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The National Park Service used the sesquicentennial to shed **new light on an old story**

by **Tim Rowland**

# It's **not your grandfather's** Civil War

## **AS THE NATION PREPARED TO**

commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Civil War in 1961, the remarkable Robert Smalls was not part of the conversation.

Born into slavery in Beaufort, S.C., Smalls worked the docks of Charleston Harbor, acquitting himself so well that he eventually was trusted to navigate steamships through the tricky waters in one of the South's more important ports.

Thirteen months after Confederate artillery had fired on Fort Sumter, Smalls was a wheelman for the CSS *Planter* on a mission to deliver a cargo of cannon to an island fortress. On the way, its white officers, in a decision they would come to regret, tied up their craft in Charleston Harbor and disembarked for a night on the town. Smalls and a small crew of black sailors bided their time, and at

3 o'clock on the morning of May 13, 1862, they fired the *Planter's* boilers and prepared to run the gantlet through Charleston's heavily armed harbor. Smalls dressed in an officer's uniform, pulled the brim of the captain's familiar straw hat low over his brow and coolly sailed into the history books.

At least he might have had he been white.

A hundred years later, in the midst of America's conflagration over civil rights, no one was raising a glass of bourbon to men like Smalls. Congress had created the United States Civil War Centennial Commission in 1957, but, unwilling to risk a Civil War redux, it left ceremonies and interpretations up to the states, which, after giving the matter some thought, were more than happy to take this artistic license and run with it.



■ **TATTOOED DUDE** Reenactor T.J. Miller, 18, displays a lasting reminder of the war. He was visiting the National Park Service visitor center at Chancellorsville, Va., after the sesquicentennial reenactment in May 2013.

So in the South, the centennial became a fireworks-laced celebration of states' rights and individual courage, and a political justification of laws that kept blacks at the back of the bus. The era of Civil War reenactments was born, and North and South enthusiastically, almost wistfully, reminisced over the war as if, instead of an American tragedy, it had been a particularly competitive round of golf. Rather than punctuating how much we changed as a nation, it was more symbolic of how much we hadn't. The low point occurred early on in Charleston, when a black woman seated on the New Jersey Centennial Commission was denied equal accommodations in a city hotel.

In his work *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial 1961-1965*, historian Robert Cook noted that states-rights cheerleading for school segregation in the newspapers during the centennial was eerily similar to the headlines related to slavery a century prior. "Successful and genuinely popular commemorations of secession in Alabama and Mississippi revealed the raw power of historical memory as a tool of political and cultural warfare," Cook wrote.

Today, the centennial is widely regarded as a disaster, one the National Park Service was determined not to repeat, even at the risk of alienating some of the Civil War's core constituency. "We went into this journey realizing it would be a sensitive thing," said Michael A. Allen, a community partnership specialist for the Park Service at Fort Sumter. "We wanted a broad-based, diverse holistic commemoration that wouldn't look like 1961."

As such, the sesquicentennial commemoration has had a far different look and feel than the centennial, and has featured a new cast of heroes and a new storyline that tells what the war has meant to the American psyche, from secession right up to recent events in Ferguson, Mo. This isn't to say the great battlefields and generals are being ignored; instead, they are being woven into the larger tapestry of the American drama, while at the same time African Americans, Native Americans, women, Hispanics, Pacific

Islanders and run-of-the-mill families caught in the crossfire whose stories were largely untold have taken their seat at the table.

Historian Edward Ayers, president of the University of Richmond, views the sesquicentennial as "Civil War history coming of age." It's history seen from a broader perspective—through the eyes not just of military historians, but sociologists and social scientists as well.

"We're getting beyond that great divide between military history and social history, and seeing it in different ways," Ayers said. "This is not to diminish the battles, but to show why they mattered."

Seen in this light, even the battles might challenge some of our traditional assumptions. First Manassas was a relatively small and, by Civil War standards, not terribly bloody. But its impact in Southern confidence and Northern angst was tremendous. Chickamauga by contrast produced a far more shocking casualty sheet, but when the gunfire had faded away, little was accomplished or had changed. Even Gettysburg, Ayers said, might deserve a second look. Though the battle has been long considered the

turning point of the Civil War, "a few weeks later (the armies) were right back where they started," Ayers said.

