reenactors at the park that day. None were acquainted with any of the King's Own Patriots.

However, 83% had seen reenactors in other settings. Two respondents (the park volunteer and the Boy Scout leader) were reenactors themselves. Nine mentioned seeing reenactors at other national parks; ten cited other historical sites; two had seen reenactors outside the U.S.

Of the 14 people who returned the follow-up survey, all but one had spoken with the reenactors at the encampment. Asked what demonstrations or activities they had seen, they responded:

Firing demonstration	8
Camp life	7
Cooking	4
Marching/drill	4
Sewing	2
Uniforms	2
Reenactors socializing	1
Reenactor repairing gun	1

Asked what they had enjoyed the most, they listed:

Musket firing	5
All of it	4
Interpretation/explanation	3
Camp life	1
Learning about women's history	1
Realism of presentation	1

Perhaps because they came with fewer expectations, these visitors were not nearly as critical of the event as visitors to Minute Man NHP. The only visitor to express

disappointment was one woman who was sorry she hadn't been able to stay longer. Despite the fact that most had not known in advance that the encampment would be there, 79% said the reenactors were an important part of their visit to the park. 100% felt the King's Own Patriots had presented a realistic picture of the past.

## Case Study C

### Garrison weekend with units of the Continental Line at Saratoga NHP

June 18-20, 1999

#### Introduction

Many of the central points of this study are illustrated by the garrison event at Saratoga National Historical Park:

- Past forms of commemoration at Saratoga show that the tension between spectacle and solemnity, education and entertainment, is not new or unique to the current park/reenactor relationship. Saratoga's commemorative history also shows a longstanding tradition of community members presenting historical performances at sites associated with the battle.
- The growing relationship between Saratoga NHP and the Continental Line shows the increasing influence of reenactor umbrella organizations, rather than individual units, in organizing reenactor events. The many problems at a major 1997 encampment at the park, which did not work within any of the umbrella structures, underscores the point that the umbrella organizations are the best equipped groups to plan and run large reenactments.
- The 1997 event used non-NPS land for battle reenactments, but was unpopular nonetheless because of logistical problems. In looking for alternatives to holding battles at national parks, organizers need to take a broader view of what makes an event successful for reenactors: careful planning, opportunities to socialize, etc. In other words, battles are not the only thing that reenactors look for in an event.
- Like Minute Man NHP, Saratoga and its affiliated units seem to take the necessary long-term view of relationship-building, rather than dealing with one another just on an event-by-event basis. The park treats reenactors as a valued and integral part of its volunteer program, creating a strong sense of connection and identification with the park.
- Saratoga staff are unusually clear in explaining NPS policies to both visitors and reenactors. These explanations directly address questions of both **values** and **performance**. Perhaps because of this, there seems to be less friction than at other parks over the no-opposing-forces rules..
- The park provides many amenities that make reenactors feel welcomed and valued. Some of these are quite small, but nonetheless noted by reenactors.
- The participants at the Saratoga weekend illustrated the whole range of the park/reenactor continuum, including long-time park volunteers, second-generation reenactors and park volunteers, a park reenactor unit made up of

regular and seasonal rangers, some of whom were also avocational reenactors, educators, etc.

- Interpretation at Saratoga illustrates the ways in which parks use many of the same interpretive tools as reenactors, including those that create an entertaining or light-hearted atmosphere. While this does not extend to battle reenactment in the parks' case, it is important to note that this is a difference of degree, not of kind.

## **The battle**

Like Lexington and Concord, Saratoga has come to represent the strength of American ideals and fighting skills early in the Revolution. Like Kings Mountain and other late-war battles in the south, it is interpreted as one of the crucial turning points in the war.

The strategic importance of the Hudson River created the setting for a significant battle. British general John Burgoyne recognized that the river valley offered a direct route from British strongholds in Canada into the rebellious American colonies. He made this the basis for his 1777 campaign, intending to seize the area around Lake Champlain, then join other British forces in an effort to cut off New England from the rest of the colonies.

