FORT FISHER STATE HISTORIC SITE: A CROSSROADS OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the fusion of state bureaucracy and local heritage agendas that occurs at Fort Fisher State Historic Site. The history of interpretation at Fort Fisher is important because studying the confluence of institutional practices and regional memory that occurs at mid-level public history venues exposes some of the fault lines on which current national ideals about race, identity and power are built. Sources consulted include Civil War and historical memory scholarship, Fort Fisher archival documents and African American pension records. These sources reveal that a gap in the scholarship exists between analyses based on the extreme situations present in large museums and small commemorative monuments, and that the evaluation of African American interpretation at Fort Fisher reveals this void. The significance of these findings is that mid-level public history institutions such as Fort Fisher are ideal places to analyze the confluence of race and power in the United States, as they incorporate both the institutional authority of national history shrines and the regional biases present in the collective consciousness of their local constituencies.
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my daughter, Audrey, who reminds me to enjoy life at all times, and to my mother, Teri, who inspires me to do my best at whatever task life sets before me.
INTRODUCTION – FORT FISHER STATE HISTORIC SITE: A CROSSROADS OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL MEMORY

The revered nineteenth-century American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, did not think much of memory. As the leader of the transcendentalist movement, Emerson immersed himself in empirical practices by favoring action over remembrance and originality over tradition. In one of his famous speeches on the condition of the “American Scholar,” the famous orator proclaimed, “Only so much do I know, as I have lived.”\(^1\) With his firm foundation in experiential learning, it is no wonder that Emerson considered remembering a passive activity. He often cautioned Americans against retrospection, against remembering:

> The forgoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?\(^2\)

It is ironic, therefore, that Emerson’s life spanned a period in the country’s history that has ingrained itself on America’s consciousness and preoccupied the nation’s memory ever since – the American Civil War. It would be fair to assume that Emerson’s harsh reproaches of history are tantamount to a criticism of modern “American Scholars” for their part in remembering the war. However, had he been able to witness it firsthand, Emerson would not – indeed, could not – equate the idle and dreamlike qualities of memory that he described as so many “fair pictures in the air”\(^3\) with the active and often contested remembrance of the past one hundred and fifty years.

Perhaps the greatest historical debate that has taken place during this period is the importance of Civil War memory to the problems associated with race and power in contemporary society. This notion has evolved exponentially over the years, taking into account

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\(^3\) Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 60.
different perspectives and sources that correspond to the various schools of thought concerning historical research and analysis in the academy. Yet, a full understanding of racial disparities in the United States cannot be attained without a thorough investigation of how the individual stories associated with minority groups are assimilated into mainstream historical interpretations at the local level. Larger museums, which represent the national consensus on historical perspective, and commemorative monuments that epitomize the grass-roots movement of American commemoration in the twentieth century, are not representative of mid-level public history sites. It is precisely large museums and local commemorative monuments, however, that have been given the most attention by scholars analyzing the confluence of race and historical memory in the post-Civil War era.

Because the peculiarities of interpreting the social aspects of the Civil War in public history venues directly impacts contemporary perceptions of race and power in the United States, the focus of the following study is the evolution of historical interpretation and educational programming in one such space, Fort Fisher State Historic Site. A Civil War fortification in New Hanover County, North Carolina, Fort Fisher is an excellent example of a relic that owes as much to America’s twentieth-century commemorative efforts for its continued existence as it does to the war itself. This dual history at Fort Fisher, which encompasses both the Civil War and national memories of that event, speaks to the lasting and tangible impact that Civil War commemoration has had on the public landscape, as well as on the country’s collective memory of that episode in American history.

Fort Fisher, named for Colonel Charles F. Fisher, commander of the 6th Regiment N.C. Troops and the first Tar Heel killed in battle of Bull Run in 1861, was the largest earthen fortification built under the direction the Confederacy during the Civil War. The fort’s
construction spanned the entire war, and was performed by Southern soldiers, as well as a large number of impressed free and slave laborers from throughout the state. The purpose of Fort Fisher was to protect the maritime supply lines that ran through the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. This particular supply route became known as the “lifeline of the Confederacy” because it was the only route that remained open to General Robert E. Lee’s army of Northern Virginia in the last month of the war. Two battles occurred at Fort Fisher. The first took place on 24–25 December 1864, and the second on 13–15 January 1865. Union forces captured the fort in the second battle. Only ten percent of the original earthworks are preserved. Today, this reduced piece of Fort Fisher, along with the Visitor Center, comprises the state historic site. Fort Fisher is North Carolina’s most visited state historic site, accounting for roughly one third of the state’s total historic site visitation.4

As previously stated, current scholarship concerned with Civil War memory focuses primarily on the national and grass-root extremes of public commemoration in the twentieth century. The analysis of secondary sources presented in Chapter I of this study corroborates this claim. The Civil War centennial, along with the heated racial issues occurring within the observance and elsewhere in the nation in the 1960s, prompted a scholarly backlash against the idealized, pro-white interpretation of the conflict so long adhered to by mainstream academia. This period marked a shift in Civil War scholarship, as professional historians advanced discussions about race and historical legitimacy and how this historical memory affected minority groups in the United States. However, while the historical debate over Civil War remembrance has expanded since 1960, current scholars still tend to overlook state-run institutions as legitimate avenues of historical analysis.

The reason for this omission is twofold: Historians examining how public perceptions are affected in museum settings gravitate towards larger institutions because these spaces represent a consensus in both visitor and administrative perspectives of the past, without any of the cultural biases perceived to be endemic of a regional institution’s pedagogy. On the other hand, scholars who concern themselves with the grass-root aspects of monument and organizational histories tend to omit analyses based on state-run institutions because these sites are too similar in their bureaucratic tendencies to federally-owned and operated organizations. However, it is precisely because of this fusion of national bureaucratic practices with local interest-group agendas that occur at state historic sites that these repositories of the past deserve further assessment.

Chapter II discusses the evolution of site interpretation at Fort Fisher during the preservation, commemorative and interpretive phases of the site’s history and how this narrative corresponds to larger debates about Civil War memory within the scholarly community. In the post-war years, veterans of the Fort Fisher battles held several reunions there. They even attempted to turn the site into a national park. Meanwhile, beach erosion took a visible toll on the fort. The United Daughters of the Confederacy completed a memorial to the Confederate defenders, known as “Battle Acre,” in the 1930s. The thirty years leading up to the Civil War centennial saw the formation of a local interest group called the Fort Fisher Preservation Society, now the Fort Fisher Restoration Committee. The local actors in these epochs of the fort’s history played many different roles, but they had in common the simple idea that Fort Fisher’s primary contribution to the national historical narrative was that a memorable battle was fought here. This romantic vision took on new meanings and perspectives over the years, transforming into the present-day site interpretation that, in many ways, adheres to the battle-specific, top-down historical perspective bemoaned by modern scholars of public history.
The dominance of martial themes in the site’s present-day interpretation provides the bedrock for Chapter III of this study, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of site interpretation and educational programming concerned with the African American experience at Fort Fisher during the Civil War. Simultaneously narrowing the focus from general interpretive themes at Fort Fisher to its African American components while harkening back to the broad topics of race, power and historical memory, this chapter explores the successes and shortcomings of Fort Fisher’s African American interpretation by focusing on two minority groups associated with the site; impressed laborers and United States Colored Troops (USCT). The success of USCT interpretation at Fort Fisher relative to the ineffective narrative of impressed laborers presented at the site may be directly attributed to the supremacy of military history offered in the museum’s permanent exhibit space, as well as to the lack of a sophisticated discussion of the slave experience in the museum area. The triumph of one African American narrative over another imparts the necessity of a unified message in every element of site interpretation, including permanent installations and secondary educational programming, such as tours and special events. Moreover, the evolution of African American interpretation at Fort Fisher reveals the positive and negative aspects of presenting an inclusive historical narrative at mid-level public history venues.

