

## Pulling from Outside, Pushing from Inside

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### *Imperiled Promise* and Change in the National Park Service

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2011, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) released *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, a multi-year team-authored study commissioned by the NPS Chief Historian. The study offered twelve findings assessing strengths and challenges facing history practice across the agency, and made almost one hundred recommendations that aimed to support that work. The report's fifth anniversary offers an opportunity to review how *Imperiled Promise's* proposals have fared. We find that, although the report has been positively received and many of its perspectives and specific suggestions embraced, the persistent structural issues it identified continue to hinder full realization of the parks' promise. The OAH, National Council on Public History (NCPH), American Historical Association (AHA), and other professional associations, as well as their members, must continue to advocate strongly and consistently for NPS history.

**KEY WORDS:** National Park Service, Organization of American Historians, federal history, advocacy, policy

#### The Centennial as a Time of Reports and Reflection

Anniversaries matter. While they often seem ubiquitous, innocuous, or blandly celebratory, milestone moments and landmark years can also create genuine moments of possibility, of serious reflection, and of impulse for sustained and necessary change. This has in many ways been the case with the 2016 National Park Service (NPS) centennial, which has prompted several serious efforts to review the past and consider the future of this country's preeminent conservation, recreation, and cultural preservation and interpretation agency. Efforts to mark the centennial have gathered from several directions. Beginning in 2006, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne launched the National Park Centennial Initiative, a "10-year, \$3 billion effort to prepare national parks for another century of conservation, preservation, recreation, and enjoyment." The agency held over forty listening sessions to solicit input from a range of stakeholders, and

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that material in turn informed the May 2007 report *The Future of America's National Parks*.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after, the National Parks Conservation Association invested some \$1 million in the work of an independent Second Century Commission convened to consider the agency's current needs and to advocate for its future.<sup>2</sup> The commission's 2009 report, *Advancing the National Park Idea*, urged that NPS "embrace a 21st-century mission."<sup>3</sup> The wide-reaching and ambitious recommendations included steps to be taken not only by NPS itself, but also by the US Congress and the executive branch and aimed to strengthen the agency at every level. Commission members sought to increase and stabilize the agency's funding with bigger appropriations and more revenue streams; update and streamline bureaucratic procedures; affirm and revitalize the agency's educational mission; improve the ways NPS engages with new constituencies both at home and internationally; expand the agency's reach in new ways to new audiences; enhance stewardship and citizen service; reinvigorate NPS's capacity for research; and help the agency to become more adaptive, innovative, and diverse.<sup>4</sup>

In 2011, NPS put forth its own centennial agenda in *A Call to Action*, a vision document that drew on the Second Century report and other sources to create a compendium of "specific goals and measurable actions that chart a new direction for the National Park Service as it enters its second century," which is updated annually with checkmarks for activities completed.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the National Parks Second Century Action Coalition—over eighty organizations "dedicated to promoting the protection, restoration, and operation of the National Park System to benefit the health and well-being of current and future generations"—has formed both to support and lead actions advancing the NPS mission.<sup>6</sup>

But while park supporters have endeavored to leverage the centennial to urge review, reinvestment, and renewal of the national parks and their individual and collective missions, the celebration of what many have touted as one of the great American ideas has taken place at a dark moment when it seems that the entire national parks project may, in fact, be endangered. The 2016 Republican platform,

1 *The Future of America's Parks: A Report to the President of the United States by the Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne* (NPS, 2007), <https://www.nps.gov/indu/learn/management/upload/2016presidentsreport.pdf>. Quotation from National Parks Second Century Coalition, "Centennial Challenge Fact Sheet," January 2016, <https://www.npca.org/resources/3158-second-century-action-coalition-centennial-challenge>.

2 Second Century Commission documentation is available at <https://www.npca.org/resources/1900-national-parks-second-century-commission-report>.

3 National Parks Second Century Action Coalition, *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Report* (National Parks Conservation Association, 2009), <https://www.npca.org/resources/1900-national-parks-second-century-commission-report>.

4 *Advancing the National Park Idea*, 17. The recommendations are summarized on pages 42–46.

5 *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement* (NPS, August 2011), <http://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/>.

6 National Parks Second Century Action Coalition Statement of Purpose, n.d., available at <https://www.npca.org/resources/2810-second-century-action-coalition-partners>.

for example, urges turnover of federal lands to state control.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, severe funding shortfalls and a maintenance backlog that Congress seems unable to address persist, exacerbated by near-constant uncertainty in the annual appropriations process. NPS faces daunting challenges as environmental change threatens conditions across a wide range of sites and shifting social, political, and cultural landscapes demand constant innovation, even reinvention.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 2016 has seen extensive media discussion of serious cultural problems within the agency, and an apparent unwillingness to address pervasive harassment of female employees in some parks.<sup>9</sup>

As the centennial year concludes, then, it is difficult to know how and whether to celebrate. The potential of the parks and their palpable benefits remain immeasurable, but it appears that even the hundredth birthday of this venerable organization has failed to spark the political will to address the parks' most fundamental needs, particularly funding. With the agency's annual budget of nearly \$3 billion constituting a mere .01 percent of the federal budget, nearly all centennial observers have pointed out how little it would cost the country to significantly increase the allocations to our parks.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the summer of 2015, NPS operational funding was down 7 percent (\$178 million) in current dollars from where it was in 2010. Its construction budget had declined by 62 percent (\$230 million) over the last decade in today's dollars. And transportation-related funding had also not kept pace with needs. By the spring of 2016, although a modest centennial-related infusion had begun to address deferred maintenance, NPS reported that the maintenance backlog remained at a shocking \$11.93 billion.<sup>11</sup>

In this moment, what encouraging signs might be found?

7 Jenny Rowland, "GOP Platform Aims to Get Rid of National Parks and Forests," *Think Progress*, July 15, 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2016/07/15/3798652/gop-platform-national-parks/>; see page 21 of "Republican Platform 2016," [https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT\\_I2\\_FINAL\[i\]-ben\\_I468872234.pdf](https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_I2_FINAL[i]-ben_I468872234.pdf).

8 These themes are particularly well explored in Robert E. Manning, Rolf Diamant, Nora J. Mitchell, and David Harmon, eds., *A Thinking Person's Guide to America's National Parks* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 2016).

9 Lisa Rein, "As National Park Service Confronts Sexual Harassment, This Dysfunctional Park Is Exhibit A," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2016; Kathryn Joyce, "Out Here, No One Can Hear You Scream," *Huffington Post*, <http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/park-rangers/>. Also see Cathy Stanton's provocative post, "Does the National Park Service Have a Culture Problem?" *History@Work* (blog), July 19, 2016, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/does-the-national-park-service-have-a-culture-problem/>.

10 Tom Ribe, "The Park Service Doesn't Need Corporate Sponsorship. It Needs Proper Funding," *High Country News*, June 28, 2016.

11 Kurt Repanshek, "Concessionaires Push Point That National Park Service Lacks Business Savvy," *National Parks Traveler*, July 24, 2015, <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2015/07/concessionaires-push-point-national-park-service-lacks-business-savvy/>; NPT Staff, "Maintenance Backlog Reaches \$11.9 Billion, National Park Service Says," *National Parks Traveler*, February 7, 2016, <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2016/02/maintenance-backlog-reaches-119-billion-national-park-service-says/>; Kurt Repanshek, "Traveler's View: President's FY17 Request for National Park Service Disappointing," *National Parks Traveler*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2016/02/travelers-view-presidents-fy17-request-national-park-service-disappointing/>.

## *Imperiled Promise*

We ask this question by way of taking stock of another anniversary—the five-year mark since publication of *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, a project whose initial conceptualization was not sparked by the centennial, but which resonated with the many other initiatives afoot. In the years since that study appeared in 2011, we have been asked many times what sorts of impacts the report has had: how many and which of its recommendations have been adopted, how the findings have been received at all levels of NPS, and what traction its insights have gained among academic readers. This special issue of *The Public Historian* offered a welcome opportunity to reflect and report on those questions.

*Imperiled Promise* emerged from work we conducted between 2008 and 2011 as part of a four-historian team (with Gary Nash from UCLA and David Thelen of Indiana University) charged by the Organization of American Historians (OAH) and the National Park Service's chief historian's office with evaluating how historical work was faring in today's National Park Service. Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley had initiated this project in 2003 as the first professional assessment of NPS history programs by scholars outside of the agency. Upon Pitcaithley's retirement, his successor Robert Sutton steered the work to conclusion. The delay in our project start until 2008 meant that our efforts quickly became entwined with work towards the approaching anniversary.

To document the "state of history in the NPS," our team worked with the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University to query over 1,500 members of NPS's permanent staff who have some responsibility for history. We were interested both in historical work (no matter how conducted, or by whom) and the place of professionally trained and credentialed historians within the agency. The survey generated more than eight hundred single-spaced pages of discursive replies from over five hundred respondents. Our team also solicited perspectives from retired and current NPS historians and administrators and consulted historians who have worked closely with the agency. Team members visited dozens of parks, conducted listening sessions at several professional conferences, and combed through OAH-sponsored site-visit reports, NPS administrative histories, and other previous studies. These inquiries yielded a broad view of NPS history practice in recent decades. The report, released by OAH in 2011, observed that despite many inspiring examples of history practice at its best across the agency, the historic and cultural potential of the national parks on the whole was not only unrealized but also in jeopardy.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians, 2011), <http://www.oah.org/programs/the-oah-national-park-service-collaboration/imperiled-promise-the-state-of-history-in-the-national-park-service/>. *Imperiled Promise* won the 2013 NCPH Excellence in Consulting (Group) Award.