Burgoyne's plan faltered when other British commanders failed to join his army. Proceeding south anyway with 9,000 men, he was cut off from safety and supplies in Canada, and constrained by the narrow river valley he was following. Just north of the village of Stillwater, he encountered an equal force of Americans commanded by Horatio Gates, who had also recognized the strategic advantages of the Hudson River Valley. With the help of Polish engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Continentals had entrenched themselves on a hillside above one of the valley's narrowest spots, where the British troops would have to squeeze between the hills and the river.

Rather than run the risk of destruction, Burgoyne chose to attack. On September 19, a vicious three-hour battle left the British in command of the field but badly battered, with the colonials still well-fortified and with open lines to the south. Burgoyne set his army to building entrenchments of their own, and dug in to wait for reinforcements he believed were on their way from New York City.

After almost three weeks, no reinforcements had come, while the Americans were welcoming new recruits into their ranks every day. Deciding to force a second battle, Burgoyne launched an attack that began another fierce fight. Within an hour his men were in retreat back to their fortifications, pressed by three columns of Americans. The Continentals' furthest advance was recklessly led by Benedict Arnold, who was badly wounded in the final assault on one of the British barricades.

At the end of the day, the British continued to withdraw under cover of darkness. Ten days later they were surrounded at Saratoga by an American army now numbering 20,000. Burgoyne surrendered his remaining 6,000 men to this overwhelming force. With the colonists in control of Boston, this surrender effectively ended British military

power in New England, and further damaged the notion that the formidable redcoats could not be beaten in a face-to-face battle.

### **Commemoration at Saratoga**

Despite Saratoga's symbolic importance as the "turning point" of the American Revolution, its relative distance from large centers of population has meant that commemoration there has always tended to be local or regional, rather than national in scope. As at other sites, celebrations at Saratoga have often included—sometimes on a spectacular scale—performed representations of history.

The Saratoga battlefield remained in private hands for 150 years after the battle, but the events of the autumn of 1777—particularly Burgoyne's surrender—were well-remembered in nearby towns. The national centennial was the impetus for local civic and historical groups to break ground for a monument, located just north of the battlefield in Schuylerville, New York. The cornerstone-laying ceremony in October 1877 concluded with a "brilliant military spectacle, representing the Surrender of Burgoyne's Army" (Quinn 386).

Participants in this spectacle included many Civil War veterans and members of local militia units, who camped overnight and took part in sunrise salutes and a march to the battlefield. The attending crowd was estimated at between 40,000 and 100,000. Although I was unable to locate details about the "brilliant military spectacle," it seems probable that it was similar to other regional centennial presentations, such as the July 4, 1876 event at Rome, New York, which included an artillery-studded "representation of Fort Stanwix in the fierce contest of war" (*Rome Daily Sentinel*, July 1876).

The Saratoga monument was finally completed and dedicated in 1912, in a much more modest ceremony led by local Masons. Although the celebration included "an impressive array of military companies" (Quinn 104), there is no record that these uniformed men staged any type of battle reenactment. The difference between the centennial fanfare and the dedication 35 years later illustrates two very different approaches to commemoration, the solemn and the sensational, and confirms that during major anniversary years there tends to be public pressure for the latter type.

During the 1920s there was local agitation to have the Saratoga battlefield declared a public park. Local politicians and civic groups led a successful campaign that saw a state appropriation of \$140,000 in 1926 for the purchase and restoration of the battlefield.

1926 also marked the start of the national sesquicentennial, giving Saratoga two reasons to celebrate. During the week of July 4, 1926, local towns joined in a display of pageantry depicting colonial times, with a focus on the signing of the Declaration of Independence and Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. The town of Schuylerville was transformed into "a replica of colonial days, with its dress, manner, and customs" (1926

program book, 151), with a final pageant staged by many local groups (including the Masons, who presented the military scenes).