This study will directly benefit state historic sites, which face similar administrative challenges as Fort Fisher, or any site that complies with state institutional standards while maintaining a relationship with their regional constituencies. While the discrepancies in Fort Fisher’s African American interpretation would suggest there are some drawbacks to such institutional practices, Fort Fisher is a case where national and local memories have been successfully fused into a dynamic and malleable Civil War narrative.
Additionally, curators and educators intent on altering public perceptions of Civil War commemoration during the sesquicentennial could accomplish this goal more effectively by studying the history of interpretation at sites like Fort Fisher. It is widely accepted among historians that the Civil War centennial was an administrative and interpretive failure, and that it did little to alter the ways in which ordinary Americans thought about the Civil War.\(^5\) This theory has led many scholars to dismiss the centennial commemoration’s impact on Civil War memory over the past fifty years. However, since it became an historic site during the 1960s, Fort Fisher’s interpretation, administrative practices, and regional support groups were greatly influenced by the tumultuous climate of the centennial observances. Therefore, the centennial commemoration did impact America’s collective memory of the Civil War through its influence over historic interpretation at popular mid-level historic sites such as Fort Fisher. It is in these spaces that educators engaged in changing national perceptions of the Civil War in the twenty first century should focus their attention.

CHAPTER I – “AN OCCASION FOR RETROSPECTIVE RECONSIDERATION”: REFLECTIONS ON CIVIL WAR SCHOLARSHIP, HISTORICAL MEMORY AND PUBLIC COMMEMORATION, 1960-PRESENT

The ways in which groups of people collectively remember the past are mirrored in how scholars choose to interpret historical events. Because of this, there is no subject of historical inquiry that will ever become fully exhausted. Group memory shifts with the times, as many professional historians have noted through the years. The American Civil War is a case in point. There have been several notable transformations in popular perceptions of the war over time. These changes correspond to larger historical debates about memory, war and American identity. Professional historians are about to embark on another watershed moment in Civil War remembrance, namely the national commemoration of the war’s one hundred and fiftieth anniversary.

Planning for the commemoration is already underway, prompting collaboration between scholars, museum professionals, and local history enthusiasts. Some of the prominent spaces in which these collaborative efforts will manifest themselves are state-level public history venues, such as Fort Fisher, North Carolina’s most visited state historic site. Ironically, these very spaces are the ones that have been overlooked by modern scholars as legitimate repositories of historical memory. Accordingly, the impending American Civil War sesquicentennial necessitates a re-examination of how the Civil War has been remembered (and consequently how it has been documented by scholars) over the past fifty years. Before any discussions of Civil War memory

can take place, however, they must first be situated within current dialogues about the relationships between collective memory and individual identity.

There have been several inquiries into the intangible aspects of individual and collective memory by professionals across various fields, including history, sociology, and psychology. For French sociologist Pierre Nora, history and geography help define the spatial boundaries of national memory. Nora contends that the historical landscape as defined by tangible geographic markers aid in one’s mental construction of memory, time and space. Nora’s analysis of “les lieux de memoire” demonstrates the interplay between individual identity and communal histories, allowing for a deeper analysis of how people incorporate the past into their everyday lives. Ultimately, Nora argues that the different ways in which individuals interact with society are tantamount to their relationships with the places and events that surround them.²

Psychologist John Kotre explores similar themes of individuality through a phenomenon he describes as the “autobiographical memory system.” According to Kotre, “autobiographical memory is memory for the people, places, objects, events and feelings that go into the story of your life.”⁴ These external and internal forces contribute the raw material to a person’s construction of self. Once internalized, these items are filtered through two distinct and often contradictory aspects of memory that Kotre categorizes as the “mythmaker” and the “archivist.” The mythmaker in our subconscious is interested in creating a story of the self, based in reality but not wholly made up of the historical fact of our lives. The archivist, on the other hand, preserves, categorizes and allocates the significance of memories. Unlike Nora, Kotre does not believe in the factualness of events and places in relation to individual perceptions of these

occurrences, arguing instead that “historical truth” cannot be recovered through memory. Rather, a “narrative truth” can be gleaned, one with a “coherence that takes on ‘aesthetic finality’ and fits the present character of” an individual.4

A parallel may be drawn between Kotre’s unconscious components of memory, the mythmaker and archivist, and Barry Schwartz’s public acts of historic remembrance, chronicling and commemoration. Schwartz asserts that “chronicling allows for the marking and preservation of the historically real,” a collective action that mirrors Kotre’s private undertaking of archiving individual experiences.5 Kotre’s mythmaking, on the other hand, is similar to Schwartz’s interpretation of public commemoration in which commemoration:

Celebrates and safeguards the ideal. Commemoration lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values. Commemoration… is in this sense a register of sacred history.6

Unlike Kotre’s relativist philosophies, however, Schwartz leans towards a middle-ground perspective on the factual reality of the past within a presentist mindset. He observes, “we seem to be faced with a choice of adopting either an absolute theory which locates the significance of events in the nature of the events themselves, or a relativistic theory, which locates the significance of events in the standpoint of the observer.”7 Schwartz situates his argument in between these two extremes, rationalizing that the fact of the past is for the most part constant, but its significance varies relative to changing social climates. Schwartz uses the memorial art housed in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. as his case study in social commemoration. He postulates that America’s antebellum generation was fixated on remembering and

4 Kotre, White Gloves, 56.
commemorating the nation’s origins. However, after the outcome of the Civil War secured the
country politically, “regional diversity could be safely cultivated.”
Schwartz further notes that
commemoration in the Capitol Building became less personal after the Civil War; a trend that
may be observed in the shift from the memorialization of men for individual accomplishments to
the commemoration of men in accordance with their political posts, no matter their personal
achievements. 

Schwartz’s argument that the Civil War changed the way that Americans collectively
remember their past (as well as how scholars analyze this phenomenon) may be extended to the
one hundred year anniversary of the conflict. In his political examination of the Civil War
centennial, historian Robert Cook stated that the observances were relevant “only in the realm of
political rhetoric… and the work of growing numbers of professional historians.”
While Cook’s assessment that the centennial did not “have a major influence on the historical consciousness of
ordinary blacks and whites” is questionable, his observation that historians became active
participants in “the ongoing contest for the meaning of the Civil War” during and after the
centennial deserves further consideration.
Several schools of thought concerning Civil War
history evolved and declined before Americans celebrated the one hundred year anniversary of
the conflict. However, it was not until the 1960s that historians approached the challenge of
interpreting the Civil War from multiple points of view. This movement was especially prevalent
among those who objected to the celebratory manner in which Southern groups chose to observe

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9 Another excellent analysis of memory and interpretation is John R. Gillis, ed., Commemorations: The Politics of
10 Robert J. Cook, Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961 – 1965 (Baton Rouge:
Louisiana University Press, 2007), 264.
The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War, ed. Susan-Mary Grant and Peter J. Parish (Baton Rouge:
Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 48 – 64, 63.
12 Cook, Trouble Commemoration, 14; Cook, Troubled Commemoration, 264.
the Civil War centennial, arguing instead for a commemoration that acknowledged the hardships and legacies of American slavery. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement paved the way for entirely new interpretations of the causes of the war, as well as for a fresh look at the history of slavery in the Western Hemisphere from social and intellectual viewpoints. Most recently, historians have set themselves about the task of reconciling broad interpretations of the causes and consequences of the Civil War with the personal approaches to historical interpretation brought about in the late twentieth century.

Shortly after the war, Southerners commenced an aggressive campaign to actively remember a sentimental, pro-white version of the conflict. Organizations intent on spreading the myth of a romantic Southern past (such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Confederate veteran’s groups) found an ally in the burgeoning scholarly trend towards absolute historical truth. These early twentieth-century historians utilized the scientific tenets of absolutism and objectivity in their attempts to heal American’s fractured national identity by creating a homogenous narrative, rooted in revolutionary and colonial themes. Moreover, groups that rationalized their racist agendas under the guise of historical legitimacy were not exclusive to pro-white Southerners. Adherents to empirical practices found that the displacement of Native Americans and a general disdain for immigrants in the North were also subjects that could be scrutinized in an historical and scientific manner. Ultimately the professionalization of historical inquiry, along with efforts to reunite the country after the Civil War, solidified an elitist, Anglo-American interpretation of the past as the nation’s dominant historical narrative well into the twentieth century. It was not until the social, political and historical upheavals of the 1960s that

14 The re-interpretation of the American Revolution gave the Imperialist school of history its name. Some of the movement’s leading historians were Charles McLean Andrews, Herbert Levi Osgood and George Louis Beer.
popularly held beliefs about the national narrative (and the Civil War specifically) gained closer scrutiny.

Organizers began planning for the Civil War centennial in the 1950s. At that time, the desegregation policies of the federal government were causing defensive reactions in the South, provoking pro-segregation and traditionalist groups to become actively involved in the planning period of the centennial. For many Southerners, the centennial was a platform from which the long contested issue of states’ rights could be rehashed and disseminated to the public in the manner most favorable to the Southern cause. The message presented by the South’s Confederate Centennial Commissions, therefore, “was one of resistance to federal authority on the basis of a redundant Confederate past.” In the case of Fort Fisher, local groups bolstered romantic Southern ideals in the site’s secondary programming, while promoting a sense of regional pride in the permanent exhibit space. These sentiments were later replaced with a strong military interpretation when the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources (NCDCR) renovated the exhibit hall in 2001.