*Imperiled Promise*—which has, to date, received more than 3,700 unique page views at its home on the OAH website and which was distributed in hard copy to staff across the agency—argued that if history were fully embraced and funded throughout the agency’s multiple divisions as a mission equally important with other missions, particularly natural resources stewardship, it could help transform, reimagine, and reinvigorate NPS for its second century.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, it could potentially transform, reimagine, and reinvigorate our profession as well.

Our study, like the Second Century Commission’s, found much to praise in the achievements of the agency and its hardworking staff. Our survey uncovered nearly 150 instances of high-quality scholarship and creative interpretation including forthright discussion of slavery’s role in the Civil War, creative distance-learning initiatives at Manzanar and other parks, and engagement with local history alongside national narratives at San Antonio Missions and Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. *Imperiled Promise* highlighted inspiring models in a section profiling “Lamps on the Path.”

But the study also asserted that NPS—despite extraordinary achievement routinely visible across the agency—had yet to develop systematically and disperse widely the analytical approaches, methodologies, and discourses that would support the robust history practice that occurs when the agency is at its best. The problems we identified were in some cases reflective of the general underfunding of the agency; we agreed with nearly every other centennial-era study in calling for an infusion of resources for staff and projects. At the same time, other observations identified problems in agency culture and practice that were holding back the presentation and interpretation of history.

In a dozen findings, the report articulated serious challenges to the practice of history in the parks. For instance, the study considered the ahistorical and unproductive ways that “natural” resources programs and staff are often set in opposition to “historic” resources—a vacant distinction with damaging impact on history programs. A 2008 study had found that funding for natural resource programs was then double that for cultural resource programs—a striking disparity that seems difficult to justify given the equally pressing needs of the agency’s historic sites.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite competition for resources, the distinction between natural and cultural sites is collapsing—a welcome development. For instance, the #FindYourPark centennial branding campaign, created for NPS by the Grey New York advertising agency, features striking nature-culture “mashups” that offer a more integrated vision. The caption for a stunning image of the Carlsbad Caverns limestone

13 Aidan Smith, e-mail message to authors, July 5, 2016. We thank Aidan Smith, public history manager at OAH, for the information about page views. The report, he added, has been downloaded 3,109 times; however, that figure is a total and includes duplicate downloads from the same address and so inflates the number of readers by an unknown margin. As we note below, we are not certain about how many hard copies were distributed.

14 National Academy of Public Administration Panel et al., *Saving Our History: A Review of National Park Cultural Resource Programs* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2008), xii, xi, <http://www.napawash.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08-03.pdf>.

formations juxtaposed with the marble Thomas Jefferson Memorial proclaims that: “Some parks take us back to the birth of our nation. Others, to the dawn of life itself.”<sup>15</sup> The soaring peaks of Denali National Park fading into the stone bell tower of a Spanish mission dramatizes a key liminal message: “Some parks offer breathtaking views. Others will change your perspective.”

Such trenchant juxtapositions could serve as a metaphor for how natural and cultural resources could be entwined in the agency’s future. But embracing an advertising campaign is easier than addressing the deep and persistent internal and external causes of the “imperilment” that lies within NPS history endeavors. Again, continuously since 2011, our team has been impressed by the excellent work done by so many individuals across the agency. But, *Imperiled Promise* asserted, if NPS is to achieve its highest aspirations as the nation’s largest history classroom, the following structural problems must be addressed:

- Lack of resources for historical work, both in absolute terms and as compared to conservation, law enforcement, and other functions
- Artificial separations between cultural resources management and interpretation, and between natural resource interpretation and cultural and historical interpretation
- The ways in which a focus upon mandated compliance activities, while critically important, can eclipse other ways history can be practiced and can limit the potential of these essential activities to inform other high-quality research, interpretation, and stewardship
- A tendency to see history as a tightly bounded, single, and unchanging story, rather than an ongoing discovery process through which new questions and multiple perspectives are always shaping new narratives
- An apparent reluctance or inability to bring system-wide coherence, balance, and quality into the history enterprise. One of our survey respondents observed that history in the NPS is “sporadic, interrupted, superbly excellent in some instances and vacant in others.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Noreen O’Leary, “Check Out These Cool Nature-Monument Mashups in New Campaign for National Park Service,” *AdWeek*, July 17, 2015, <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/check-out-these-cool-nature-and-monument-mashups-new-campaign-national-park-service-165955>.

<sup>16</sup> Our report followed closely several others and concurred with many of their findings. These include *Saving Our History*; *Advancing the National Park Idea*; and the National Parks Conservation Association, Center for Park Research, *The State of America’s National Parks* (June 2011), <https://www.npca.org/resources/2259-the-state-of-america-s-national-parks>, each of which documents the increasingly dire state of cultural resources, including history resources, within the Park Service. The summer 2011 report *Aligned for Success: Recommendations to Increase the Effectiveness of the Federal Historic Preservation Program* (Federal Historic Preservation Task Force, Andrew Potts and David Morgan, co-chairs, Preservation Action Foundation, Summer 2011), <http://ncshpo.org/AlignedForSuccess.pdf>, took a somewhat parallel approach to ours and recommended improvements to the federal historic preservation program. *Imperiled Promise* also integrated material from *A Call to Action*, the agency’s response to several of those previous reports.

*Imperiled Promise* framed the history preserved and presented in the national parks as a crucial *social* resource that enriches our national life. It is a reservoir of ideas and options for how we might live, a catalog of some persistent social and political patterns, a cautionary and humbling reminder of dead ends and national mistakes, a map of how we got to where we are and the possible paths ahead, and a well of inspiration to give us courage to face the challenges of our own time. Visiting NPS parks and historical sites helps build a thoughtful and informed citizenry who, thus empowered, can better consider present dilemmas and help create a more equitable, just, healthy society for all.<sup>17</sup> American history in the parks is as much a national resource as is park scenery.<sup>18</sup> Making those resources meaningfully available, however, requires research, thought, planning, trained staff, infrastructure, and money.

### The Task of Assessing Impact

While this special issue of *The Public Historian* provides an opportunity to inventory the impact of *Imperiled Promise*, completing that task proved more challenging than we imagined, partly due to the circumstances and context in which the report was rolled out.

Neither we as the authors of the report nor the OAH as the report's sponsors had more than suasive power to press action, and the supporting entity within NPS, the chief historian's office in Washington, DC, has no line authority over most of the history activity across the agency. Equally problematic, neither the task agreement nor initial budget for *Imperiled Promise* contained time or funding for efforts to publicize the study, seed implementation, or monitor follow-up. (Indeed *Imperiled Promise* had identified this lack of attention to follow-through as a key issue affecting many projects contracted by NPS.) Instead, the agreement projected three phases of work, ending with production of the final report. The OAH and NPS agreed to one "project wrap-up session," while NPS promised to "distribute the final report to parks and other NPS offices."<sup>19</sup> The budget included only a modest \$3,000 for an initial run of print copies.

<sup>17</sup> These ideas are well expressed with regard to a related endeavor, public higher education, in Eric Johnson, "Calculating Economic Impact of NC Colleges Confuses Means, Ends," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), February 21, 2015, <http://www.newsobserver.com/opinion/op-ed/article10883669.html>.

<sup>18</sup> In addition, it is important to note at the outset that *Imperiled Promise* emphasized the work NPS does across its four hundred plus units; however, as the study notes on page 16, the National Park Service is much larger than the parks most familiar to many Americans and includes several "external" offices and initiatives that document and steward historic resources, from the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program to heritage preservation grants. For discussion of some of these areas in particular, we refer readers to the 2011 report *Aligned for Success*, which examined the federal historic preservation program.

<sup>19</sup> Task Agreement Number J2261070002 between the National Park Service and the Organization of American Historians, 2009.

As a result, the study's rollout depended on the good will of the team members, staff at the OAH, enthusiastic colleagues within the NPS and beyond, and about \$20,000 of new funding allocated after the report's completion.<sup>20</sup> Among other activities, this funding paid for printing of an additional one thousand copies of the report to be distributed to all parks and regions as well as to key leaders across the agency and within supporting organizations. Even so, the actual distribution of *Imperiled Promise* throughout the service, to Congress, and elsewhere appears to have been somewhat uneven. Additionally, *Imperiled Promise* appeared in the midst of several other studies and planning initiatives related not only to the centennial but also, as it turned out, to the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. As a result, the multiplicity of initiatives makes untangling the specific impact of *Imperiled Promise* difficult.

Moreover, as the conversations documented by *Imperiled Promise* intersected with conversations related to the centennial and other agency initiatives, they also coincided with synergistic activities in the public history world more generally, from the development of facilitated dialogues by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and leading museums to more recent initiatives such as the History Relevance Campaign, #historyinmyimage, and the American Alliance of Museums workshop Museums & Race. These and other activities resonate with themes we addressed (unsurprising, as we are also swimming in these waters in our professional lives). As we consider *Imperiled Promise* at this remove, we see more clearly the ways that the study and the events that have followed represent a moment in time not just for the agency but for our field and professions.