### IN MANY CASES, THE

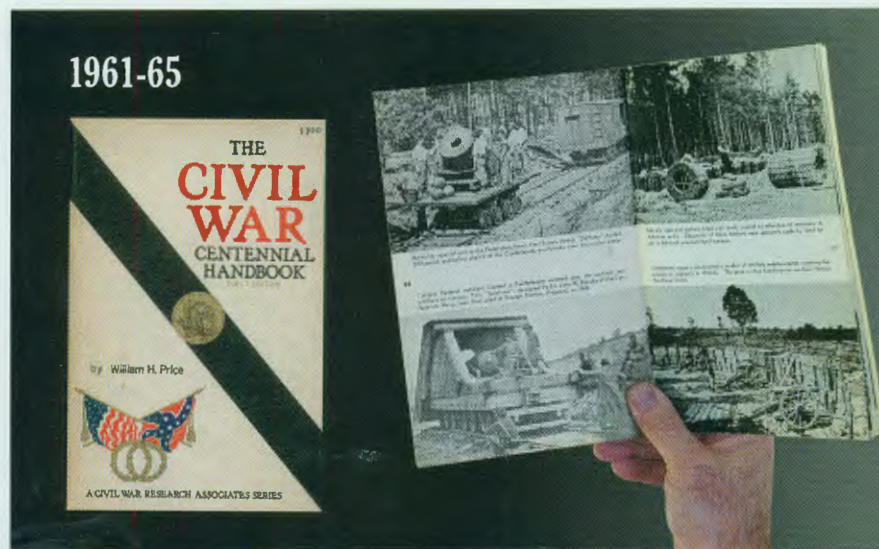
examination of minority participation in the war is unplowed ground. Battles and great generals have been the subject of exhaustive investigation, so they offer little in the way of fresh angles. But mainly, these new stories represent a conscious decision by the Park Service to put the Civil War into greater historical context, going beyond Appomattox to include Jim Crow, segregation and the Civil Rights movement.

It was in some ways a break from the Park Service's comfort zone, which traditionally relied upon an aloof and sterile recounting of the facts, while largely steering clear of modern politics and feathers that the scrutiny of time might ruffle. So for one thing, the standard Civil War timeline—nation breaks apart, terrible war ensues, nation gets back together and lives happily ever after—had to go.

Both North and South had been guilty of painting a prettier picture than the facts would warrant. For blacks, the dissolution of slavery was certainly

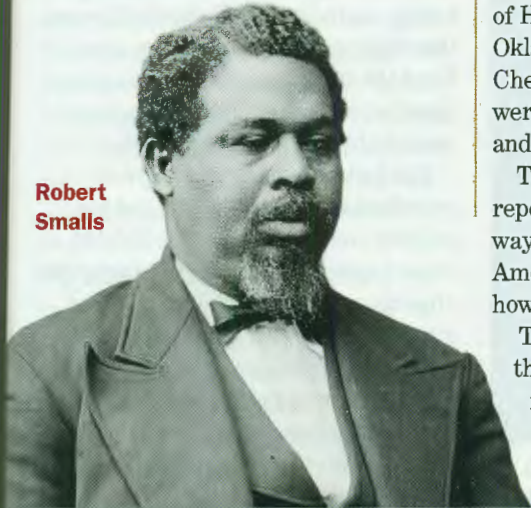
## And now, the rest of the story

During the centennial, commemorated against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, activities and publications concentrated on the military aspect of the war. During the sesquicentennial, the National Park Service made a concentrated effort to tell stories beyond the battlefield, and include minorities.



welcome, but it in no way solved their social and economic problems, many of which persist today. Long before his pith-helmeted glory days, the future Lord Stanley—then an immigrant who was swept into war against his wishes and wound up wearing both the gray and the blue—was astounded that white men would kill each other over the well-being of negroes. Many men on both sides would have heartily agreed, and when the war was over, so was any effective care for the black man's future. "Reconciliation was only reconciliation among the white people," said Carol Shively, communications coordinator for the Civil War Sesquicentennial Southeast Regional Office. "It was not only time for us to tell [minorities'] stories, it was well past time."

So in 2008, the Park Service produced a critical analysis of its own past performance and a road map for change. The



Robert Smalls

## ■ ■ ■ LARGE SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION FAIL TO SEE THE WAR'S RELEVANCE

report, "Holding the High Ground," pulled no punches: "We, as a nation, still use our battlefields to define the nation's Civil War experience in largely military terms—through the eyes of the participants of battle," it said. "We emphasize military outcomes, with little discussion of the relationship of those military events to social, economic, and political evolution of the nation. As a result, large segments of the population fail to see the war's relevance."