Traditionalist interpretations of the Civil War were not exclusive to Southern constituencies. Scholarly publications focused specifically on the war years, as well as public exhibits devoted to the same subject, bolstered misconceptions of the Civil War as a static timeframe, and allowed pro-segregation sentiments to multiply unchecked throughout Southern commemorations of the conflict. One representative work from the traditionalist sect of Civil War historians was Bruce Catton’s multivolume account, The Centennial History of the Civil War, first published in 1961. The popular trilogy, subtitled “The Coming Fury,” “Terrible Swift

work of these historians classified the dominant sentiments of American history in the 1890s. For a synopsis of the Imperialists school, see; Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76 – 85.

15 Cook, Troubled Commemoration, 85-86.
“Sword” and “Never Call Retreat,” provided readers with a comprehensive military history that also included social, economic, and political topics. However, Catton’s interpretation of these themes was limited by his romantic convictions that the Civil War was a symbol for:

- a certainty, for an assured viewpoint, for a standard of values that did not fluctuate, that put such things as bravery, patriotism, confidence in the progress of the human race, and the belief in a broadening freedom for all men, at the very basis of what men moved by.16

Less than a decade later Catton would comment that the outpouring of publications concerning the social and cultural aspects of multiracial and gender studies (fields which expanded at that time as the direct result of the Civil Rights Movement) were jeopardizing the Civil War’s legacy of faith in the righteousness of national unity. Catton complained, “We have become, perhaps, too wise for our own good – or if not too wise, too sophisticated. We find it harder to believe in the things the Civil War veterans stood for, in the things the war itself won for the entire country.”17 Of course, the unity and peace of mind Catton spoke of is argued by contemporary scholars to have been won at the expense of racial equality in America; an issue that many historians inspired by the Civil Rights Movement expounded upon during the 1970s and 1980s.18

On another front, in 1961 the Library of Congress (LOC) produced from its archives a traveling exhibit and accompanying publication titled, The American Civil War; A Centennial Exhibition. The exhibit, with its own title of “The Civil War; a Centennial Exhibition of Eyewitness Drawings,” was first displayed at the National Gallery of Art and was circulated thereafter by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibit images comprised only a small portion of the LOC’s Centennial Exhibition publication, which

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17 Leekley, Reflections on the Civil War, xvi.
accounted for various other Civil War media such as posters, photographs, sheet music, and periodicals for which the LOC provided interpretive labels. The LOC prefaced its interpretation of Civil War imagery by stating that the *Centennial Exhibition* was “presented as part of the national commemoration” of the Civil War, and that such an observance deserved every bit of “the attention which has been devoted to the Civil War, its causes and consequences.” The institution went on to admit that while “military themes predominate” the publication, “no attempts have been made…to treat any of the complex issues in extended detail.”\(^\text{19}\) It is no wonder, then, that only a cursory concession was made to slavery as the cause of the “years of sectional strife and mounting tensions” in the country prior to 1865. And that all efforts by period politicians at “moderation and compromise failed” because the nation was “led by men of sincere but extreme points of view” into a situation where “emotionalism replaced reason; and the growing nation was plunged into its greatest internal crisis.”\(^\text{20}\)

Oscar Handlin may well have been speaking about both Catton’s *The Centennial History of the Civil War* and the LOC’s *The American Civil War* when he lamented in 1961 that:

> An anniversary is an occasion for retrospective reconsideration. It affords an opportunity for analysis of what happened and why and for an estimate of the consequences that extend down to the present. But it is precisely in this respect that both the scholarly and popular treatments of the Civil War touched off by the centennial fail us most seriously.\(^\text{21}\)

In stark contrast to Catton’s musings on the Civil War as a symbol of American unity, Handlin argued that the Civil War was perceived by the majority of Americans in the 1860s as an abrupt and jarring experience, which forced them to “weigh not only the potential gains and losses to social and economic orders in which slavery still existed” in a relatively short amounts of time,

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“but also political loyalties.” Handlin felt that it was “a misreading” of the Civil War to argue that the outcome of the conflict united the country:

the war which settled such important questions as the scope of state’s rights could not settle the important problems that divided the nation in 1860, neither of the future of Negroes nor of the kind of society that the United States would become.\(^{22}\)

As the centennial progressed, several prominent members of the historical community echoed Handlin’s contentions. Robert Penn Warren’s work, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, stirred much debate among historians during the centennial. Without speaking of the centennial itself, Warren did a thorough job of bringing the Civil War into contemporary American controversies. While analyzing the concept of union, Warren differentiated between the fact and ideal of American unity, arguing that unionism as an ideal was merely “the noble vision of the Founding Fathers,” and that, after America won its independence this vision “became merely a daydream of easy and automatic victories, a vulgar delusion of manifest destiny, and a conviction of being a people divinely chosen to live on milk and honey.”\(^{23}\) The fact of union, on the other hand, was a phenomenon “so technologically, economically, and politically validated that we usually forget to ask how fully this fact represents a true community, the spiritually significant communion which the old romantic unionism had envisaged.”\(^{24}\) For Warren, union was a fact of life in 1960s America. Yet it was not always reflected in the nation’s individual and regional identities: “We have not yet created a union which is, in the deepest sense, a community.”\(^{25}\) In the same vein as most recent scholarship on the subject, Warren broadly postulated that the Civil War was a

\(^{22}\) Handlin, “The Civil War as Symbol,” 143.


complex subject, that its present utilization was open to interpretation, and that slavery could not be divorced from any modern discussions of the Civil War.

In response to Warren’s book, as well as to the tenuous climate of the centennial, C. Vann Woodward published an article titled “Reflections on a Centennial: The American Civil War,” in which he argued that America’s centennial celebration of the Civil War represented the culmination of the nation’s misguided attempt to mask the harsh realities of its turbulent past. Borrowing from Warren’s historical prose, Woodward elaborated on the Southerners “Great Alibi” and the Northerners “Treasury of Virtue.” During the peak interest by lay audiences in the centennial, Woodward stated that the South’s “Great Alibi still short-circuits honest thinking and corrodes the will to face reality.” In the North, on the other hand, “the deed of the abolitionists saints and the crusaders in blue had stored up in Heaven such a surplus of righteousness as to take care of the moral lapses and the sin of their descendants,” allowing Northerners to wash their hands of Reconstruction, thereby abandoning newly freed men to the whims of their bitter former masters.

Perhaps more to the point, John Hope Franklin’s critique of the centennial, “A Century of Civil War Observance,” argued that the efforts of Reconstruction politicians to promote sectional peace relegated “Negro citizens” to the status of “second-class citizens.” Franklin’s critique was published in 1962, less than a year after the highly publicized racial conflicts within the centennial administration at Charleston, South Carolina. In response to such disputes, as well as

26 Cook, Troubled Commemoration, 86 – 87.
29 The federal Civil War Centennial Commission accepted an invitation to Charleston, SC for the Fort Sumter reenactment in April of 1961. However, city officials refused to house one of the black delegates, Madaline Williams of the New Jersey Commission, in the same hotel as the white delegates. This slight proved to be a defining moment of the centennial, as well as the first civil rights crisis brought before the Kennedy administration.
to the rest of the centennial observances to that point, Franklin confronted readers with this pointed observation:

We remember the Civil War because it was a great national tragedy, and we observe it because it was a unique experience...But there is still the unanswered question of why it is being observed in ways that resemble a national circus and why the greater enthusiasm for the observance is in the former Confederacy rather than elsewhere.\(^{30}\)

Franklin provided enlightened historical interpretations of post-Civil War African American experiences for the remainder of the twentieth century. His seminal work, *From Slavery to Freedom*, was first published in 1947 and followed by eight subsequent editions, one of which was produced in 1979. Another work published by Franklin in the 1970s was *Racial Equality in America*. This work touched on several instances in American history, from the age of the Founding Fathers to the Civil Rights Movement, where a disparity between freedom and equality for African Americans could be observed.\(^{31}\) The Civil Rights Movement influenced countless other studies concerned with the origins of racial inequality in the United States, prompting members of the scholarly community to evaluate this issue from multiple vantage points.