Indeed, our process, results, and impact are in many ways inseparable, as the study's methodology—which prioritized the voices of NPS employees—necessarily meant that we were hearing ideas already brewing across the agency. Put another way, as our co-author David Thelen observed, our methodology captured and reflected the concerns that NPS staff had already been struggling with and searching for ways to address.<sup>21</sup> It is no surprise, then, that they would have continued to do so with or without the report. Assessing the impact of *Imperiled Promise*, then, is no simple matter, and we cannot and do not claim direct credit for the many important recent initiatives described below. But if, as we hope, *Imperiled Promise* inspired, armed, and amplified the voices of people who were already advocating for change and boosted fledgling efforts to enhance history practice, we count that as a success.

The report blended twelve “findings” with narrative analysis of what we identified as key issues. Specific recommendations accompanied each finding—nearly one hundred in total—and we estimate that as many as a quarter of these have been implemented (either actually or in spirit) by both NPS and the OAH. We can also

20 The original project budget was approximately \$125,000. The additional \$20,000 was provided by Julia Washburn, associate director for Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers.

21 David Thelen, e-mail message to authors, June 28, 2016.



share a number of ways in which history professionals, both within and outside the agency, have embraced the report.

We are especially gratified to find *Imperiled Promise* chosen as one of the five key studies conducted between 2007 and 2011 influencing the priorities and aspirations articulated in the 2013 NPS *Cultural Resource Challenge* document and its updated 2016 action plan. The *Cultural Resource Challenge*'s five goals echo *Imperiled Promise* in their emphasis on leadership; research-based stewardship, management, and interpretation; diversity in the stories told; and skilled workforce development.<sup>22</sup> Further, *Imperiled Promise* directly influenced the "Outcome One: Relevance and Inclusion" section of *Achieving Relevance in Our Second Century*, the new five-year strategic plan for the Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers Directorate.<sup>23</sup>

Also heartening have been developments in several regions (Northeast, National Capital, Midwest, and Intermountain) where under the leadership of regional historians Christine Arato, Dean Herrin, Don Stevens, Pat O' Brien, and others, *Imperiled Promise* has taken root in ways that demonstrate what is possible when an engaged and dynamic staff find encouragement and support to pursue new ideas. As we were going to press, for instance, we learned that the Intermountain Region is developing a five-year plan that uses *Imperiled Promise* as "a template and general reference" undergirding its proposals for well-coordinated interdisciplinary collaboration among historians and other NPS professionals.<sup>24</sup>

The fresh vantage point of 2016, and the work to prepare this essay—which allowed us to reconnect with many of the individuals who informed the study—also give us the chance to rethink and revisit some of our findings. In the end, we realize that *Imperiled Promise* is not a report that concluded at its 2011 release but is an ongoing project that will evolve and grow as long as conversation about history's role in the national parks continues. The process in which we find ourselves engaged, as NPS associate director for Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers

22 Toothman pointed out to us that these two documents originated in 2012. Stephanie Toothman, phone conversation with authors, June 10, 2016. National Park Service Cultural Resources Stewardship, Partnerships, and Science Directorate, *National Park Service Cultural Resource Challenge: Preserving America's Shared Heritage in the 21st Century* (October 2013), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1345/upload/cultural-resource-challenge-2013.pdf>; and National Park Service Cultural Resources Stewardship, Partnerships, and Science Directorate, *National Park Service Cultural Resource Challenge: NPS Cultural Resource Action Plan for 2016 and Beyond* (National Park Service, 2016), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1345/upload/cultural-resource-challenge-action-plan-2013.pdf>.

23 Julia Washburn, phone conversation with authors, June 27, 2016; National Council for Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers, *Achieving Relevance in Our Second Century* (Washington, DC: NPS, April 2014), [https://www.nps.gov/interp/IEV%20Strategic%20Plan\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/interp/IEV%20Strategic%20Plan_FINAL.pdf). NPS's organizational chart refers to various "directorates" including the "Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers Directorate" and the "Cultural Resources, Partnerships, and Science Directorate." See <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/organizational-structure.htm>. For purposes of simplicity, we refer to these as the cultural resources division and the interpretation division.

24 History in the Northeast Region has long been especially well connected to the OAH, and for that reason and others, we have more information about activities in the Northeast Region than in other regional directorates. Pat O'Brien, "IMR History Program 2016–2021: A Plan for Future Cooperation," July 28, 2016; we thank Pat for sharing this document with us.

Julia Washburn suggested to us in a recent conversation, is one in which NPS professionals trying to change the agency “push from the inside” while external Park Service advocates “pull from the outside.”<sup>25</sup>

Such a process is not linear, direct, or swift. Disappointment mixes with incremental and sometimes spotty progress that is still more dependent than we would like upon the good will, energies, and engagement of passionate individuals. History in the National Park Service remains a sprawling set of activities with many moving parts, and a comprehensive review of all of the many and diverse initiatives unfolding at any time across the agency is beyond the scope of this article. Yet there is good news to report, both in terms of specific outcomes as well as encouraging developments that advance the spirit of *Imperiled Promise* and bode well for history in the Park Service.

### *Imperiled Promise's Debut*

Despite the shoestring rollout budget, the year following *Imperiled Promise's* appearance was marked by a flurry of activity by team members, the chief historian and the park history program office, and the OAH to bring attention to the study and take some concrete steps toward implementation. The team debuted *Imperiled Promise* in a public session at the spring 2012 joint NCPH/OAH meeting in Milwaukee and presented it officially to the OAH board, the OAH National Park Service Collaboration Committee, and the NPS historians present there. Additionally, team members briefed the staff from the National Parks Conservation Association by phone and met in Washington, DC, in January and June with representatives from OAH and NPS cultural resources and interpretation divisions to plan activities. Anne participated in briefing conference calls with both the NPS's National Education Council and National Interpretation Education Leadership Council, advisory bodies working with the Division of Interpretation. Team members also consulted with NCPH leadership about how NCPH could support the work.

An early priority was to bring the study to the attention of NPS's top leadership, particularly Director Jon Jarvis. In the fall of 2012, the OAH, the NCPH, the American Historical Association, and the American Association for State and Local History sent a joint letter and a copy of the study to Director Jarvis, highlighting the need for attention to specific proposals about creating two leadership bodies—a History Leadership Council comprised of the agency's most talented and influential historians and interpreters (recommendation 1.2) and a History Advisory Board (recommendation 2.1) designed to ensure that the best emerging trends in history practice nationwide quickly permeated the agency—to carry the *Imperiled Promise* work forward and offering to assist in identifying participants.<sup>26</sup> Yet

<sup>25</sup> Washburn, phone conversation.

<sup>26</sup> Hereafter, specific recommendations from *Imperiled Promise* will be noted by their number alone.

Director Jarvis never responded, and our efforts to arrange a conversation about *Imperiled Promise* at a meeting of the NPS National Leadership Council—considered by many to be crucial to inviting leadership buy-in—failed.<sup>27</sup>

The chief historian, as the original project sponsor, meanwhile, acted quickly to distribute a link to the completed report. He also sent a survey in the spring of 2012 to the 1,500 employees who had received the original OAH survey in order to begin formulating the agency's response. It asked recipients to rate (on an agree/disagree continuum) each of the study's twelve findings, as well as the "Highest Priority" recommendations from the report, and also to respond to a few general questions. Some 118 employees participated in this second survey, which NPS leadership linked to a series of specific responsive actions. Of the twelve findings, finding 1, which discussed counterproductive internal divides between history (cultural resources) and interpretation garnered the highest level of interest and agreement, followed closely by finding 2, which emphasized the importance of strong leadership for history.<sup>28</sup>

The chief historian's office also took specific actions (especially those requiring modest resources) within its power to respond to the report. For instance, it purchased for all NPS employees the appropriate subscription to JSTOR (3.5), giving staff access to the most current history scholarship. It also immediately funded the proposed (8.2) transition of materials from the popular and useful NPS History E-Library into the more standardized NPS Integrated Resource Management Applications portal, enabling historians to more easily locate more than four thousand reports, documents, studies, and publications stored there by author, title, subject, and other criteria.<sup>29</sup> Not everyone, however, has viewed this transition as a success; the (now retired) creator of the original NPS History E-Library in response has re-created (and enhanced) the original site on his own new, independent platform, <http://npshistory.com>.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most significant early effort from the chief historian's office was developed in response to finding 4, "Historical Expertise in Today's Workforce,"

27 The National Leadership Council is described as a "representative body of managers from the National Park Service that meets to achieve alignment, consultation, and coordination regarding the issues facing the Service. It is not a decision making body, but provides advice, input, and opportunity for debate and open analysis of issues. It consists of the Director, deputy directors, the Chief of Staff, all associate and assistant directors, all regional directors, all SES superintendents, the Albright and both Bevinetto Fellows, one superintendent from each grade 12–15, and one additional program lead from each associate directorate. The NLC meets twice yearly in Washington, DC." See <https://www.nps.gov/policy/nlc/NLC.htm>.

28 Memo, "Organization of American Historians State of History in the NPS Report," Bob Sutton to Stephanie Toothman, July 13, 2012; our thanks to Bob Sutton and his office for sharing these materials with us. The Park History Program's portal for electronic resources is <https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/electronicresources.htm>.

29 "OAH State of History in the NPS Report."