Saratoga's sesquicentennial celebration provides an outstanding example of a civic pageant held at the height of the pageant movement in the U.S. Throughout New York state, towns and historic sites were embracing the ideals of pageantry: mass participation, education, and celebration of a common history grounded in local landscapes and events. In a 1927 newspaper article explaining why the majority of the state-sponsored sesquicentennial events featured pageants, state historian Alexander Flick pointed out three major benefits of pageantry:

- 1) Pageants encouraged participation by people of all ages.
- 2) Pageantry helped people to become more discerning about what was important and what was merely trivial in their local histories.
- 3) It created a "vivid realistic drama" that left "indelible impressions" on both participants and spectators.

Organizers at Saratoga hired Percy Jewett Burrell, a professional pageant-master, to direct the sesquicentennial pageant. Scripted by Josephine Wickster of Buffalo, the performance featured 6,200 performers, including a chorus of 1,000 singers and 1,200 National Guards from Albany. The "stage" was the Great Ravine of the newly-created Saratoga Battlefield Park.

The directors and their staffs communicated by specially-run telephone lines and signal corps. There was also a loudspeaker, but this was used only for announcements between scenes, not for interpretation. The script was divided into six "epochs" comprising 18 scenes, and focused on the declaration of American independence in 1776 and the events around Saratoga in 1777.

Although the actual battle of Saratoga was just one of these scenes (and by no means the longest, lasting only about 20 minutes), it captured much of the audience and media attention, just as reenacted battles do today. A few performers carried antique flintlocks to give an air of authenticity, but the actual firing was done by costumed men with modern rifles, who seemed to feel the same heightened emotions that contemporary reenactors often experience in "battle." A newspaper reporter noted that "Their instructions were to go through the motions of loading flint-locks before each shot. At first this was the custom, but as the action grew a little warmer the firing speeded up."

There were a few mix-ups among the several hundred "soldiers" in the scene, as when the British officers' horses became spooked by the gunfire and had to be led off by experienced Continentals, giving the impression that Burgoyne and his entire staff had been captured in mid-battle. And after the battle, the same reporter wrote:

*...both sides began to pick up their 'dead' and 'wounded,' who lay here and there about the battlefield. The dead and wounded failed to do their full duty. Many who were marked for the casualty lists forgot their parts*

*and there were comparatively few to be carried off the battlefield.*

It is interesting to note that there was no artificial “raising of the dead,” a technique that troubles many critics of contemporary reenactment. Newspaper photos of the scene show images that might almost have been taken in 1977 or 1997, except for the anachronistic rifles, cartridge belts, and smokeless powder. “The battle flowed on at a smart pace,” the reporter wrote, “and without a serious hitch.”

The pageant attracted an enormous crowd, estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000. Organizers deemed the event a great success, largely because it had raised Saratoga’s profile in the region and even nationally. And the mass participation by area residents demonstrates a fact that remains true today—that the Saratoga battlefield is of tremendous importance in local commemorative activity. (This support was expressed strongly in 1995, when Saratoga was on the Department of the Interior’s list of national parks slated for possible closing.)

Costumed performance continued to be a feature of local commemoration, although not on such a grand scale as the 1927 pageant. In 1938, the park was brought into the national park system. The transfer caused some resentment among local residents, particularly when the NPS moved an inauthentic but much-loved blockhouse that had been built on the battlefield in 1927, and which symbolized Saratoga for many people.

The shift toward more “authentic” and less colloquial commemoration continued at the park, although parades and other types of performances were still a part of annual local celebrations. In 1950, a historical parade represented the Saratoga battle symbolically with 13 girls as the 13 original states, escorted by World War II veterans. In 1973, a short program celebrating “Monument Day” included a demonstration of eighteenth century military drill. The bicentennial commemoration was muted, with Tom Brokaw featured as a guest speaker and a small number of local reenactors in attendance.

Costumed interpretation within the park was concentrated within the park unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire, and until recently the park had few connections with external reenactor groups. However, the present Chief of Interpretation sees reenactors as an important part of the park’s volunteer program. During the first five years of her tenure at Saratoga, volunteer hours have increased from 800 to 13,000 per year, many of these contributed by reenactors. The park currently enjoys good relationships with a number of avocational reenactor groups, and is actively building a connection with the Continental Line, a national umbrella organization.