Many social and cultural histories on slave communities and families in the antebellum period enriched discussions of slavery in the late twentieth century, while others incorporated analyses of America’s revolutionary and colonial eras. Influential social and cultural histories of slavery from the mid to late twentieth century include; John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community*, George P. Rawick’s *From Sundown to Sunup*, Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, *

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Roll, and Lawrence W. Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, among others.  

Edmund S. Morgan’s *American Slavery – American Freedom* provided an examination of slavery in Virginia during the colonial period, while Philip D. Curtin’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade* offered one of the first quantitative analyses of the African and North American slave trade. Another theoretical publication on the workings of the slave South that sparked many debates among the scholarly community was Stanley L. Engerman and Robert William Fogel’s controversial publication, *Time on the Cross*.  

Scholars returned to discussions of the white Southern experience in the 1980s, but these conversations unavoidably took place in the context of the minority and nontraditional scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, historians at this time who attempted to re-examine the history of the Confederacy and the formation of a unique Southern identity approached the task with what they believed to be “new and fresh ideas.” In his narrative history of the Confederacy, *The Confederate Nation*, Emory M. Thomas took the concept of collective identity and applied it to the national ambitions of the “Old South.” Thomas postulated “the Confederate era was an extended moment during which Southerners attempted simultaneously to define themselves as a people and to act out a national identity, all the while engaged in total war for corporate survival.” Drew Gilpin Faust provided another view of the Confederacy in her work, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*. Faust argued that the necessary formation of a Confederate identity during the Civil War was the very thing that

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exposed the ideological shortcomings of the old Southern regime, thereby undermining the region’s bid for political independence. “At the same time that it promised the restoration of a lost equilibrium on which the organic unity of the South had been based, the logic of Confederate ideology prescribed an effort to build a social consensus that would have implied a significant transformation in Southern life.”36 According to Faust, the two ideologies that were responsible for exposing these inconsistencies were the Southern concepts of evangelicalism and republicanism, both of which were incorporated into Confederate nationalism from its inception.37

In his examination of the post-war South, *Baptized in Blood*, Charles Reagan Wilson explored the religious influence on the establishment of a separate cultural identity for the South during the early twentieth century. Wilson argued that, being denied an autonomous political identity, Southerners adopted the Lost Cause “attitude” in an effort to solidify a distinctive regional culture. The Lost Cause therefore became a “Southern civil religion, which tied together Christian churches and Southern culture,” and consequently affected regional perceptions of morality, race, and history.38 Other social issues of the Civil War that were examined at this time were gender and class. The essays found in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber’s publication, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, touch on both of these topics. Ultimately, the reevaluation of Southern scholarship in the late twentieth century reveals the reciprocal nature of minority and mainstream historical perspectives, for one cannot be adjusted without then reinterpreting the other.

It fell to historians of the mid-nineties and early twenty-first century, therefore, to place these reconceptions of Civil War scholarship into a broader historical perspective, and to trace the global implications of the same. Moreover, scholarship that measured the impact of “other” war commemoration on the American public, as well as examinations of civil wars outside of the United States, broadened contemporary discussions of national identity and memory. One aspect of historical discussions based on “other” war commemoration that would benefit Civil War scholarship is the breakdown of the historical construct, “collective memory.” In Carried to the Wall, Kristen Hass distinguishes between the notion of collective memory and many memories together. Hass contends one must separate “public grief” from “personal memory” when analyzing “the history of memorializing war, and… the shifting ideas about nationalism and individualism that this history reflects.”

James Young also differentiates between collective memory and “collected memory” in his work on Holocaust Memorials. Young argues that collected memory is:

the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning… If societies remember, it is only insofar as their institutions and rituals organize, shape, even inspire their constituents’ memories. For any society’s memory cannot exist outside of those people who do the remembering – even if such memory happens to be at the society’s bidding, in its name.

Discussions of collective memory aside, Civil War historians have done much to situate what Jean B. Lee describes as “the cacophony of individual experiences perpetuated in memory” into the larger narrative of action and remembrance that resulted from the war. For example, Joseph Tilden Rhea charts the impact of the Civil War on American memory in his

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work, *Race Pride and the American Identity*. Rhea laments that “in a reversal of the rule that the victors write the history, the South’s interpretation of the ante-bellum and Civil War past became dominant in the restored nation.” Rhea goes on to describe the rise of multiculturalism in America, arguing that while Americans are collectively more aware and accepting of ethnic diversity, there is still an unease with the threat of ethnic fragmentation in the nation. Rhea situates his argument between the political successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Cultural Revolution for American minority groups, an event that he terms as the “Race Pride Movement.” Rhea is explicit in his call for a more inclusive public interpretation of the past due to the impact of collective memory on the “shared beliefs” of present generations:

One way to demean another group is to deny the value of its history. Written out of the national past, the group is denied the collective landmarks which signify its importance. A public history which promotes negative views of a group, or simply excludes it from consideration, does real harm to the living members of that group.43

Not surprisingly, historians who examine broad themes in Civil War scholarship (i.e., causes, consequences, race, sectional reunion, identity, nationalism, and gender) have turned to the symbolic aspects of historical inquiry to assert their positions. Interesting conversations on the history of the Confederate flag, for example, bring the importance of visual symbols read as text into current discussions of group identity and memory. In *The Confederate Battle Flag*, John M. Coski analyzes some of the ways in which the Confederate battle flag gained its national stigma, as well as how it is perceived outside of the United States. According to Coski, the flag became associated with racists groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and pro-segregationist politicians like Alabama governor George Wallace during the Civil Rights Movement. However, as Coski further notes, these extreme political and social groups have

“used the Stars and Stripes far longer and far more often than they have the St. Andrews cross.”

Moreover, “from a vantage point beyond our shores,” the Confederate flag has gained recognition as symbol of “national liberation,” “individual expression and rebelliousness.”

Coski concludes that the flag is “an American symbol with an inevitable place on the American landscape,” and that its continually contested meaning makes it “an accurate barometer of disagreement over the meaning and the proper place of the Confederacy in American history and memory.”

One instance where American citizens contested the appropriateness of the Confederate flag was during the Civil War centennial, when South Carolina’s African American community protested the placement of the Confederate flag over the state’s capitol building. Dissenters argued that government buildings should be neutral in regards to racial issues, and that heritage sites such as Civil War battlefields and historic houses were more appropriate spaces for the flags. Southern Civil War sites continue to fly these flags. Fort Fisher flies four flags in front of its exhibit hall: the United States flag, the North Carolina State flag, the thirty-five star Stars and Stripes and the Second National Confederate flag.

Michael Martinez and William D. Richardson advance the discussion of the Confederate flag as a contested American symbol in *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*. Unlike Coski’s critique, Martinez and Richardson include Confederate monuments in their assessment of the “conflicting interpretations of Southern history in general, and the Confederacy in

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45 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 293.
Martinez and Richardson preface the *Confederate Symbols* anthology by identifying the problem with symbols and memory:

Symbols are prone to ambiguous interpretations because they are abstract, often nonverbal expressions of ideas that depend on a complex interrelationship among and between human cognitive processes and the ability to use and understand language. Moreover, the ideas expressed by symbols do not always hold the same meaning for all audiences.  

Martinez and Richardson’s understanding of both flags and monuments as cultural signifiers exposes another thematic development in current Civil War scholarship, the reading of Confederate monuments as symbolic text. However, this exercise is not exclusive to Civil War history. For example, John R. Gillis’ essay compilation, *Commemorations*, charts the various ways in which different cultures from Iraq to Germany have utilized public commemoration in their quest for a cohesive national identity. Gillis observes that the relationship between memory and identity “is historical; and the record of that relationship can be traced through various forms of commemoration.” It is fitting, therefore, that scholars are drawn to monuments as possible avenues of historical interpretation since these multimodal symbols represent the bond between memory and identity.