30 See Jim Burnett, "Interested In NPS History? New 'National Park Electronic Library' Offers A Great Resource," <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2013/11/interested-nps-history-new-national-park-electronic-library-offers-great-resource24183>.

which called upon NPS to develop ways to enhance the historical training of NPS personnel. With significant input from *Imperiled Promise* team members who were included in a weeklong planning summit, NPS staff worked with the Cultural Resources Academy to build a training module appropriate for a variety of NPS professionals on the practice of history and the importance of understanding historiography (4.3).<sup>31</sup>

The Organization of American Historians, meanwhile, readily adopted several of the suggestions directed at them. To highlight the fine history practiced by NPS historians, for instance, the report urged OAH to create a prize to raise the profile of that good work (2.3). The OAH Committee on National Park Service Collaboration stewarded the development of the new prize; it presented the first Stanton-Horton Award for Excellence in National Park Service History in 2015 to the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom and its primary project director Diane Miller.<sup>32</sup> The second (2016) award went to Manzanar National Historic Site for its barracks exhibit, which engaged people who experienced life in the Japanese American internment camp and their families in both gathering materials (including both archival materials and oral histories) and in exhibit planning.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, in an effort to keep the nation's historians apprised of opportunities to work with NPS, the OAH created the NPS 101 workshop that *Imperiled Promise* suggested (3.8); it has been part of nearly every annual meeting since. Other recommendations regarding site visits, peer review, institutional memberships, and the dissemination of NPS scholarship (often called "grey literature") are likewise seeing various levels of attention from OAH.

In the months following release of the report, several institutions organized structured discussions of its findings. In May 2012, a weeklong work session designed to develop the new series of history training modules for NPS's internal Learning and Development Program used *Imperiled Promise* as a starting point. In November 2012, the University of Massachusetts Boston History Department and Boston National Historical Park drew a standing-room only crowd of NPS professionals and others for an afternoon of "critical conversations" about the report, and particularly findings 1 and 11, on artificial and bureaucratic divides between history and interpretation and what the study called "Fixed and Fearful Interpretation"—an inclination toward

31 Memo, "Organization of American Historians State of History in the NPS Report."

32 The OAH Committee on National Park Service Collaboration, which includes NPS staff among its membership, has been a key driver of ongoing work to advance aims articulated in *Imperiled Promise*, including the creation of the Stanton-Horton prize and the development of NPS-related sessions at the OAH Annual Meeting. The committee, for instance, planned the 2016 meeting's three sessions and large plenary devoted to considering the NPS centennial, thus reinforcing the continuing importance OAH places on the Park Service's history needs and potential.

33 The prize committee commended the exhibit's "nuanced exploration of how internees grappled with the Loyalty Questionnaire that they were compelled to answer, in the process raising the larger question of what loyalty means in a multicultural democracy and who has the right to define it and question others about it." Horton-Stanton Award for Excellence in the National Park Service, Organization of American Historians, 2016. See <http://www.oah.org/programs/awards/stanton-horton-award/>.

stories that convey resolution rather than contingency and a general preference to avoid, rather than engage, controversy or conflict. At Salem State University, a workshop with Salem Maritime and Saugus Iron Works National Historic Sites brought education and interpretation staff together to discuss how to deepen and broaden interpretation in three key ways: emphasizing the complexity, disagreements, and messiness of historical events; making historical interpretation itself more transparent; and connecting the histories of the site to pressing contemporary public issues.

In November 2013, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) at Rutgers University–Camden and NPS’s Northeast Region together convened a public forum to explore the changing presentation of history in US national parks, taking *Imperiled Promise* as its point of departure. The June 2014 New York State Historical Association Conference on New York State History included the pre-conference workshop *Imperiled Promise: Public History and Shared Authority at New York’s NPS Sites*. Formal discussions at the annual meetings of the National Council on Public History, the George Wright Society, and the Organization of American Historians have discussed *Imperiled Promise*’s findings. More than forty articles, blog posts, and podcasts have engaged the study.<sup>34</sup>

34 Ari Kelman reviewed the report in the *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (December 2013): 767–70. Related posts in the NCPH blog *History@Work* include Jennifer Burns, “A Seasonal Ranger Ponders ‘The State of History in the National Park Service,’” April 12, 2012, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/a-seasonal-ranger-ponders-the-state-of-history-in-the-national-park-service/>; Melinda Jette, “Refining the Republic: A Discussion on History in the National Park Service,” November 8, 2012, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/refining-the-republic-history-in-the-national-park-service/>; Marla R. Miller, “NCPH 2013 Group Consulting Award (Part 1): What Next for Imperiled Promise?” April 3, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/ncph-2013-group-consulting-award/>; Anne Mitchell Whisnant, “NCPH 2013 Group Consulting Award (Part 2): Synergies and Cross-purposes,” <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/ncph-2013-group-consulting-award-part-2/>; “Collegial Questioning: A New Forum on History in the US National Park Service (Part 1),” November 22, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/march-nps-forum-part-1/>; “Collegial Questioning: A New Forum on History in the US National Park Service (Part 2),” November 25, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/march-nps-forum-part-2/>; and “Collegial Questioning: A New Forum on History in the US National Park Service (Part 3),” November 27, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/march-nps-forum-part-3/>. See also: “AHA Today: What We’re Reading: March 22, 2012,” *AHA Today* (blog), March 22, 2012, <http://blog.historians.org/what-we-are-reading/1601/what-were-reading-march-22-2012/>; Kurt Repanshek, “Review of National Park Service’s Approach to History Points to Weak Support for That Mission,” *National Parks Traveler*, March 26, 2012, <http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2012/03/review-national-park-services-approach-history-points-weak-support-mission9642/>; “OAH Report Claims History Is Imperiled at National Parks,” *Engaging Places*, March 26, 2012, <http://engagingplaces.net/2012/03/26/oah-report-claims-history-is-imperiled-at-national-parks/>; John Warren, “New York History: Major Study Finds Park Service History ‘Imperiled,’” *New York History: History News and Views from the Empire State* (blog), March 30, 2012, <http://www.newyorkhistoryblog.com/2012/03/major-study-finds-park-service-history.html>; Eleanor Mahoney, “Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service Report Released,” *Living Landscape Observer*, April 12, 2012, <http://livinglandscapeobserver.net/imperiled-promise-the-state-of-history-in-the-national-park-service-report-released/>; Jacob Dinkelaker, “Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the NPS,” *Interpreting the Civil War*, April 17, 2012, <http://www.civilwarconnect.com/2012/04/imperiled-promise-state-of-history-in.html>; Allen Mikaelian, “OAH Report Urges National Park Service to ‘Recommit to History,’” *Perspectives on History*, May 2012, <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2012/1205/OAH-Report-Urges-National-Park-Service-to-Recommit-to-History%20o.cfm>;

Graduate and undergraduate courses at over twenty colleges and universities have made *Imperiled Promise* required reading, some bringing in either the study authors or NPS staff to discuss the findings with students.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond the federal context, other agencies within the United States and beyond have seen something of themselves in the report's findings and have contemplated the implications of *Imperiled Promise* for their own work. The huge California State Parks system, finding *Imperiled Promise*'s observations about "Fixed and Fearful Interpretation" (finding 11) and "Civic Engagement, History, and Interpretation" (finding 12) especially relevant to its own struggles to carry out high-quality historical work, is seeking to develop pilot programs to implement and test the study's recommendations as part of its current Transformation Initiative. The system may eventually undertake a similar large-scale investigation of its own history practice. Parks Canada, meanwhile, sent representatives to meet with the Park History Program and Northeast Region staff in March 2016 to explore ideas for how *Imperiled Promise*'s insights might be applied in the Canadian context.<sup>36</sup>

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John Fea, "The State of History in the National Park Service," *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Reflections at the Intersection of American History, Christianity, Politics, and Academic Life*, May 8, 2012, <http://www.philipvickersfithian.com/2012/05/state-of-history-in-national-park.html>; Rolf Diamant, "Letter from Woodstock: Keeping on the Path," *George Wright Forum* 29, no. 2 (August 2012): 201–3; Timothy S. Good, "The Need for Intellectual Courage, the History Leadership Council, and the History Advisory Board," *George Wright Forum* 29, no. 2 (August 2012): 268–71; Lisa Mighetto, "A Sobering Report—Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service," *George Wright Forum* 29, no. 2 (August 2012): 264–67; Anne Whisnant et al., "The State of History in the National Park Service: A Conversation and Reflections," *George Wright Forum* 29, no. 2 (August 2012): 246–63; Danny Bernstein, "Imperiled Promise—An Award-Winning Report," *Hiker to Hiker* (blog) March 27, 2013, <http://www.hikertohiker.com/thishikinglife/archive/2013/03/27/imperiled-promise-an-award-winning-report>; Debbie Ann Doyle, "The National Parks and the Value of History," *Perspectives on History*, May 2013, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/the-national-parks-and-the-value-of-history>; Sue Ferentinos, "Reflecting on 'Imperiled Promise,'" *Historical Scholarship in the Service of the Present*, December 4, 2013, <http://susanferentinos.com/wpblog/2013/12/reflecting-on-imperiled-promise/>; Seth C. Bruggeman, "A New Future for History in the National Park Service," *Cross-Ties* (Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Rutgers–Camden), December 15, 2013, <http://march.rutgers.edu/2013/12/a-new-future-for-history-in-the-national-park-service/>; Ed Linenthal, "Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service," *Journal of American History Podcast*, April 2013, <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/podcast/index.html#2013>; "Critical Conversations: The State of History in the National Park Service" conference, November 2, 2012, University of Massachusetts Boston.