From elementary school on, for example, most Americans have it drilled into their heads that the Civil War pitted brother against brother. But how many have been told that at the Battle of Honey Springs in what would become Oklahoma, Creek fought against Creek, Cherokee against Cherokee, and whites were the minority in both the Northern and Southern armies?

The Park Service, the "High Ground" report continued, "has failed to find ways to engage large segments of Americans in ways that demonstrate how the war is relevant to them."

The sesquicentennial would change the way the Park Service did business, and to institute that change, the Park Service needed Robert Smalls—and many like him.

It wouldn't be the first time Smalls was enlisted as a rallying point. Following his daring escape, he met with President Lincoln, helped recruit nearly 5,000 former slaves to fight for the Union and continued to lend his navigational skills to the Yankee cause.

"To many observers, Robert Smalls was the first African American hero of the Civil War," wrote his great-granddaughter Helen Boulware Moore. *The New York Times* described Smalls that way in 1862, and Congress appropriated \$4,584—half the value of the ship—to give to Smalls and his crew. Smalls went on to serve 12 years in Congress, but the *Planter* went to the bottom of the sea during a storm in 1876.

In another time, streets and schools might have been named in his honor. Instead, it fell to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Voyage to Discovery initiative to honor Smalls in the most significant way it could. And on May 13, 2014, exactly 152 years after Smalls' adventure, NOAA announced that years of tedious and technical exploration had paid off and the remains of the *Planter* had likely been found under nine feet of sand off the shore of South Carolina.

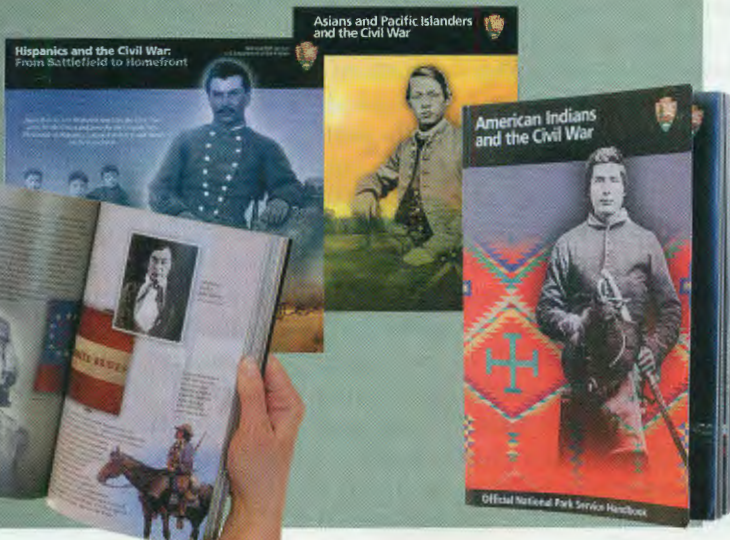
## BUT BRINGING NEW STORIES

to the surface was only half the battle. The Park Service also had to deftly decouple itself from past practices. Park Service representatives in South Carolina had to sit down with members of the community and explain why there would be no fireworks over Fort Sumter in April 2011, a conversation that went about as well as could be expected. Instead, a single beam of light over the fort was split into two.

Allen acknowledged there were difficulties with marking anniversaries in South Carolina, especially when a group of blacks and whites exchanged words at a solemn commemorative ceremony of secession mixed with a celebratory ball held by the Sons of Confederate Veterans. "Some people yelled at the mayor," he said. "We still had people thinking this was 1961."

In the end, a meeting was arranged among representatives of the NAACP and SCV. "We told them that our suc-

2011-15



cess depends on how well you two organizations cooperate.”

Nor did the Park Service hedge its bets about the causes of the war, which it solidly traced to slavery. Predictably, this hasn't been universally applauded, but to explain how the war has affected lives to this very day, it had to be done, according to Shively.