Two years ago, for the 220<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle, several local groups (including reenactor units) promoted the idea of a major commemorative event at the park. A special use permit was issued to a local historical association, and a coalition of area reenactment groups organized what became known as “Turning Point ‘77.”

Although about 5,000 spectators and 400-500 reenactors attended this event, it was not generally judged a success by reenactors or by the park. One area reenactor described it

as “too diffused” in terms of leadership, logistics, and geography. The organizing groups were inexperienced at fundraising and at hosting large encampments, and the physical layout—British and American camps far apart, with the “battle” held on privately-owned land outside the park—worked against the kind of socializing that is important to reenactors. Poor weather and difficulties with transportation added to everyone’s frustrations.

“Turning Point ‘77” was envisioned as a region-wide celebration that would include towns, reenactors, and the park, but the necessary coordination and partnerships were not in place to make this happen. Partly because of their experiences in 1987, Saratoga NHP and regional reenactor groups seem to recognize that any major event, such as the projected 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary encampment, must be based on solid relationships among experienced community groups.

## **Event report**

### **➤ Planning**

The June encampment with units of the Continental Line had its beginnings more than three years ago, when Saratoga’s Chief of Interpretation visited a Continental Line event in eastern Massachusetts. She had heard about the umbrella organization through staff at Minute Man NHP, and was interested in the possibility of working with them at Saratoga.

The then-coordinator for the Continental Line’s northern department is also a member of the Battle Road Committee. Like some of the other leaders at the Saratoga event, he is what I have termed a “third-generation” reenactor—those who came of age after the “baby boom” and Vietnam era, and who tend to reenact perhaps less as a way to fulfill frustrated dreams of soldiering, and more as a means of creating community or acquiring and sharing knowledge.

Like many reenactors in this generation, this man grew up in “the hobby.” His father was a park volunteer at Minute Man, and is still an active reenactor. His fiancée’s family has volunteered and organized special events at Saratoga NHP and other area historic sites for many years. He was active in the spring 1999 gun law lobby in Massachusetts, and has also helped to plan and run recent major Revolutionary War reenactor events sponsored by Parks Canada, giving him a broad perspective on many facets of reenactment.

Already looking toward a 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary event at Saratoga in 2002, some within the Continental Line expressed interest in the idea of holding an event there so that they and park staff could assess each other’s styles. Because of the NPS rules prohibiting opposing forces, the event was set up as a garrison weekend, a scenario made plausible by the extended period of time that both the British and Continental armies remained encamped at Saratoga.



Normally, Saratoga encampments are set up on the flat lawn around the Neilson House, a reconstructed farmhouse that was within the American lines in 1777. For the June event, the reenactors requested that the park mow and make available a section of field below the house. The firing demonstrations, drill competition, and most of the group interpretation took place at the Neilson House. In the camp itself, reenactors offered more informal one-on-one interaction with visitors. Most visitors seemed to stop at both the camp and the Neilson House.

The change in location of the encampment prompted some discussion among park staff about how visitor-friendly the garrison weekend was likely to be. Some worried that the reenactors were coming to Saratoga primarily to pursue their own activities, rather than to enhance the park's interpretive mission. Others felt it was possible to satisfy both reenactors and visitors. These questions were raised with the event organizer, who put together a schedule addressing the needs of both visitors and reenactors. The park publicized the event widely, and my audience surveys showed that many people did come to the park primarily to see the reenactors, and that they enjoyed what they saw.

The planning process for the event included :

- telephone and email contact beginning in the fall of 1998
- meetings between park staff and reenactor organizers in December 1998 and June 1999
- a final schedule of events submitted to the park in late May

#### ➤ **Weekend activities**

About 80 reenactors attended the garrison weekend. The event followed the usual weekend pattern, with the camps open to the public from nine to five on Saturday and nine to 3:30 on Sunday. The program listed various activities that were scheduled to take place throughout the day, but in practice the reenactors did not follow this schedule, which tended to develop as the days progressed. In place of the scheduled "Guided Tours of Camp," for instance, visitors were encouraged to walk through the camp on their own and to ask questions as they did so. Battalion drills and Sunday's drill competition also took place at different times from those listed. Some visitors expressed confusion about this, while others seemed satisfied just to observe whatever was going on at the moment. Park staff have noted this as an aspect of future encampments that needs to be addressed.