<sup>35</sup> We have been informed anecdotally of several instances. Syllabi (graduate and undergraduate) available online include Sarah R. Payne, The Practice of Public History (Colorado State University, History 479, Fall 2013), [http://web.libarts.colostate.edu/wp-content/Cimy\\_User\\_Extra\\_Fields/srpayne/file/Syllabus-HIST-479-F2013.pdf](http://web.libarts.colostate.edu/wp-content/Cimy_User_Extra_Fields/srpayne/file/Syllabus-HIST-479-F2013.pdf); Denise Meringolo, Introduction to Public History (University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Hist 300, Spring 2015), <http://denisemeringolo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIST-300-Syllabus.pdf>; Kathleen Franz, Public History Seminar (American University, History 729, Fall 2012), <https://american.edu/cas/history/pdf/upload/PublicHistorySyllabus.pdf>; and Seth Bruggeman, Managing History: An Introduction to Public History (Temple University, History 8152, Fall 2013), <http://astro.temple.edu/scbrug/ManagingHistory2013RevisedSyllabus.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> See "Transforming California State Parks," California Department of Parks and Recreation website, [http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=28074](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=28074).

## Focus on the Findings

We have been intrigued to see which of *Imperiled Promise's* many observations and suggestions have gained the most notice and traction. Finding 1, "The History/ Interpretation Divide," appears to have been far and away the most resonant, especially when considered in connection with finding 3, "The Challenge of Disconnection," which called for cultivation of better links among practitioners within NPS and between NPS and historians outside the agency. Suggestions endorsing the full-fledged embrace of social media laid out in finding 8, "Technology and the Practice of History," have come to fruition.

The findings focused on the need to develop and support a high-quality history workforce (findings 4 and 5) seem also to have found synergy with other NPS priorities, while the centennial has offered opportunities for notable progress on some elements of finding 9, "Stewardship and Interpretation of Agency History." Finding 11, which focused upon the agency's tendency to practice "Fixed and Fearful Interpretation," has continued to find a receptive audience as interpretive leadership has turned towards more dialogical and interactional forms of practice.

Challenges remain, of course. Progress related to finding 2, "The Importance of Leadership for History," remains difficult to assess, partly due to the wide distribution of leadership throughout the agency and the lack of significant line authority from Washington to the field. Finding 6, meanwhile, "Inadequate Resources for Historical Practice," joined a chorus of voices noting the underfunding of the Park Service, and while there is some good news to report for history, the overall financial and staffing picture remains bleak.

Careful examination of several of the findings suggest some of the immediate and long term developments that relate to specific areas of practice. Together, these observations suggest those areas most amendable, and resistant, to change.<sup>37</sup>

### Finding 1: The History/Interpretation Divide

Finding 1 called upon NPS to "find and take every opportunity to reintegrate professional history practice and interpretation," and NPS and OAH have both taken this advice to heart. Among other specifics, the study enjoined the service to "create more opportunities for professional crossover and direct interaction between cultural resources divisions' historians and staff in the interpretation division at all levels."

Nearly everyone we spoke with recently (admittedly largely at the Washington, DC, and regional office levels) described a palpable shift in culture, some concrete

<sup>37</sup> Note that this discussion omits finding 7 (on "Productive and Enduring Partnerships") and finding 10 (exploring "The Constraints of Boundaries, Enabling Legislation, and Founding Histories"), which, for whatever reason(s), have been the subject of comparatively less public attention. Additionally, the discussion that follows proceeds in what we found to be a logical sequence based on our current information, rather than in the strictly numerical sequence in which the findings appeared in *Imperiled Promise*.

activities, and a new openness to intradivision communication and collaboration at many levels. The aspirational national planning documents for both the interpretation and cultural resources divisions contain language that recognizes synergy and encourages crossover.<sup>38</sup>

In the Washington Support Office (WASO), for instance, both the associate director for the Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers Directorate, Julia Washburn, and the associate director for the Cultural Resources, Partnerships, and Science Directorate, Stephanie Toothman, reported regular, ongoing collaboration, a commitment that—while somewhat dependent upon their individual leadership styles—nevertheless represents a positive step. According to Toothman, she and Washburn “share a common understanding that we are generating the research that they [the interpretation and education division] are using to meet our common goal of telling all American stories,” a priority under the *Cultural Resource Challenge*.<sup>39</sup> “Collaboration at the national level is great,” Washburn told us, noting that the interpretation and cultural resources divisions had worked closely together on several recent theme studies, creating tools and lesson plans for interpreters and teachers.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, Toothman has instituted a new requirement within her division (implemented as of fiscal year 2014) that all proposals for funded research in cultural resources include plans and a budget for a “transfer of knowledge” component. The plans, she explained, should elaborate concrete steps by which the research will be made available to other directorates of NPS that need it. Julia Washburn elaborated that her office is working closely with funding applicants to help them shape the parts of their proposals dealing with interpretation so that they move beyond, for instance, only a post-project lecture.

While noting that the impulse to create firmer connections between research and other activities predated *Imperiled Promise*, both Toothman and Washburn indicated that the study’s recommendations about the need to plan and scope cultural resources studies to include interpretive components catalyzed and reinforced this nascent initiative.<sup>41</sup> The new approach to integrating interpretive planning into cultural resources research projects is bearing fruit through the OAH, as well. OAH public history manager Aidan Smith described consistent efforts to plan new research projects so that they include interpretive deliverables, follow-up visits, and peer review.<sup>42</sup>

In Washington, a newly organized Cultural Resources Office of Education and Outreach, headed by Barbara Little, maintains close and ongoing ties with the Division of Interpretation, with Little serving on the National Council for Interpretation,

38 *National Park Service Cultural Resource Challenge* (2016); and NPS, *Achieving Relevance*.

39 Toothman, phone conversation. The “Telling All Americans’ Stories” project page is <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/index.htm>.

40 Washburn, phone conversation.

41 Ibid., and Toothman, phone conversation. *Imperiled Promise* recommendation 1.3 specifically called for all cultural resource management studies to include an interpretive deliverable. We were unable to get specifics about what, exactly, is required.

42 Smith, e-mail.



Volunteers, and Education. The division of interpretation's *Achieving Relevance* strategic plan, meanwhile, places high value on collaboration with "external advisors and professional societies," as well as "among interpreters, communicators, resources managers, scientists, scholars, and historians." It projects a strategy of "[harnessing] the knowledge and skills of diverse staff" (including "cultural resource experts") to "strengthen and enrich interpretation."<sup>43</sup>

Leaders in Washington have highlighted collaborative opportunities emerging from the recently concluded Civil War to Civil Rights celebration of the Civil War sesquicentennial. A draft summary report on that commemoration includes a sidebar naming *Imperiled Promise* as well as *A Call To Action* key texts inspiring the initiative. The report observes that the cultural resource training manager at NPS's Mather Training Center developed an online course, Bridging the Gaps: Collaborative Interpretation of Cultural Resources, specifically to address the "Historian/Interpreter chasm cited by *Imperiled Promise*." It notes that cultural resources and interpretation worked together to connect scholarship, research, and interpretive planning related to a number of projects, including several handbooks (*The Civil War Remembered*, *The Reconstruction Era*, and *American Indians and the Civil War*). More broadly, coming out of the celebration, NPS embarked on theme studies in which cultural resources staff including regional historians worked to identify sites associated with both Reconstruction and civil rights.<sup>44</sup> We are also heartened to see that the park service historian's office staff has grown since 2011, with four full-time PhD historians now in place. Chief Historian Sutton retired at the end of 2015, but recruitment for his replacement is under way.<sup>45</sup>

To address the persistent gap that so often hampers crossover between history and interpretation, meanwhile, the Northeast Region (NER) hired a permanent public history education and outreach coordinator. This new staff member deploys social media skills and collaborates with history program staff, particularly on "transfer of knowledge" projects and oral history projects. NER History also created a Google site (replacing a monthly electronic newsletter) to support an inter-divisional community of practice.<sup>46</sup>

The historian in the National Capital Region (NCR), Dean Herrin, has designated "creating a closer relationship with regional Interpretation and Education colleagues as one of two priorities." Herrin elaborated that

[w]e want to find avenues in which the History Program can assist front-line interpreters and educators with information that the public receives. At the

<sup>43</sup> NPS, *Achieving Relevance*, Outcome One.

<sup>44</sup> "Civil War to Civil Rights Commemoration Summary Report (Draft)" (2016); we thank Stephanie Toothman for sharing this document with us. Robert Sutton, e-mail message to authors, July 20, 2015. For a review of these handbooks, see Stephen R. Hausmann's review essay in this issue, "Telling Larger Stories: Five Additions to the National Park Service Official Handbook Series," on pages 293–304.

<sup>45</sup> Sutton, e-mail.