“I'm proud of us for putting a sword in the sand and saying we're going to talk about the causes,” Shively said. “I'm not sure the traditional audience has been terribly excited. We get [negative] comments on it in the parks every day, and they have a right to their opinion; we show respect to everyone's opinion. But it was the right thing to do.”

to Lee—a battlefield map drawn by Stonewall Jackson—was displayed for the public for the 150th anniversary of Chancellorsville. The map was apparently drawn in the days leading up to Jackson's celebrated flanking maneuver that doomed the Yankees. Little more than a week later Jackson would be dead, and the map became one of Lee's rare wartime keepsakes, preserving Jackson's scrawl as one of his few lasting connections to the man himself.

Indeed, the sesquicentennial has been notable for the people of all backgrounds who have a personal connection to the war, said Beth Parnicza, historian for the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania National Military Park. If the

## ANOTHER FACTOR HAS MADE

the sesquicentennial more friendly to people with a newfound interest in their connection to the war: Internet access. Moore said that when he was writing unit histories in the 1990s, he would often wear his tires to the nub, trundling off to the Library of Virginia in Richmond, or the National Archives in Washington. Today, much of the same information is easily accessed on the Web, and sharing that information with an interested public is only a blog- or Facebook-post away.

It was this technology—real-time communication with two other people hundreds of miles away—that helped Ajena Rogers discover an astounding part of her past that had escaped her until the sesquicentennial. Rogers, now a supervisory ranger at the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Richmond, Va., had worked for the Park Service since 1984, creating a niche acting out the roles of historical figures that she'd painstakingly researched. Until the sesquicentennial, she had no idea that her own family tree held a remarkable story of derring-do.

She had known her great-great-grandfather, James Shields, and his brother, George Washington Shields, as remarkable men who went to law school after the war and became propertied attorneys. Her grandmother faintly remembered George Washington Shields after he moved back home from New York, where he had been the first African American to graduate from Cornell University. She recounted how the “crazy old uncle,” elderly and blind by this time, tended to frighten the children who would scurry to the other side of the street on his approach.

Then, two years ago, Rogers got wind that her great-great-uncle had written a memoir of his early life, and that it might still exist. With the aid of genealogist Drusilla Pair and Cornell law professor Kevin Clermont, the manuscript was discovered in a Hampton, Va., museum archive. From the manuscript, she learned that for James, a slave, the last straw occurred when he was beaten for using a rotting fence rail to make a small fire on a frigid night.

He escaped, was recaptured and

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Before Civil War

September 17, 1787

Slave Trade and the U.S. Constitution

When the delegates to what would become the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, they had the task of creating a new framework of government which would be workable, reflected American republican ideals, and would be acceptable to the majority of constituencies. One major compromise was the counting of slaves as 3/5 of a person for purposes of allocating representation. Another compromise was the continuation of the slave trade for the next 20 years.

■ The Park Service created a special website for the Civil War's sesquicentennial, and unabashedly identified the war's major cause as slavery—which has led to some lively conversations.

So the Park Service sought out stories of those previously left out of the discussion and brought rare exhibits to the fore. At Monocacy National Battlefield, Robert E. Lee's infamous Special Orders No. 191 was on display for three months, allowing visitors to view the document within sight of the fields where it was found by Union soldiers. The intelligence it revealed forced the South to abort an invasion into Pennsylvania and led to a show-down four days later at Antietam. To add a human touch, the Park Service brought in descendants of the soldiers who had found the orders on a roadside, wrapped around a couple of cigars.

Another document with close ties

centennial was about armies, the sesquicentennial is about individuals.

Parnicza was on the Wilderness battlefield when a man with a photo of an ancestor approached her and asked about the soldier's position on the field.

He was historian and blogger Robert Moore, who, right down to the hour on the battle's 150th anniversary, pinned the photo of Capt. Michael Shuler, his third great-grand-uncle, to a poplar tree in the area where the soldier fell in the dense undergrowth. Shuler's story demonstrates the complexity of the war in personal, civilian terms; Moore wrote that although Shuler fought for the Confederacy, his father opposed secession and his uncle was a unionist.

escaped again, eventually reaching Union-held Fort Monroe, where he was protected as contraband of war. His family, having no idea of his fate, made its own daring escape a year later. But nine more months would pass before they were reunited with James.

For Rogers, reading the manuscript was a suspenseful, soul-wrenching experience. "It was written like a great novel," she said. "I'm sitting there yelling, 'No, don't [take the fence rail]. You know better, your mamma taught you better than that!' Then I'd have to remember that of course he got away, or I wouldn't be here."

"The battlefields and weapons are cool as well, but there's more to it," Rogers said. "Sometimes you don't realize that there are stories within you, and within your own family."