Social historians such as Gillis would no doubt agree with Cynthia Mills’ assertion that “the meaning of public sculpture is not fixed but changes as audiences’ experiences and beliefs grow increasingly distant from original understandings.” While Mills’ contention is accurate, however, it cannot be overlooked that monuments are predominantly cultural expressions of societal beliefs at the time of their construction. Any subsequent meanings, as Mills points out,

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48 Martinez and Richardson, *Confederate Symbols*, 5.
49 Gillis, *Commemorations*, 5.
are imposed from without. Ultimately, while Confederate sculptures have been effectively analyzed as symbols of cultural memory, the very nature of symbols are constant and static. It is the idea behind these signifiers that changes, taking on multiple and often contradictory meanings over time.\(^5\)

There is no question that Southern history has been enriched by the introduction of Confederate monument interpretation. The inclusion of such structures in historical analyses of the past represents an expansion of the field, as well as a significant bridge between the realms of academic and public history. However, more work on the living (but no less permanent) aspects of public history needs to be done, as there are more dynamic public venues through which cultural biases are perpetuated such as historic house museums, battlefields, and parks. There are a few studies that have crossed this divide outside of Civil War commemoration, such as Kenneth Ames, Barbara Franco and Thomas Frye’s critical assessment of interpretation at the Smithsonian, *Ideas and Images*. While museums are gaining some much-needed critical evaluation, Civil War sites are still being discussed in terms commercialization and tourism, without any analysis of public exhibits or interpretation.\(^5\)

Another excellent museum assessment is Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig’s *History Museums in the United States*. Leon and Rosenzweig assert that the critical scrutiny of museums exhibits is vitally important to a full understanding of a society’s attitudes and perceptions since

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“the exhibit genre… tends to force historical material into certain conventional modes.”

More importantly, both academic and public historians should review exhibits at the time of their presentation because:

Museum exhibits are intrinsically more ephemeral than books…the evanescent, transient quality of the exhibit heightens the significance of the exhibit review: it documents the exhibit and at the same time critically responds to it.

Leon and Rosenzweig go on to assert that the social history movement of the 1970s fundamentally altered museums practices thereafter. One positive influence of social history on museum interpretation was that it shifted the power imbued in historical ownership from the dominant upper class into the hands of minority groups. Other publications concerned with the relationship of power and historic interpretation include Jean B. Lee’s “Historical Memory, Sectional Strife, and the American Mecca,” James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton’s Slavery and Public History and Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small’s Representations of Slavery.

Lee analyses the contest between Northern and Southern constituencies for ownership of George Washington’s home, Mount Vernon, after the Civil War, while the Hortons explore the problems that arise for pubic historians who attempt to interpret the paradox that is “the history of American slavery in a country dedicated to freedom.” Eichstedt and Small deal with interpretation at historic plantation homes. Eichstedt and Small’s analysis of what they deem “symbolic annihilation” is especially interesting to discussions of power and historic

54 Leon and Rosenzweig, History Museums in the United States, xxi.
55 Leon and Rosenzweig, History Museums in the United States, ix – xx. Leon and Rosenzweig do not argue that social history’s impact on museum practices has been entirely positive (see pages xix – xx). Another source which asserts that social history has not benefitted museum interpretation is Richard Handler and Eric Gable’s The New History in an Old museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
interpretation. According to the authors, symbolic annihilation in museums is the manner in which “the institution of slavery and the presence and personhood of those enslaved and of legally free African Americans are either completely or extremely minimized.” In other words, it is not only what is included but also what is excluded in museums exhibits that perpetuate the collective racial ideals of a society.

Studies such as these have enhanced the modes of presentation in museums, but now it is time for professionals to turn a critical eye on historic Civil War sites and battlefields. In a profession where the American Civil War has dominated discussions of national identity, collective memory, and popular culture, the spaces in which this conflict is interpreted for the public have been grossly overlooked as legitimate avenues of historical analysis. This is especially true when one considers the extent to which university and museum-based professionals have discussed the issues of race and power in relationship to historical legitimacy over the past fifty years. The exception to this trend can be found in discussions of sites belonging to the federally supervised National Park Service. Historical analyses of commemoration and preservation at battlefields such as Harpers Ferry, Gettysburg, and Shiloh provide excellent templates for further Civil War site interpretation. However, as David Cook has observed, the problems with Civil War commemoration in the twentieth century (especially during the centennial observances) took place at the state level, as the federal government “pursued a decentralized approach to commemoration activities.” And it is at this level that “the

connection between identity, memory, and current affairs\(^{59}\) needs further evaluation in the present. This is especially true when one considers the unique situation presented in state historic sites, as these spaces represent a fusion of national and local memories in the United States. A closer examination of interpretation at historic sites such as Fort Fisher reveals the ways in which these modes of remembrance have coincided over time. More importantly, an analysis of historic site interpretation exposes some of the fault lines on which America’s collective memory of the Civil War is built.

In his historiographical work, *The White South from Secession to Redemption*, written in 1982, Joe Gray Taylor noted that historians of the 1960s and 1970s who asserted slavery as the cause of the Civil War were undoubtedly affected by “the civil rights controversy of the 1950s and 1960s, and it may well be that future historians will emphasize other causes. But for the present, slavery holds center stage.”\(^ {60}\) Decades later, Taylor’s assessment still holds true. One might add, however, that the repercussions of this concentration have expanded to include racial controversy as the war’s legacy in America. However the historical debates on the meaning of the Civil War have shifted over the past fifty years, it is important to note that many prominent scholars in the 1960s were first concerned with how the war was interpreted and commemorated for the public. Furthermore, commemoration is a subject that contemporary scholars have returned to as the ideal vantage point from which to evaluate broader themes in Civil War memory. More attention must be paid, however, to the ways in which Civil War remembrance is manifested in historical interpretations presented in mid-level public history venues. For there is no better way to understand the relationships between individual, regional and national memories


than to study the ways in which different generations have interpreted the past where history happened.
CHAPTER II – “A MOMENT OF HISTORY”: INTERPRETING THE CIVIL WAR AT FORT FISHER STATE HISTORIC SITE

In November 1863 Abraham Lincoln gave the first of two presidential addresses commemorating the Civil War battle between Union and Confederate forces at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. After recognizing the present crisis of whether “any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure,” Lincoln spoke of those who were not capable of attending the event; namely the soldiers who had died at Gettysburg and the future generations of Americans for whom that battle, and indeed the entirety of the Civil War, was fought:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us… that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.¹

Fifty years later at the battle’s semicentennial commemoration, President Woodrow Wilson declared that:

[Americans] have found one another again as brothers and comrades in arms, enemies no longer… the quarrel forgotten – except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men arrayed against one another…²

Although the same spirit of commemoration permeated both President Lincoln’s and President Wilson’s Gettysburg Addresses, the speeches greatly diverged in setting and sentiment. Lincoln’s address occurred shortly after the battle, when the newly dead vastly outnumbered the President’s living audience. Additionally, Lincoln stressed the importance of looking forward during his brief oration. According to historian David Blight, Lincoln “envisioned an ideological struggle over the meaning of the war, a society’s tortured effort to know the real character of the

tragedy.” Conversely, Wilson’s speech, delivered to a large number of survivors and veterans from both sides of the conflict, allowed for “neither space nor time . . . for considering the causes, transformations, and results of the war.” By juxtaposing Lincoln and Wilson’s comments on the living and the dead – what Lincoln implored citizens to consider about the future of the country versus what was actually remembered fifty years later – Blight effectively addresses the selectivity with which Americans remember the Civil War.

Like all other aspects of collective remembrance, American’s selective memory of the Civil War is a national phenomenon that occurs at the local level, as in the case of the battlefield at Fort Fisher, North Carolina. At the national level, the majority of modern historians agree with Blight’s assessment that the cultural, economic and political causes of the Civil War were intentionally underemphasized after the conflict in an effort to reunite the nation. As evidenced by Wilson’s Gettysburg Address, this feat was accomplished by focusing on the conflict itself and not its origins; on the dead, but not what men died for; and on remembering parts, but not the whole of the story. Moreover, scholars have recently begun pointing to the Civil War centennial commemorations as the moment when Americans collectively accepted the reunion rhetoric of the previous century, thereby abandoning the problems of slavery and race as causes of the war itself. These themes also played out in several venues leading up to the centennial, including: Civil War veteran reunions at the turn of the twentieth century, monument and memorial

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4 Blight, Race and Reunion, 9.
5 Fort Fisher, named for Col. Charles F. Fisher, was the largest earthen fortification built under the direction the Confederacy during the Civil War. The fort’s construction spanned the entirety of the war, and was performed by Southern soldiers, as well as a large number of free and impressed slave labor from around the state. The purpose of Fort Fisher was to protect the supply lines that ran through the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. This particular supply route became known as the “lifeline of the Confederacy” because it was the only route that remained open to General Robert E. Lee’s army of Northern Virginia by the end of the war. Two battles occurred at Fort Fisher. The first took place on 24 – 25 December 1864, and the second on 13 – 15 January 1865. Union forces captured the fort in the second battle.
productions by local heritage organizations in the early twentieth century, and the patriotic-minded popular media channels of the mid-twentieth century.