<sup>46</sup> Christine Arato, e-mail message to authors, July 20, 2015.

same time, we can't expect all interpreters to sit down and read a two-volume Historic Resource Study. It is therefore incumbent upon the History Program to create summaries, guidebooks, timelines, indexes, web content, story maps, and other material in which parks can quickly find pertinent information. In two new projects on the history of Civil Rights in NCR, for example, we will hold workshops for park interpreters and educators to help disseminate the new research the projects will produce.<sup>47</sup>

Herrin also described new subject pages planned for his regional website to spread the word on new research and interpretive possibilities. The NCR's new American Council of Learned Societies-sponsored public fellow, a Brown PhD, will join NCR as the "Public Outreach Coordinator," Herrin said, and will take up these tasks of disseminating history program information to the public, regional parks, universities, and front-line interpreters and educators.<sup>48</sup>

Midwest Region historian Don Stevens described to us his longstanding close relationship with the regional chief of interpretation, Tom Richter, whom he credited for a number of steps taken to formalize historian-interpreter collaboration as a direct result of *Imperiled Promise*. Stevens noted that Richter is now systematically building "historian roundtables" into all exhibit design and development contracts, something that was done on a more ad hoc basis before the publication of the report. Such processes are bearing fruit already in exhibit planning for Fort Larned National Historic Site, Scott's Bluff National Monument, and the new Pullman National Monument.

Stevens pointed out that "interpretive-minded historians" in the parks have generated energy for implementing the recommendations of *Imperiled Promise*. He added that the reformulated Cultural Resources Advisory Group for the Midwest Region now includes a historian, Julie Galonska, who is the chief of interpretation at St. Croix National Scenic Waterway—giving an "interpretive voice" to cultural resources planning at the regional level. "We were inclined this way," Stevens said, "but [*Imperiled Promise*] has made it more formal." He added that interpretation/cultural resources collaboration is "not a guerilla exercise anymore, [but is] accepted by the current leadership."<sup>49</sup>

## Finding 2: The Importance of Leadership for History

The efforts described above emanate in large part from key leadership in NPS Cultural Resources and Interpretation Directorates at the national and regional levels. Although we are encouraged to know that these individuals have taken *Imperiled Promise* to heart, we remain concerned both about how to institutionalize change in ways that will outlive the tenure of dynamic and committed

<sup>47</sup> Dean Herrin, e-mail message to authors, June 15, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Don Stevens, phone conversation with authors, July 5, 2016.

individuals. Finding 2, “The Importance of Leadership for History,” called for “visible, and well-supported leadership that articulates an inspiring and wide-ranging vision for NPS history.”<sup>50</sup>

To help do this work, *Imperiled Promise* proposed two leadership bodies—the internal History Leadership Council (1.2) and the external History Advisory Board (2.1)—to carry the mantle. Our team felt that these two bodies could both make a case for increased congressional funding and press initiatives that would dissolve unproductive internal barriers and foster interconnection. They could help staff better engage the agency’s own history, and spread word of the most exciting developments and promising practices from both within and beyond NPS. But despite some early work on developing a charter for the History Leadership Council, neither group has come to fruition.

Our recent informants have cautioned us not to interpret this lack of movement as an indication that the spirit of the *Imperiled Promise* recommendations on this score have been rejected. They emphasized other ways (for instance, through appointment of history professionals to various existing advisory groups) in which the ideas—designed to bring coherence to the NPS history enterprise and to better connect it to the wider historical profession—were being implemented. Especially in an era of constrained funding, particularly for travel, it appears that such more economical solutions may be necessary. Toothman highlighted new appointments of historians and museum and public history professionals to the National Historic Landmarks Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board and credited that “diverse, multi-disciplinary, engaged group” with taking on an expanded role of “advocacy for history, archaeology, and anthropology.”<sup>51</sup> Toothman also called attention to changes she has made in her Cultural Resources Advisory Group (CRAG), which now includes representatives from both WASO and the regions. Stevens echoed Toothman’s assertion that this level of regional input and dialogue with those crafting WASO priorities is new and welcomed.<sup>52</sup> Washburn, too, emphasized the impact of these groups, as well as her own National Council of Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers, on which the Cultural Resources division is now represented, and which created the *Achieving Relevance* strategic plan.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, positive leadership news from the regions includes Northeast Regional Office (NERO) director Michael Caldwell’s emphasis on “Collaborative History” that requires parks and programs to address *Imperiled Promise*’s findings, particularly by incorporating research from cultural resources management work into interpretive and public programming. NERO History has been invited to

<sup>50</sup> As we pointed out in 2011, key leadership for many NPS activities comes from superintendents at the parks. The present review of activities has not attempted to determine the extent of superintendent engagement with *Imperiled Promise*.

<sup>51</sup> Toothman, phone conversation; Current membership is here: “National Park System Advisory Board,” National Historic Landmarks Program, NPS website, <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/learn/advisoryboard.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Toothman, phone conversation; June 10, 2016; Stevens, phone conversation.

<sup>53</sup> Washburn, phone conversation.

present twice to the Northeast Leadership Council (including once on plans for interpreting Reconstruction), and the staff is developing a strategic plan for history needs in the region. The Intermountain Region's draft history program plan endorses the establishment of the national History Leadership Council and a regional History Advisory Board.<sup>54</sup>

### Finding 3: The Challenge of Disconnection

Finding 3 enjoined NPS to “foster historical scholarly and collegial connections . . . both within its borders and beyond.” Evidence indicates that in many ways this is happening, both on the informal level with the emergence of social media interest groups and other digitally enabled communities of practice, and on the formal level of project-focused collaboration between NPS and historians outside the agency (for instance, through work with the OAH to identify scholarly experts to serve as consultants and researchers on several theme studies designed to widen the scope of the National Historic Landmarks Program).<sup>55</sup>

An exciting effort emerging from the Civil War to Civil Rights commemoration is a 250-member community of practice, with digital space in a new NPS “commons,” called Arc to Equality. This effort aims to position the NPS as an “agent of understanding, healing, and change” and a “national resource and catalyst for . . . conversations” in a nation rent by conflicts, many along racial lines. The ambitious initiative aims to focus NPS resources and projects from all divisions (including theme studies, interpretive practice, and workforce development) to forthrightly address issues and conduct difficult conversations related to race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. A related employee group, the Allies for Inclusion, is facilitating intra-NPS discussions related to these efforts, while an African American Employees Resources Group is developing a toolkit for NPS employees to provide ideas for interpretation, recruitment, and engagement with African American communities.<sup>56</sup>

Although conference travel has remained challenging for NPS professionals, the OAH has continued to reach out. Beginning in 2014, for instance, membership information including discussion of a new “affiliate” membership (which would include electronic access to publications) was mailed to every NPS park superintendent.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Arato, e-mail; O'Brien, “IMR History Program 2016–2021.”

<sup>55</sup> Toothman highlighted intense scholarly involvement in theme studies related to Latino history, LGBTQ history, Reconstruction, and the Manhattan Project. “We are trying,” she wrote, “to inform our parks and programs with the best scholarship we can bring to the table . . . with peer review and without censorship of any kind.” Toothman, e-mail.

<sup>56</sup> “Arc to Equality: Director’s Briefing Talking Points,” January 25, 2016; we thank Julia Washburn for sharing this with us. The document notes that “in light of Imperiled Promise, the Organization of American Historians might be impressed to see the stove pipes being knocked down and all these groups working together toward a common cause.” This point is also made in Brian Joyner, e-mail message to authors, June 23, 2016, and Keena Graham, phone conversation with authors, July 31, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, e-mail.

In the Northeast Region, the history program collaborated with Central Connecticut State University to offer a guided research seminar focusing on Reconstruction in New England. Salem Maritime National Historic Site (Salem, Massachusetts), Springfield Armory National Historic Site (Springfield, Massachusetts), and Martin Van Buren National Historic Site (Kinderhook, New York) have also developed innovative collaborations with colleges and universities (see the essay on Salem in this issue, 129–48). NERO History and Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area are also supporting Northeastern University’s exploration of massive incarceration in the Boston area, while regional historian Christine Arato met with students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to discuss the many places NPS interprets histories of incarceration—all efforts in collaboration with the Humanities Action Lab’s project “States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories.”<sup>58</sup>

The Midwest Region conducted a series of monthly conference calls for a least a year that brought together historians from any division in the region around topical discussions (including about *Imperiled Promise* itself), often coordinated with a guest speaker. The calls, historian Stevens observed, created a missing esprit de corps among historians across the region and helped people become better informed about ongoing or new initiatives.<sup>59</sup>

#### Finding 8: Technology and the Practice of History

The challenge of disconnection is partly being overcome through creative adoption of new technological tools. For instance, the integration of all training, learning, and intraorganizational collaborations in a new NPS Common Learning Portal (which provides space for the “commons” mentioned above) points to a serious effort to harness technology to bridge physical, institutional, disciplinary, and cultural divides.<sup>60</sup> Progress, as well, in the full embrace of social media has provided new avenues of ongoing contact with NPS constituents, partners, and the public. We personally have found social media an excellent mechanism to remain connected to the many NPS colleagues with whom we worked in creating *Imperiled Promise*.

The purposeful harnessing of social media in the Civil War to Civil Rights commemoration (efforts coordinated by a separately funded social media team) was especially impressive. Mather Training Center’s “Diginterp” community and training webinars helped parks effectively harness media for interpretive work, and a commemoration-ending “Bells across the Land” engaged nearly four hundred groups across the country and trended online.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Arato, e-mail. See <http://statesofincarceration.org>.

<sup>59</sup> Stevens, phone conversation.

<sup>60</sup> NPS Common Learning Portal, “Welcome to the NPS Common Learning Portal,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gkox6lQ-kYc>.