The featured activity on Sunday was the Strawberry Banke Bowl Drill Competition. This is an evolving tradition in the Continental Line's northern department, started when the Strawberry Banke museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, donated a silver bowl as a prize for the Line's first drill competition in 1994. This year's competition lasted for almost two hours, with each unit performing in three categories (drilling in line, marching, and musket firing).

There was almost no interpretation of this contest, and visitors seemed to become bored or puzzled by it after a short time. Spectators came and went, leaving about 30 people in the crowd at any given time. The largest crowd gathered at the end, to hear the judges' decision. There was an interesting period of time when all the reenactors and most of the visitors were mingled together on the lawn of the Neilson House. The lines between performers and spectators were momentarily dissolved, as both became caught up in waiting for the results of the competition. A very social atmosphere was created, lacking the usual restraints that many visitors feel in the presence of people who seem strangely suspended between past and present, onstage and offstage.

This convivial atmosphere shifted when park rangers stepped in to stage a mock drill with some children from the crowd. Using wooden guns, they showed a group of eight "recruits" how to hold and fire their "muskets." The mock drill was very light-hearted, amusing the crowd while instructing and entertaining the children. Although this was understandable as a technique for capturing the attention of young visitors and their parents, it seemed extremely similar to the playful spirit that pervades reenactment, which NPS policy-makers find so troubling when it comes to the depiction of battle. While a musket drill is not a battle, it is not an entirely unrelated activity, illustrating the extent to which NPS and reenactor interpretation—though they differ in the matter of battle—often make use of the same strategies and styles.

Each of the five units attending the garrison event took turns presenting musket firing demonstrations for visitors at the Neilson House over the course of the weekend. At these small-scale demonstrations, interpretation was done by members of the units, rather than by park rangers. All of the uniformed reenactors gathered for a 25-minute "Grand Division Drill" on Saturday afternoon, for which the black powder safety officer provided interpretation.

On Sunday morning, some of the women reenactors led an informal workshop on "Talking to Visitors," covering such topics as "The Importance of Interaction," how to draw in children as a way of getting adults involved, and how to develop a repertoire of questions to start people thinking about what they were seeing. This workshop included some practice at role-playing interactions with visitors, and an open discussion on interpretive strategies that had worked well for participants in the past.

### ➤ **Park reenactors: The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire**

A parallel type of reenactment was taking place in the park during the garrison weekend. Saratoga NHP has its own unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire Regiment, founded at the park during the 1970s and made up of regular and seasonal rangers. The park's black powder safety officer, himself a former reenactor, provides leadership in this unit. The other members tend to be students or, in the case of the seasonal rangers, reenactors from other units.

During the garrison weekend, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire set up a tent fly and cook fire behind the Neilson House, but did not camp there overnight. Their interpretive activities

dovetailed with the reenactors' in many ways. Rangers interpreted some of the reenactor activities for visitors, and acted as general interpreters throughout the weekend.

A noteworthy feature of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Hampshire's interpretation is that it directly addressed the question of why reenactors may not portray battles on NPS land. Explaining this point to visitors, the black powder safety officer spoke in terms of both **values** and **performance**:

- First, he pointed out that recreated battles can never really show what actual combat is like. In his words, "It can't be anything more than an approximation. And for the people who were really here, this was not a weekend of fun." The discrepancy between the real thing and any reenactment of it, then, is so wide, in the Park Service's view, that it cannot be bridged.
- This ranger also echoed the view that activities deeply satisfying for reenactors, such as battle reenactments, may be unsatisfying for visitors. "Battles are *for* reenactors," he stated, adding that visitors can seldom effectively see or understand what is happening on the field during a reenacted battle. More than that, he feels that some visitors become caught up in a kind of "cartoon violence" that does an injustice to the memory of the actual events.