The story of Fort Fisher State Historic Sites’ preservation and eventual dedication during the centennial observances is no great exception to the larger narrative of American Civil War remembrance from 1865 to 1965. However, while there are numerous similarities between Fort Fisher’s story and that of the national narrative, there are also several instances in which the evolution of the site’s institutional rebirth has contradicted prevalent scholarly views of the impact of the Civil War centennial on the American historical landscape. There is no question that the themes presented to the public during the site’s dedication ceremonies in the 1960s, as well as in the exhibit area of the newly constructed visitor center, were focused on the heroic feats of men in battle. Yet the themes of blockade-running (the main purpose of Fort Fisher for the duration of the war) and site preservation (through which the efforts and techniques employed to save the fort were explored) were equally dominant in this version of site interpretation. It was not until the 2001 revisions by the NCDCR that the site’s interpretive focus shifted more towards the battles. As in the case of Fort Fisher, since this battle-specific interpretation was both assimilated into and fostered under the leadership of the state bureaucracy, it may be harder to dislodge than many hopeful anticipants of the sesquicentennial celebrations predict.

Fort Fisher’s post-war existence as a place of memory and commemoration began with a veteran’s reunion held there in 1893. As the first of many similar events, the reunion was

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6 Fort Fisher, located in present-day Kure Beach, North Carolina, was commonly referred to as the “Gibraltar of the South” during the Civil War. This massive earthen fortification spanned almost one mile of sea defenses and an additional one-third of a mile in land defenses. The mounds ranged from 24 to 43 feet in height, and the fort was armed with more than forty guns at the time of its capture. Only ten percent of the original earthworks are extant. Today, this small piece of Fort Fisher, along with the visitor center, comprises the historic site. Fort Fisher is North Carolina’s most visited state historic site, with its visitation making up roughly one third of the state’s total historic site visitation.
thoroughly covered by the local paper. The occasion’s charged atmosphere was evident even to
the non-veterans in attendance. One local journalist noted the event’s equally melancholy and
nostalgic tone when he observed, “one of the scarred heroes took a long sigh and said, ‘after all,
looking over the entire four years of conflict, could it have been bettered?’ And they agreed a
nobler fight had never, and could not be made, by any nation on the face of the globe.” The most
anticipated part of the program was a speech delivered by Colonel William Lamb, the former
Confederate commander of Fort Fisher. Lamb’s speech to the blue and gray veterans on the
history of Fort Fisher was the first of many calls by the former colonel to preserve the
stronghold. At one point in his address, Lamb had this to say about the significance of the
stronghold and the battles that transpired there:

When I recall this magnificent struggle, unsurpassed in ancient or modern warfare, and
remember the devoted patriotism and heroic courage of my garrison, I feel proud to know
that I have North Carolina blood coursing through my veins, and I confidently believe
that the time will come with the Old North State, when her people will regard her defense
of Fort Fisher as the grandest event in her historic past.  

Both the veterans and the local community received Lamb’s remarks warmly. A
Wilmington journalist allowed that Colonel Lamb “paid glowing tribute to the heroic valor of
North Carolina troops and the veterans ought to see to it, that this account of the battles at Fort
Fisher be the one which shall become history.” As ominous as it was laudatory, this editorial
assessment foretold the fate of Lamb’s speech, which was transcribed and published alongside
similar sentiments conveyed by another prominent Fort Fisher veteran, Colonel Newton Martin
Curtis, a Union brigade commander in the battle. Lamb and Curtis were introduced in a U.S.

7 “Colonel Lamb’s Return to Fort Fisher,” The Weekly Star (Wilmington, NC), 16 June 1893.
8 Darlene and Leslie Bright, eds., My Friend the Enemy: The Battle at Fort Fisher as recalled by Colonel Lamb,
CSA & General Curtis, USA (Carolina Beach, NC: The Federal Point Preservation Society, 2007), 66.
9 “Colonel Lamb’s Return to Fort Fisher,” The Weekly Star (Wilmington, NC), 16 June1893.
Army hospital after the capture of Fort Fisher. Upon meeting Lamb, Curtis announced, “Your side or mine will control this country, it will not be divided. You and I will be in it and I offer you my hand and friendship. Let it begin now, not years later.” Lamb would eventually refer to Curtis as “my friend the enemy.” The sentiments conveyed by these two men upon their first meeting express the reconciliatory atmosphere that enveloped Fort Fisher for the remainder of the century.

Unfortunately, both Lamb and Curtis’ ambitions to see the fort preserved as a national battle park were not successful. Despite strong efforts made in lobbying Congress to turn Fort Fisher into a military park, the stronghold remained abandoned until the 1903 reunion. Fort Fisher continued in this way, as an unofficial place for veterans to congregate and reminisce, until the death of Colonel Lamb in 1909. Curtis died the following year. Veterans held one last reunion in 1915 during which an ex-Union officer from New York, along with “two score Confederate Veterans,” visited the site. The Union officer’s name was Colonel John W. Vrooman, and his presence at Fort Fisher renewed, if only for a short while, efforts to place the Southern fortification in the hands of the federal government.

Needless to say, Fort Fisher’s transformation from Civil War relic into State Historic Site did not occur in an historical vacuum. Numerous events transpired at the turn of the twentieth century that changed the meaning of race and class in post-war America, both regionally and nationally. The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 eliminated many African American political advances that had occurred during Reconstruction, and solidified a white supremacist political

11 Flowers, “Forward.”
agenda throughout the state for years to come. Meanwhile, contests for racial superiority at home led to imperialist tendencies abroad with the United State’s involvement in the Spanish American War, giving the sons of Confederate and Union soldiers a common cause. Moreover, increased immigration and urbanization, especially in Northern cities such as Boston and New York, drove the final nail into the coffin that was the African American dream of equality at the turn of the twentieth century. For many Americans in the North as well as the South, racial superiority evolved into a matter of native and foreign-born residents, with blacks falling somewhere in between.13

By the 1920s, it was clear that the efforts of Civil War veterans to transform Fort Fisher into a national park had failed. Yet a new issue presented itself in the waning years of the veterans’ movement, which brought the fort back into public discourse. It was at this time that the ill effects of the post-war Army Corps of Engineers’ project to close the inlet directly south of the fort made themselves apparent. The project, locally referred to as “The Rocks,”14 successfully alleviated a hazardous shoaling problem in the Cape Fear River, but it also affected


14 “The Rocks” sealed one of the two inlets at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The inlets were referred to as Old and New Inlet. Old Inlet was the traditional entrance to the Cape Fear River, while New Inlet was created by a hurricane that hit coastal North Carolina in September 1761. These two entrances to the Cape Fear River provided a strategic advantage for blockade runners during the Civil War. However, the formation of New Inlet caused increased sediment deposits in the river channel, making the Cape Fear difficult for merchant vessels to navigate after the war.
the beachfront of the fort by causing severe erosion. The physical loss at Fort Fisher prompted increasingly urgent reactions from local advocates for the fort’s preservation.\textsuperscript{15}

Ironically, Fort Fisher’s “erosion crisis” proved to be a blessing in disguise because it kept the earthworks in the public eye for the better part of the twentieth century. However, it also hindered many memorial attempts on Federal Point.\textsuperscript{16} For example, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), famous for their commemorative efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,\textsuperscript{17} spent four years raising money to build a monument to the Confederate defenders at Fort Fisher only to see their first efforts swallowed by the sea. The project was relocated, and the monument was completed by June 1932.\textsuperscript{18} By the time Fort Fisher’s monument was erected, the Southern landscape was replete with UDC markers proclaiming the honor and sacrifice of Confederate soldiers as well as a steadfast devotion to “Lost Cause” rhetoric. Individuals and organizations such as the UDC who favored the “Lost Cause” interpretation of the Civil War argued that the South did not go to war in defense of slavery, but of states’ rights, and that the lone reason for Southern defeat was the region’s inability to produce its own supplies, with the result that the South was overwhelmed by the North’s superiority in manpower and resources.\textsuperscript{19} While the peak monument building phase of UDC history occurred roughly fifteen years prior to the construction of the Fort Fisher monument, the

\textsuperscript{16} Federal Point was the narrow peninsula between the Cape Fear River to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east on which Fort Fisher and Battery Buchanan were built. Federal Point terminated at New Inlet. Today, a man-made waterway separates Federal Point from the mainland.
\textsuperscript{19} Steele, “‘How Grand a Fame.’”
marker, as evidenced by its dedication, was an unwavering testament to traditional UDC tenets and beliefs. The final UDC monument at Fort Fisher depicted an eagle atop a Grecian column, fashioned out of bronze and clay. During the dedication ceremony UDC North Carolina division president, Mrs. Glenn Long, impressed upon her audience the importance of preserving Confederate heritage to ensure the proud legacy of its people:

"today is the culmination of a long-cherished dream – a monument at Fort Fisher. This shaft of stone, commanding the pilgrim to pause, to read and to know that here occurred the greatest naval bombardment in the history of ancient or modern warfare; that the blood of our bravest drenched the ocean border in a scarlet rain; that here was gloriously displayed the indomitable spirit of the Boy Soldier of the Confederacy and to know that here a grateful people have taken pride in inscribing their history on imperishable stone. We pray it will stir and quicken the pride of every North Carolinian."  