<sup>61</sup> “Civil War to Civil Rights Commemoration.” In an example of the effective use of technology, the “We are Still Marching” website, produced by Organic Web Design for the fiftieth commemoration of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, was sponsored by Julia Washburn’s office

#### Findings 4 and 5: Historical Expertise in the Workforce

Findings 4 and 5 emphasized the need to build a “strong base of in-house, professional qualified historical expertise” and to recruit a new, more diverse cadre of historians for the future. Although identified as a significant need during NPS’s internal budgeting processes, the staffing situation in cultural resources—and indeed agency-wide—remains, Toothman told us, “grim.” Staff numbers in her directorate have declined 16 percent since 2011, while as many as one hundred new FTEs would be needed to fully staff all programs.<sup>62</sup>

Funding for new permanent staff not forthcoming, the most promising efforts have revolved around internal training. WASO historian Lu Ann Jones, for example, has collaborated with the NPS Academy for Cultural Resources to develop a self-directed, online History Initiative training module (now being incorporated into the NPS’s new integrated Common Learning Portal) to teach NPS personnel about the nature of history and historical thinking and their value and uses across many career fields. The module (still under construction) incorporates many ideas and examples from *Imperiled Promise*.

Director Toothman also called our attention to the robust NPS diversity internship programs that bring dozens of (paid) interns into cultural resources work each year. The Latino Heritage Internship Program, for instance, engaged forty-eight interns in 2016, while the Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program hosted twenty. Like many of the developments described here, these initiatives were not responses to *Imperiled Promise*, but they are promising efforts that speak to issues explored in the report.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, when *Imperiled Promise* was released, retirements across the NPS had left only one regional office with a full-time regional historian. As of this writing, all but one of the seven regions have either a permanent, full-time historian, or a historian on a long-term detail.

#### Finding 9: Stewardship and Interpretation of Agency History

Finding 9 encouraged more mindful attention to stewardship and interpretation of the agency’s own history, both in the service of helping the public consider “how history works” and in the interest of improving park management. Although the 2012 chief historian’s office post-*Imperiled Promise* survey revealed some of its park-level respondents to be unenthusiastic about this, as they believed this was not what drew visitors to the parks, the centennial has provided an opportune moment for some of the called-for self-reflection.

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in collaboration with the National Park Foundation, Google, and the National Mall. The website won a People’s Choice Award for Cultural Institutions Webby in 2014; Joyner e-mail. See <http://www.wearstillmarching.com/landing/>.

<sup>62</sup> Toothman to authors, July 27, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Paloma Bolasny, e-mail message to Anne M. Whisnant, July 22, 2016.

In 2015, the agency launched “Telling Our Own Untold Stories: Centennial Voices Oral History Project,” an initiative supported by the Park History Program and several regional offices and led by WASO historian Jones. The program—which answers a need identified in *Imperiled Promise* recommendation 9.5—blends oral history training, systematic work to document institutional history at risk of being lost in a wave of retirements, and knowledge transfer to newer employees. As of this writing, this program has sponsored oral history trainings in four regions to prepare employees to conduct oral history interviews with long-time Park Service personnel. At WASO, staff are conducting interviews with employees who have recently retired and providing support to the Association of National Park Rangers’ centennial oral history project, which has completed some sixty interviews with key NPS staff and shared compelling interview excerpts in *Ranger* magazine.<sup>64</sup>

These oral history initiatives are a strong example of NPS training its workforce in participatory techniques. Multipark trainings at the regional level as well as park-specific work allows NPS staff to both document and learn agency history; at the same time, engaging younger workers as interviewers lends a mentoring element to these encounters. At the Northeast Region’s training session, participants included interns from the Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program, the Latino Heritage Initiative Internship Program, and Student Conservation Corps.<sup>65</sup>

*Imperiled Promise* also called for the Washington Park History office to hire a bureau historian to document agency history (9.1). By the time of publication, the Cultural Resources Directorate already had reassigned historian John H. Sprinkle Jr. from the NPS Federal Preservation Institute to the bureau historian position.

#### Findings 11 and 12: Fixed and Fearful Interpretation and Civic Engagement

From our admittedly limited review of current initiatives, it appears that *Imperiled Promise*, the centennial, and the confluence of public discussions around racial violence, the Confederate flag, police brutality, and #BlackLivesMatter have together catalyzed efforts already underway to make NPS interpretation more dialogical and open-ended, and less rigidly “thematic” and didactic. Especially in the current polarized political climate, wading into conversations around these core American fault lines requires significant courage and good training. But it seems that NPS is making progress towards being less “fixed and fearful.”

64 See Association of National Park Rangers, “Oral History Interviews Donated to NPS,” February 27, 2014, <https://www.anpr.org/news/3237506> and interview excerpts published in *Ranger* magazine at <https://aonpr29.wildapricot.org/Oral-History-Project> and shared on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdH4wseOZsA>) and SoundCloud ([https://soundcloud.com/user-40599427/retired-park-ranger-jd-swed?utm\\_source=soundcloud&utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=facebook](https://soundcloud.com/user-40599427/retired-park-ranger-jd-swed?utm_source=soundcloud&utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=facebook)). See the NPS Park History Program’s Oral History web page, <https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/oralhistory.htm>; and *NPS Oral History: Centennial Voices*, <https://soundcloud.com/npsoralhistory>.

65 Lu Ann Jones, e-mail message to authors, July 21, 2015.

With an eye toward the centennial, the national NPS team working on *A Call to Action*'s "History Lesson" developed resources available to NPS personnel on an internal History Lesson Google site.<sup>66</sup> These include a concise checklist (inspired by *Imperiled Promise*) of ideas, concepts, and best practices to guide in the planning and evaluation of programs. More recently, this team is identifying more examples of innovative park history projects (such as *Imperiled Promise*'s "Lamps on the Path") and plans to highlight them for audiences inside and outside the Park Service in new education and outreach efforts.

NPS's encompassing new "Telling All Americans' Stories" framework weaves together heritage and preservation initiatives, new research and recent scholarship, and interpretation of histories of underrepresented groups as well as both painful and inspiring histories. Toothman told us that 40 percent of new national historic landmarks approved in the last five years document previously overlooked histories, and new funding has been allocated to surveys of sites related to LGBTQ history, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Latino History, and the Reconstruction era.<sup>67</sup> The LGBTQ Heritage Initiative (which, we note, was not funded as part of the NPS budget, but rather by external sources), in particular, represents a courageous foray that is breaking exciting new ground in preservation and potential interpretation in an area where even rudimentary documentation of an array of sites was unavailable.<sup>68</sup>

Washburn said that Interpretation, meanwhile, is trying "to shift the field of Interpretation away from lecture-style to an audience-centered dialogic approach," a report seconded by Dom Cardea, learning and development coordinator for the Northeast Region, who adds that he and his colleagues are actively looking to pioneering efforts beyond NPS for inspiration and example (as suggested in *Imperiled Promise* recommendation 12.1). Cardea adds that the "four perspectives on historical truth" articulated by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and discussed in *Imperiled Promise*—that is, forensic truth (who did what to whom, when, and where); experiential truth (how participants experienced what they did); dialogic truth (how different people approached and engaged their different experiential understandings); and healing truth (what could be agreed on in order to move on)—have become the "cornerstone" of new directions in NPS Interpretation. And they are being applied broadly, including to "natural"

66 Item #3: "Excite and involve new audiences in the exploration of the full diversity of the American experience by conducting history discovery events, projects, and activities that invite them to explore and share their heritage, using a variety of participatory methods, in at least 100 parks and programs," *Call to Action*, 10.

67 Toothman, phone conversation; "Telling All Americans' Stories." For the Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Initiative, see <https://www.nps.gov/AAPI/>; for the American Latino Heritage Project, see <https://www.nps.gov/heritageinitiatives/latino/>. The LGBTQ Heritage Initiative can be found at <https://www.nps.gov/heritageinitiatives/LGBThistory/>. On Reconstruction, see Jennifer Schuessler, "Taking Another Look at the Reconstruction Era," *New York Times*, August 24, 2015.

68 For a list of LGBTQ Heritage Initiative partners see <https://www.nps.gov/heritageinitiatives/LGBThistory/partners.html>.



topics such as climate change. This approach, he told our co-author Thelen, encourages people to see four different lines of sight on the past, to understand different uses to make of history, and to transcend a “facts vs. opinion” dichotomy that immobilized good interpretation.<sup>69</sup> Such efforts, it appears, suffused the just completed Civil War to Civil Rights commemoration, one aim of which was to “move beyond the facts” to train and urge interpreters to ask questions that connected past events to present concerns.<sup>70</sup>

The hope is to promote civil discourse on big issues, and changes such as the addition of sites like Stonewall National Historic Site along with the expansion into cities with a new “urban initiative” are forcing the agency to consider how best to facilitate difficult conversations on issues from social justice to climate change. Through the new Arc to Equality project, NPS is working with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to develop training, and Washburn has barnstormed the country, meeting in 2015–16 with five hundred chiefs of interpretation in five workshops to promote the new perspectives encompassed in the *Achieving Relevance* interpretive strategic plan.<sup>71</sup>

#### Finding 6: Inadequate Resources for Historical Practice

We applaud all of this progress, both tangible changes and the notable adoption in some corners of many of the study’s core perspectives and proposals. Yet, significant challenges remain, most especially those related to finding 6, “Inadequate Resources for Historical Practice.” This finding lamented the ebbing of federal support for the NPS itself and for history work within it—observations that echoed those of several other reports concerning NPS in recent years.<sup>72</sup> *Imperiled Promise* observed:

History in the NPS has been under-resourced for decades. Chronic underfunding and understaffing have severely undermined the agency’s ability to meet basic responsibilities, let alone take on new and bolder initiatives, nurture and sustain public engagement, foster a culture of research and discovery, and facilitate connectivity and professional growth among NPS staff. Reducing inefficiencies and forming productive partnerships can help address these gaps, but after decades of deferred maintenance, the history infrastructure seriously needs repair.