During his interpretation of the reenactors' battalion drills, this ranger clarified these two points repeatedly. Despite this clarification, some visitors at Saratoga still seemed disappointed that they were not seeing recreated battles. Staff at Minute Man speculated to me whether they could do more to explain Park Service policies to visitors at reenactor events, but my audience surveys at Saratoga suggest that a visitor who is hoping and expecting to see a battle may not be easily convinced by the rationale for the no-opposing-lines policy.

Saratoga's black powder officer nonetheless has excellent rapport with reenactors, having worked with them at more than one Revolutionary War park besides having been a reenactor himself. This seems to illustrate the point that if park staff are respected and liked by reenactors, NPS policies become much less of a bone of contention between them.

A second illustration of this at Saratoga involves the park's Chief of Interpretation. Many of the reenactors at the June weekend had also been at the 1999 Battle Road event, and subscribed very strongly to the idea that interpretive staff, particularly those with backgrounds in history, are by far the best equipped to understand and work with reenactors in parks. Beyond the perceived interpretive/protection split, I heard many reenactors at Saratoga and elsewhere complain that park staff at Revolutionary War parks were often career bureaucrats trained in a variety of fields, who were sometimes more intent on climbing a career ladder with the NPS than fostering the history that reenactors hold so dear.

At Saratoga, though, the Chief of Interpretation is by training a biologist who is still quite new to historical interpretation. But no one seems to mind this fact, because she is well-liked by reenactors and considered very respectful and welcoming to them. Personality seems to count for at least as much as policy in reenactors' eyes. As one member of the King's Own Patriots put it during my visit to Kings Mountain, "**Manner matters.**" The relationships between Saratoga's staff and reenactors seems to prove the truth of this comment.

### ➤ **Attending units**

The units who attended the Saratoga weekend illustrated the growing maturity of the reenactment community, and its many significant points of connection with the National Park Service.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Regiment, for instance, is commanded by a man whose father was an influential bicentennial-era reenactor and a "founding father" of the Continental Line. Like the organizer for the Saratoga event, this reenactor is young but extremely experienced at running reenactor events. In addition, he is a former Eastern National employee who has worked closely with many national parks in both the U.S. and Canada. (While at Saratoga, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass. held a private ceremony honoring those in the original unit who died in the Saratoga battles, and also commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the reenactment unit.)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Jersey, whose commander is the current mid-Atlantic coordinator for the Continental Line, also brought a sizeable contingent to Saratoga. This group has a longstanding association with Morristown NHP. Several unit members have volunteered there for many years, and many feel a strong sense of stewardship and commitment to the park. "It's home," one of those volunteers told me.

Other attending units included the Regiment Saintonge, which portrays French soldiers allied with the Continental forces. One member of this unit acts as adjutant at the Battle Road event, and is currently coordinator of the Continental Line's northern department. While there were no French troops at Saratoga, American successes at that battle were instrumental in convincing the French to support the American side. Both reenactors and park staff played up this connection in explaining Saintonge's presence during the weekend—an instance of both groups shading the definition of what was "authentic."

### **Audience surveys**

Saratoga NHP is a large, open park, with a nine-mile loop of road connecting ten tour stops. The Neilson House is at one of those stops, and for the purpose of talking to visitors I concentrated my attention there, rather than attempting to catch them at other points within the far-flung park. I spoke with 30 individuals and groups around the Neilson House, and 13 in the nearby reenactor camp. Of the 43 visitors I surveyed, 28 (65%) returned my follow-up survey in the mail.

- 72% had been to Saratoga before
- 68% of these had been to the park four or more times previously.

Reasons why people chose to visit Saratoga that day:

To see reenactors	mentioned 20 times
Bicycling/hiking/etc.	5
Curiosity about park or encampment	5
Enjoying park scenery, weather	4
Visiting friends/family	3
Children interested	3
Touring area	2
Serving as park volunteer	2
Celebrating Father's Day	1

- 74% were aware that the reenactors would be at the park.  
Most mentioned having read about the event in a local newspaper.
- Only one respondent was acquainted with any of the reenactors at the park.
- However, 72% reported having seen reenactors at other sites, including at Saratoga NHP in the past.