One of the important benefits of the UDC’s involvement in Fort Fisher’s memorialization was that the organization’s widely publicized commemoration efforts directed attention to the site’s increasingly urgent erosion problem. These concerns expanded into a sixty-year preservation crusade with the founding of the Fort Fisher Preservation Society (FFPS), led by Andrew J. Howell in the 1930s. The FFPS raised local awareness of the slow but steady disappearance of the fort through a series of articles and editorials submitted to local papers. One such editorial painted a vivid picture of the devastated fortification in 1931:

"The waves of the storm-whipped Atlantic Ocean have done more in the last two years to destroy the famous Fort Fisher mound than it was possible for the Federal Fleet of more than 100 ships to do after days of bombarding the former Confederate Stronghold."  

Later that year, the FFPS and the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners requested the federal erosion board to conduct a study of Fort Fisher’s beaches. The state and

20 “South’s Numerous Monuments Cited: Mrs. Long at Unveiling Declares They Perpetuate Confederate Heroism,” Wilmington Morning Star, 3 June 1932.
federal government started work on a protection plan for the mounds, pending an Army Corps of Engineers survey of Federal Point. The survey was conducted in July of 1931, but the Corps discontinued the project. The engineers concluded that erosion prevention around Fort Fisher would not aid navigation off the coast of North Carolina for the War Department, and therefore did not meet the requirements for approval by that branch of government. The U.S. Beach Erosion Board proposed an alternative plan in 1932, but the County Board of Commissioners declined the plan due to lack of funds.  

The FFPS was not deterred by the demoralizing financial setbacks of the Corps survey. In 1933, the organization launched another grass-roots campaign to promote erosion awareness and secure funding for the preservation of the mounds. Hope was revived when the FFPS (in collaboration with New Hanover County) applied to the Works Progress Administration for beach work funds. These local preservation efforts did not go unnoticed around the state. For example, the Greensboro Record printed an article condemning the state for its indifference towards preserving Fort Fisher. “It is not a Wilmington problem,” the Greensboro Record argued, “it is a matter in which the entire state should take an interest.”

Despite the support of the press, efforts by the FFPS to preserve Fort Fisher at the state level amounted to little by the end of the decade. In 1938 the new president of the FFPS, James E. L. Wade, gained enough support to “push for legislation for the establishment of a national

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23 In addition to the earthen walls, bombproofs, and powder magazines, Fort Fisher comprised over thirty gun emplacements in 1865. These armaments were flanked on either side by mounds of earth that were on average thirty-two feet high and 100 feet thick. The mounds were also known as traverses. The traverses were meant to protect guns and soldiers from explosions during battle.
park at Fort Fisher.”25 Senator Emmett H. Bellamy, a member of the influential Bellamy family of Wilmington, North Carolina,26 agreed with Wade that the fort should become a national park, arguing, “The federal government would immediately take over all expenses.”27 Bellamy’s statement alluded to a significant problem for fort preservationists in the mid-twentieth century. The main objective for legislators became relieving taxpayers of extra expenses following the financial ravages of the Great Depression, leaving little money in North Carolina’s budget for preservation. Consequently, the FFSP’s call for additional state funding fell on deaf ears. Local officials like Bellamy and Wade reasoned that the state’s financial burden would be alleviated and the fort would receive the necessary funding if the defenses were converted into a federal park.

The onset of World War II stalled preservation efforts in the Lower Cape Fear even further. Then, in 1942, the earthworks at Fort Fisher were significantly damaged when Federal Point was converted into an active military base. The U.S. Air Corps used a portion of the land face of the fort as an airplane landing strip. A military base was also constructed north of the fort where several Confederate homes and buildings once stood. After the war, U.S. Highway 421 (which runs parallel to Fort Fisher’s sea face) was relocated further inland to ensure access to the end of Federal Point. The highway was moved a few hundred yards west, taking out another significant portion of the fort’s land face.28

26 Leonard Wilson, ed., Makers of America: Biographies of Leading Men of Thought and Action (Washington, DC: B.F. Johnson, 1916), 2:435 – 439: Dr. Bellamy was one of the wealthiest men in North Carolina at the beginning of the Civil War. Union forces occupied his home in Wilmington, North Carolina when the city was captured in 1865. Senator Emmet Bellamy was his grandson.
By the close of the 1950s, with the Civil War centennial fast approaching, Fort Fisher resurfaced in America’s psyche. Earlier cries to surrender the fort to the federal government were lost in the patriotic fervor of the one hundred year anniversary of the Civil War. The federally owned portions of Fort Fisher were turned over to the state of North Carolina in 1959 after which, the NCDCR began meticulously collecting the parcels of privately owned land surrounding the fort. By 1961, the fort was officially designated a state historic property, complete with interpretive markers. The visitor center and exhibit space were finished before the end of the centennial in 1965.  

Although the 1960s did not see the end of the fort’s preservation problems this period did mark a major shift in the focus at Fort Fisher from preservation to interpretation. Indeed, Fort Fisher’s erosion crisis was not completely solved until the Army Corps installed a revetment wall on the beach adjacent to the earthworks in 1995. This is not to say that preservation was no longer a significant issue for Fort Fisher advocates. On the contrary, preservation remained such a pressing issue that it persisted as a focal point of site interpretation throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, many of the local groups and individuals responsible for the fort’s preservation remained involved in the site’s public presentation after it became a State Historic Site.

The first twenty years of Fort Fisher’s institutionalization also witnessed a decline in emphasis on the site’s legacy as protector of Confederate supply routes during the Civil War. Before the construction of the visitor center in 1960, a small museum dedicated solely to blockade running (a vital naval aspect of the Confederate war effort) stood in close proximity to the mounds. Blockade running was officially maintained as the main interpretive focus at the site.

29 Knapp, North Carolina State Historic Sites, 36.
visitor center that replaced the blockade-runner museum.\textsuperscript{31} However, this important aspect of Fort Fisher’s history was sidelined in favor of hero-worshiping centennial pamphlets distributed to the public, as well as exhibits that focused on the valor of men in battle, preservation efforts, and a “Lost Cause” mentality expressed by local news outlets. Furthermore, American nationalism as a reaction to mounting Cold War anxiety greatly impacted Civil War interpretation at Fort Fisher.\textsuperscript{32} The dilemma only worsened with time, as blockade running became a secondary, and often tertiary interpretive theme within Fort Fisher’s historical narrative.

The construction of the visitor center commenced in 1960 with the opening of the centennial celebrations. A grand opening was anticipated for “January, 1965, the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the second battle of Fort Fisher,” with special ceremonies planned to “impart national recognition to the greatest land-sea battle of the Civil War.”\textsuperscript{33} In the interim, local and state event organizers such as the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, the North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission and the FFRC implemented a “Colonel William Lamb Day.” The event was held on 4 July 1962 in recognition of the day Colonel Lamb arrived at Fort Fisher and assumed command of the stronghold’s construction.\textsuperscript{34} The fact that the occasion happened to fall on the same day that all patriotic-minded individuals would be celebrating the nation’s Independence Day was surely no coincidence. The subtle fusion of national patriotism and Confederate commemoration was further solidified with the dual meanings in the firework displays for the event. While the traditional July 4\textsuperscript{th} fireworks were

\textsuperscript{32} For an assessment of the impact of Cold War nationalism on America’s Civil War centennial, see: Cook, \textit{Troubled Commemoration}, 227 – 260.
included in the Colonel Lamb Day’s festivities, they were presented to visitors in the same manner as the fireworks that marked the capture of Fort Fisher by Union forces in 1865.