*Imperiled Promise* survey respondents overwhelmingly identified increased staffing for history as their top priority for more funding, and that picture remains unchanged. Indeed, Toothman reported that staffing in Cultural Resources

69 Dom Cardea to David Thelen, e-mail message, as reported in Thelen, e-mail; Whisnant et al., *Imperiled Promise*, 116.

70 “Civil War to Civil Rights Commemoration.”

71 “Urban Parks and Programs (U.S. National Park Service),” NPS website, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/urban/index.htm>; Washburn, phone conversation.

72 See in particular the National Academy of Public Administration study *Saving Our History*, which appeared in 2008, just before our team commenced work on this project.

declined between 2011 and 2016.<sup>73</sup> NPS leaders continue to report low morale and stress due to shorthandedness and a multiplicity of demands.

At the service-wide level, NPS's 2013 *Cultural Resource Challenge* prospectus cited *Imperiled Promise* and documented once again the post-1990s loss of a significant number of cultural resources staff and the draining of various funding sources for historic preservation and documentation.<sup>74</sup> Yet while reiterating that "nothing less than additional funding will help fully preserve America's heritage for future generations," the 2013 *Challenge* seemed to abandon efforts to secure new monies on par with the \$70 million *Natural Resource Challenge* (2001–8). Instead, it focused on strategic efforts possibly achievable with existing resources.<sup>75</sup> By 2016, however, the updated *Challenge Action Plan* noted that meeting all the *Challenge* goals would require a more than \$200 million annual increase to the NPS cultural resources budget and stated an intention to use the *Challenge*'s identified goals to "craft future budget increase requests." Toothman explained that the current strategy puts forward requests based on the *Challenge* in piecemeal fashion, and by this process, she noted, there is some good news to report in terms of new project money for historical work. She told us, as well, that NPS is "aggressively looking for grants to fund additional research and preservation."<sup>76</sup>

The most significant new funding came in the form of a recurring base increase, initially granted in fiscal 2016, of \$5 million for cultural resources research and \$500,000 for interpretation—all focused for now on African American history and civil rights. Though the impulses that brought this boost in funding predated *Imperiled Promise*, the development is welcome. Toothman told us that a full complement of studies has been funded for this year, with more planned for the coming years. Stevens described a particularly ambitious project lead by the Midwest Region using these funds: a national study of African American outdoor recreation history that seeks to place the relationship of black Americans and the NPS in the larger contexts of NPS segregation, African American travel, and black outdoor recreation at sites separate from the NPS. This exciting project, which envisions preservation outcomes such as new national historic landmarks, alongside a digital interpretive project engaging K-12 students, embodies a number of *Imperiled Promise*'s key tenets, including its recommendations that NPS expand interpretive frames beyond existing physical resources and emphasize the connections of parks with the larger histories beyond their boundaries.<sup>77</sup> All in all, the new funding

<sup>73</sup> Toothman, e-mail.

<sup>74</sup> We were pleased to see that many of the suggestions in the *Cultural Resource Challenge*—especially about building qualified staff, nurturing partnerships, fostering quality historical scholarship, and telling a more diverse and courageous array of stories—bear the imprint of *Imperiled Promise*.

<sup>75</sup> *National Park Service Cultural Resource Challenge* (2013).

<sup>76</sup> *National Park Service Cultural Resource Challenge* (2016); Toothman, phone conversation; Toothman, e-mail.

<sup>77</sup> Toothman, phone conversation; Joyner e-mail; Stevens, phone conversation; Whisnant et al., *Imperiled Promise*, 27.

promises a welcome wave of new historical research. With the “transfer of knowledge” components included, these projects have the potential to transform the NPS in a number of positive ways, and we look forward to watching these efforts bear fruit.

In other positive news, former chief historian Sutton reported in 2015 that a new MOU with the Maritime Administration (an agency of the Department of Transportation) had permitted hiring two historians to support the Maritime Heritage Grant Program, which gives grants to maritime organizations for education and preservation projects. Although the revitalization of this program was not spurred by *Imperiled Promise*, this development aligns with calls throughout the report for just this sort of renewed investment. Sutton also reported at that time that funding for administrative histories and historic resource studies (generally contracted through the regions) had also increased significantly.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

As we reflect on *Imperiled Promise*, we are heartened at the way many of its central observations are taking hold, especially at the regional and national levels, where there has been progress in the form of concerted collaboration and a number of coordinated initiatives that have strong historical and cultural components. The vision and commitment of so many colleagues across NPS who have long been working to make history in the agency as dynamic and robust as it can be continues to inspire us. That almost everyone we contacted in preparing this article made time on short notice to tell us about developments in which they take great pride, to share insights and concerns, and read and re-read drafts of this essay itself speaks volumes of the individual talent and dedication we’ve seen time and again over the course of this work.

But structural issues are hard to address and in many cases persist despite those good efforts. Anecdotally, we’ve heard about a wide range of implementations by NPS staff at the park level, but we remain uncertain about the level of adoption of *Imperiled Promise*’s perspectives at the all-important superintendent level. More specifically, questions remain about how deeply *Imperiled Promise*’s insights—especially concerning the need for highly qualified historians knowledgeable about the best current scholarship—have penetrated into the NPS research and interpretive development contracting process. Additionally, the role of design firms and their staff and subcontractors in producing history content is a topic that merits much more systematic discussion than we have been able to tackle to date.

It is also encouraging to see the powerful ways in which NPS has courageously embraced its potential to offer sites for civil, historically informed, open-ended civic discussion of the nation’s most pressing issues. Although that outward-looking project is, in some quarters, accompanied by welcome self-reflection about

<sup>78</sup> Sutton, e-mail.

some of the less productive aspects of agency culture and operations—including embedded racism and sexism—there is clearly still significant work to be done in these areas.

Some cause for concern also lingers in that many of the positive changes underway now remain too dependent upon the commitment of individual personalities and are not sufficiently institutionalized so as to outlive particular leaders. As we noted in *Imperiled Promise*, NPS regularly benefits from the passion and dedication of extraordinary employees who transcend what can be a stultifying bureaucracy to make important things happen. Those talented employees should be supported, not weighed down, by institutional structures. And, like many historians and members of the general public, we remain dismayed that the fundamental funding and staffing problems plaguing history work (and indeed the entire NPS) have barely been addressed.

Funding for history in the parks simply must be increased to levels congruent with the NPS mandate (and the country's need) to preserve, maintain, and interpret the nation's historical sites. The OAH, NCPH, AHA, and other professional associations, as well as their members, must advocate strongly and consistently for NPS. Both as individuals and as a scholarly community, historians must actively seek ways to support our colleagues in the agency.

What is at stake if we do not? What is at stake is the enormous capacity of the national parks to be a relevant, responsive, and widely accessible classroom for lifelong learning about how Americans of the past faced the challenges of their times and how we might take up the concerns of ours. At stake is the parks' potential as laboratories for fostering growth of the essential civic skills of thoughtful, informed consideration of issues, reasoned dialogue, and empathy for the views and experiences of all Americans. At stake is the state of history in the nation's public life. Amid the din of our currently polarized politics, Americans need the parks—and the robust historical resources that they contain—perhaps more than ever before. As public historians, we have a responsibility to ensure that this “imperiled promise” is protected, its safety and strength ensured. We have only just begun our work.

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To prepare this essay, we reached out to key individuals in a position to know about *Imperiled Promise*–related activities, including our two co-authors Gary Nash and David Thelen, who read the penultimate draft and improved it greatly; Aidan Smith (public history manager at the Organization of American Historians); Dwight Pitcaithley (retired chief historian, NPS); Bob Sutton (retired chief historian, NPS); Laura Feller (retired historian, NPS); Julia Washburn (associate director, Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers, NPS WASO); Stephanie Toothman (associate director, Cultural Resources, Partnerships, and Science, NPS WASO); Lu Ann Jones and John Sprinkle (Park History Program, NPS WASO); all of the NPS regional historians (responses received from Christine Arato, Northeast Region; Dean Herin, National Capital Region; Don Stevens, Midwest Region, and Pat O’Brien, Intermountain Region); Brian Joyner (legislative specialist, NPS WASO); Barbara Little (program manager, NPS Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education, NPS WASO); Paloma Bolasny (youth program coordinator, historian, Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education, NPS WASO); Keena Graham (chair, Employee Empowerment Collective Distance Learning Group & The Common Learning Portal, Communities of Learning Team, NPS Harpers Ferry Center); and Dominic Cardea (learning and development coordinator, Northeast Region, NPS). Finally, we benefited greatly from the perceptive comments of our colleagues David Whisnant, Christopher Clarke, and the two anonymous readers from *The Public Historian*.