

Manassas Battlefield Park

# Civil War Tour Guides To Address Slavery

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## Battlefields Seek More Black Visitors

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For generations, visitors to national Civil War battlefields have gotten a steady diet of military tactics and casualty figures. Soon the subject of slavery will be addressed in lectures and exhibits in a bid to attract more African Americans to the battlefields.

The change comes in part at the orders of Congress, the result of language inserted in an appropriations bill by Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.) mandating that slavery be addressed at all federally financed battlefields, including Gettysburg, Manassas and Antietam.

The decades-long tradition of focusing on the tactical details—who shot whom, with what rifle and at what spot—was already under attack by National Park Service battlefield managers who declared their intent two years ago to begin telling more about individual lives on and off the field.

"We want to talk a bit more about the why they were shooting," said Gettysburg National Military Park Superintendent John Latcher. "This is not a situation of one approach or another but an expansion of the programs we already offer."

## Tours to Add 'Why' to 'How' War Was Fought

BATTLEFIELDS, From C1

The hope is that African Americans and other minorities, who rarely visit the battlefields now, will be encouraged to do so if their story is part of the presentation. And while an expanded interpretation seems to have received wide support from academics, there is resistance to it as well.

"It's the age of political correctness and we have to include African Americans in every story," said Joe Avalon, publisher of the [www.CivilWarInteractive.com](http://www.CivilWarInteractive.com) Web site.

"The battlefield is supposed to tell the story of the battle and not the history of the history of the war in which the battle was fought. The story of slavery is important ... but is more appropriate at a place like the Smithsonian Institution."

Any changes at the 28 national Civil War sites can become controversial because of tradition and because they are enormously popular, drawing more than 11 million visits in 1998, the last year for

which figures are available. Park superintendents acknowledge that they have been successful with the almost exclusive emphasis on military aspects but now see a need to attract an audience with different interests.

The new direction had its origins at the Nashville meeting of National Park Service battlefield managers in August 1998. The final report said that displays and lectures must explain how an individual site fit in the larger war, "illuminate the social, economic and cultural issues that caused or were affected by the war, illustrate the breadth of human experience during the period, and establish the relevance of the war to people today."

Jackson, however, wanted immediate change. To the appropriations bill for this fiscal year he added a directive for battlefield superintendents to "include in all their public displays and multimedia educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War, and its role, if any, at the

individual battle sites."

Jackson has taken a personal interest in Civil War battlefields since he arrived in Washington in 1995, touring most of them, he said, to better understand the politics of Congress, where some would say North and South count for more than being a Republican or a Democrat.

Jackson said he gained the most insight into how provincial some of the presentations were when he visited the Vicksburg, Miss., battlefield.

"I came to appreciate that although the sites themselves are maintained by the federal government, they are very local politically," he said. "There are local battlefield groups and local daughters of this and sons of that. Because local sentiments run so deep ... these sites don't address the interests of all the American people."

Jackson argues that if Americans visit only one site, they should leave with a better understanding of the Civil War and not just what happened at one bat-

tle.

Jackson is the first scheduled speaker at a two-day forum next week at Ford's Theatre, where historians will address Park Service employees on slavery, the national memory of the war and the war's impact on the home front. Others speakers include Civil War-era experts, including James McPherson, Eric Foner and Ira Berlin.

Berlin, a University of Maryland professor and authority on slavery, applauds the new concept.

"Did slavery cause the Civil War? The perennial question can't be escaped," he said. "It has to be addressed ... Everything we know indicates that what happens when people see themselves in history, they become more engaged. ... What history is about is to be as inclusive as possible."

Manassas National Battlefield Park Superintendent Bob Sutton already has changed the tone of exhibits and lectures at Manassas. In July, he opened a renovated visitor center and a new exhibit that included material on slavery and on the effect of the battles on local

residents.

Sutton said he was worried about the response—"I thought I would get clobbered!"—but that he got no complaints.

"To downplay the role of slavery in the Civil War is to be not truthful," he said. "People expect to hear the facts, and what we are trying to do is to tell the true story."