That was something the Park Service came to appreciate first-hand: "I think the greatest lessons most of us learned were personal," said Fredericksburg's Parnicza. "Getting a better sense of the people we talk about on a daily basis, watching visitors learn, explore and discover an interest in their past, and finding parts of the battlefield we'd never explored or researched before."

**TO ECHO THAT SENTIMENT,** the Park Service and a number of historians began digging into areas and peoples that in the past had attracted scant attention. The role of Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans became the subject of three books the Park Service produced to tell their stories.

A curious example of ongoing sesquicentennial scholarship is the effort to identify Asians and Pacific Islanders who fought in the war. Making the job more difficult was the tendency to assign them new names that tripped more easily off Anglo tongues.

By 1836 the Atlantic slave trade had officially come to a close, but the demand for cheap labor had not. Thwarted to the east, Caribbean planters looked to the Pacific, devising a clumsy charade in which virtual slaves from South China and India were labeled colonists, or indentured servants—which offered Asians faint hope because, writes historian Ruthann Lum

## ■ ■ THE CIVIL WAR DOESN'T SEEM WORN OUT, THERE STILL IS INSATIABLE INTEREST

McCunn, conditions were so poor they frequently expired before their contract of servitude did. In Britain, liberal politician Lord John Russell bluntly called it "a new system of slavery."

Predictably, these maltreated Asians would frequently mutiny or escape, and by the eve of the war had begun to show up on America's Eastern Seaboard. Although their numbers were small, Asians volunteered for service in high percentages. Many were mariners who, McCunn writes, might not have seen much difference in risk between civil and military sailing. It's also possible they didn't entirely understand what documents they were signing.

Asians show up even in Southern armies that permitted only whites to serve because in 1860, census takers had only three racial options on their forms—white, black and mulatto—and the occasional Asian they chanced upon left them a bit stumped. So often as not, Asians were checked off as white.

Joseph Pierce (his new moniker was a combination of the standard "Joe" from "Joe Chinaman" and a last name he was given because, why not, Franklin Pierce was president at the time) was luckier than most. He was raised and schooled in Connecticut by the parents of Capt. Amos Peck, an incredibly enlightened naval officer for the day, who purchased the boy from a destitute Chinese family with few good options. Pierce joined the 14th Connecticut Infantry in the summer of 1862, just in time to be thrown into the fray at Antietam. The following summer, Pierce and his comrades were repulsing Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg at a terrible cost.

Pierce went on to a successful career as a silver engraver; but was only vaguely known to his descendants until they were contacted by historian Irving Moy. Moy, also of Chinese ancestry, had been inspired in 1994 by a photo of Pierce in a magazine crediting him with being the only Chinese soldier in the Army of

the Potomac. Moy went on to research and write extensively on Pierce's life, revealing information that amazed Pierce's descendants. "It is so gratifying to learn and feel proud of what he did for this country," said great-granddaughter Mimi Vargas. "I'm very happy that he and other Chinese immigrants who fought in the Civil War have been given [attention] that they earned. Since Irving Moy, I pay more attention to things about the Civil War [and] I visited Gettysburg and saw the picture of Joseph Pierce in the museum."

Still, Moy said, more work is needed to bring these figures out of the shadows. "The participation of Asians and Pacific Islanders in this war is still unknown to the most ardent of Civil War students," Moy said. "It gives me great pride being Chinese to share the story of Joseph Pierce. I hope his story, and those of other Asians and Pacific Islanders, will inspire those who hear it and help them appreciate that the history of this nation is made up and continues to be made up of countless stories of known and unknown immigrants who come to this country and contribute to our national tapestry."

**UNDERSTANDING THESE** stories and the context in which they are told has, over the past four years, changed the way in which we view the war. Be it in individual performances, minority contributions or grand visions, the sesquicentennial has been notable not so much for the new information it has produced but for the new ways in which what we know is evaluated and consumed. Park Service members, Ayers said, "are the heroes" for deciding to do things differently this time, and then following through. And there will still be room for study and evaluation when the bicentennial rolls around.

"The Civil War doesn't seem worn out, there still seems to be an insatiable interest," he said. "The trick is finding something new that is worth saying. It's our responsibility as historians to show how this drama will keep unfolding." □

*Tim Rowland is the author of New York Times bestseller Strange and Obscure Stories of the Civil War.*