#### **What reenactor activities did you see at the park?**

Drill/marching	mentioned 21 times
Camp life	11
Firing demonstration	7
Cooking	6
Children in camp	4
Reenactor interpretation	4
Crafts/sewing	3
Ranger interpretation	2
Children's "firelock drill"	1

#### **What part of the reenactor presentations did you enjoy the most?**

Talking to reenactors	9
Musket firing	7
Drill	6
Interpretation/explanation	5
Uniforms/equipment	3
Realism of reenactors	2
Rangers' interpretation	2
Seeing camp life	2
Everything	2

Children's "firelock drill"	1
Music	1

**Was there any part of the reenactor presentation that you did not enjoy or found disappointing?**

No battles	mentioned 7 times
Too few activities	2
Too few reenactors	2
Wanted to have food for sale	2
Activities too far apart	1
Cannons not fired	1
Poor sight lines	1
Not enough publicity for event	1
Not enough interpretation	1
Not enough interaction w/ reenactors	1

Visitors at Saratoga seemed more critical than those at Kings Mountain, less so than those at Minute Man. 18% at Saratoga stated they were disappointed not to see a reenacted battle, as compared with 23% at Minute Man.

86% of respondents said that the reenactors had definitely been an important part of their visit to Saratoga. 14% felt they had been "somewhat important."

79% felt the reenactors had presented a realistic picture of the past, while 21% felt it was "somewhat realistic."

**Follow-up**

Several of the units at Saratoga completed the reenactor survey developed for this study, so I was able to collect their written comments about the event after it was over. All felt it had been a successful event, although with some reservations. One wrote:

*The Park staff understood that the reenactors were skilled in their area of expertise (living history). This led to correct expectations for everyone involved. Essentially the Park took care of wood, water, straw, and loos, and provided interpreters and interpretive programs which coincided well with programs put on by the reenactors. Throughout the weekend, the Park Staff and the reenactors worked together to demonstrate 18<sup>th</sup> century military life to the public and to solve any issues. From the press coverage of the event, the public thought the event was very successful and informative.*

Another reenactor echoed the idea that the event had been successful because the public had been well served:

*The structure and scheduling of the event...permitted many opportunities*

*to interact with the public, and give them a chance to see the camps, equipment, uniforms, etc., closeup. It provided a great educational opportunity to reach the public.*

Another felt the event had been successful because “*many public came to see the reenactors*” and “*we got to stay overnight in the park.*” A reenactor in the same unit echoed the generally positive evaluation, but added that low attendance (presumably among the reenactors) and limited activities were aspects of the weekend that had bothered him. Several reenactors commented to me over the weekend that a Continental Line garrison weekend held at a non-NPS site would have attracted more reenactors, although there was an additional problem of an extremely full schedule in June and a conflicting event the same weekend.

In retrospect, both park staff and the primary organizer among the reenactors felt that the Saratoga event had accomplished one of its major aims, which was to begin building a relationship between the park and Continental Line units. Reenactors reported that they were pleased with the high degree of support they had received from park staff. They felt that their skills were respected and trusted, and that all of their requests had been met.

“Sometimes it’s the little things that make a difference,” the organizer said, mentioning the fact that maintenance staff had cut kindling for the reenactors and that several staff members had made a point of saying goodbye at the end of the weekend. Rangers had also provided traffic control as reenactors were leaving, allowing them to drive a few hundred yards the wrong way on the tour road rather than have to travel several miles around the one-way loop to get to the exit.

Local units of the Continental Line and Saratoga NHP are now in the initial stages of talking about a small-scale 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary event at the park. No firm commitment has been made yet by either side, but they are actively exploring the idea for the fall of 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> My overview of commemorative activities at the three parks in this section will focus largely on performance forms. Although there is a very rich history of other kinds of commemoration at these sites, I have chosen to narrow my focus here in the interests of length and of keeping this study closely linked to the subject of reenactment.