In addition to participating in scheduled activities, guests could also purchase locally printed souvenir booklets for $0.50. The booklets included a biography on Colonel Lamb, as well as a short reference to the importance of blockade running to the Civil War. Under the heading “Fort Fisher, An Important Civil War Fort,” the following excerpt demonstrated that interpreters in the 1960s did acknowledge the importance of Fort Fisher in the context of supply routes:

> Primarily, Fort Fisher deserves its important position in Civil War history for its protection of the port of Wilmington by means of its control over the two Cape Fear River approaches. The Confederate steamers preferred New Inlet as their entrance into the Cape Fear River because it was protected by Fort Fisher.  

This validation was moot, however, when viewed in the light of the overall themes of Colonel Lamb Day that were: valor, Southern ingenuity, and national and regional pride.

Local papers bolstered these patriotic and regional sentiments while simultaneously imposing a “Lost Cause” twist on the already pro-Southern atmosphere of Federal Point. Popular themes included Colonel Lamb, combat tactics, current issues with site preservation and, as the 1960s came to a close, excavation and reconstruction of Shepherd’s Battery. One article went as far to claim that “the story of the fall of Wilmington is the story of the Old South: too little manpower, too few guns.” Additionally, local writers were quick to pick up on Colonel Lamb’s popularity due to the Southern officer’s fervent contributions to local veteran’s affairs and his

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36 In 1865, Shepherd’s Battery was the large gun emplacement at the western terminus of Fort Fisher’s land face. It protected the sally port entrance to the fort, as well as River Road, which covered the twenty miles between Fort Fisher and Wilmington. This part of the original fort, along with a small group of mounds to the east, still stands on Federal Point. After the site was excavated, the gun emplacement on top of the battery was partially reconstructed for visitors.
newly state-supported affiliation with America’s Independence Day celebrations. Journalistic references to “the scientific genius of the able engineer,” did much to elevate the affluent Virginian to the status of mythic hero in North Carolina’s Lower Cape Fear region. In other words, it was not long before Lamb, the man, was transformed into Lamb, the regional Confederate symbol.

Inside the visitor center, exhibits boasting titles such as “The Deadly Game” and “Guardian of the Gateway” alerted viewers to Fort Fisher, in the words of site archaeologist Stanley South, as “A MOMENT OF HISTORY. In this moment the story of blockade running as the lifeline of the Confederacy, and its relationship to the blockading fleet and to the Civil War, should be told.”

South aggressively lobbied to maintain an emphasis on blockade running in the site’s interpretation. He stressed the importance of continuity between the story of Fort Fisher and that of blockade running, arguing that:

[Dividing] the display area into blockade running and Fort Fisher halves would appear to be a mistake… the story of blockade running as the lifeline of the Confederacy, and its relationship to the blockading fleet and to the Civil War, should be told… the role of Fort Fisher as a protector of this lifeline can be well woven, with its chapter of violent climax, as the lifeline of the Confederacy is cut.

South was successful in discouraging designers from separating the exhibit into Fort Fisher and blockade running halves. However, his insightful interpretation of the battles as a byproduct of the fort’s importance to Southern supply routes did not translate to the finished product presented

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38 “Union Forces Faced Gallant Troops At Fort Fisher,” The Daily Independent Magazine (Wilmington, NC), 31 July 1966.
39 “Notes,” Display and Exhibits (Fort Fisher), n.d., Fort Fisher Archives.
41 South, “A Short Story Outline,” 1.
to visitors in 1965. The battles were given a distinct story separate from South’s vision.\textsuperscript{42} This autonomy paved the way for the later dominance of martial themes in Fort Fisher’s interpretation.

One of the site’s interpretive components, a fifteen-minute orientation program installed in the visitor center during the 1970s, attested to the impact of nationalism on Civil War interpretation. The narration began: “A Proud Nation is torn apart… For the next four years countryman would stand against countryman: Friend against friend, brother against brother,” and ended with the sentiment: “The American Civil War left the angriest scars ever left on our nation, and the final reunion, the final cementing of one United States is perhaps the happiest ending in history.”\textsuperscript{43} These broad, nationalistic attitudes provided the context in which visitors absorbed the rest of Fort Fisher’s story. Along with these connections to national issues, the orientation program’s closing segment was dedicated to connecting Fort Fisher to other historic sites around the state; a trend that continued to evolve over the next fifteen years. The early script specifically referenced two nearby historic sites, Brunswick Town/ Fort Anderson and the Underwater Archaeology Lab.\textsuperscript{44}

During the late 1970s and 1980s, Fort Fisher administrators broadened there institutional network by including sister sites in the fort’s semi-permanent interpretive elements. Additionally, interpretive techniques from other sites were employed in the development of the fort’s guided tour scripts and special events planning. Interpreter training and visitor appreciation also began to play a prominent role in Fort Fisher’s institutional mission during this time. Site administrators placed more of an emphasis on professionalization in regards to the language used.

\textsuperscript{42} “Outline for the Fort Fisher Exhibits,” Fort Fisher Archives, n.d.
by interpreters in their tours, as well as on employee conduct in the workplace. This expanding professionalization helped to moderate the centennial’s patriotic rhetoric, as evidenced in the few instances where new interpretive components were added to the fort’s educational cache. However, an increasingly prevalent focus on battle interpretation emerged in these additional educational tools, such as in the historical marker placed near Battery Buchanan in the 1980s. Moreover, the authority with which Fort Fisher’s narrative came to be presented during this period lent an air of legitimacy to the site’s later battle-centric narrative.

Efforts to professionalize the site’s interpretive plan corresponded to a state-funded trip through colonial Virginia in the 1980s. Fort Fisher staff visited sites “along the James River in Tidewater Virginia Where the Nation Began,” including Hopewell, Jamestown, Pricketts Fort, and Yorktown. Pamphlets and tour scripts from these places mirrored Fort Fisher’s budding ambitions to integrate their story with those of surrounding historic sites. The colonial sites in Virginia were especially adept to this aspect of historic tourism, advertizing individual sites as “points of interest…[on] Scenic Virginia Routes 5 and 10.” Virginia was not, however, the only reference point for fort employees. Another colonial site found in North Carolina, House in the Horseshoe, also influenced tour procedures in the 1980s. Fort Fisher’s philosophy that tours were “adaptable mediums” set within a site’s historical and educational framework was directly attributable to the House in the Horse’s “Tour Tips.”

As Fort Fisher continued to assimilate traditional interpretive modes found in the well-established colonial sites, the fort’s historical narrative moved farther away from its original

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45 Battery Buchanan was constructed in 1864 to monitor the waters of New Inlet and the area of the Cape Fear River directly behind Fort Fisher. It was located at the tip of Federal Point, and mounted four guns.
46 “Travel Itinerary, September 8 – September 12,” Fort Fisher Archives; “Visit the … Great Historic Plantations and Points of Interest along the James River in Tidewater Virginia Where the Nation Began; Scenic Virginia Routes 5 and 10,” n.d., Fort Fisher Archives.
47 “Visit the … Great Historic Plantations.”
message. In a request for an historical marker next to Battery Buchanan dated September 1985, Fort Fisher educators outlined what they believed to be the significance of the fortification, namely, that it was where the battle of Fort Fisher ended:

At about 10 P.M. Fort Fisher was in the hands of the enemy and the defenders surrendered at Battery Buchanan. General Whiting and Colonel William Lamb, both of whom were wounded, Whiting mortally, were among the Confederates captured at this historic site.\(^{49}\)

In this draft text which was sent to the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Advisory Committee, several crucial facts are omitted; no mention is made of the construction dates of Battery Buchanan, what its purpose was before the battle, the inlet it overlooked and protected, its size, how it was built, or by whom. Needless to say that this was an opportunity missed by site educators, but not a surprising one when placed in the context of Fort Fisher’s concurrent developing professionalization, formalized language, and adherence to traditional forms of historic site interpretation.\(^{50}\)

The last major project at Fort Fisher during the late twentieth century was the installation of the revetment wall by the Army Corp of Engineers in 1995. Plans to remake the visitor center began in 2000, after the revetment project successfully alleviated the erosion problem around the earthworks. The list of military artifacts added to the displays during the 2000-2002 renovations was substantial, and it is evident that this list and the subsequent military emphasis in interpretation was the result of the extensive networks and authority provided to the site by its status as a North Carolina State Historic Site. Moreover, despite the fact that blockade running

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\(^{49}\)“Request Form for Highway Historical Marker,” *86 Historical Markers*, n.d., Fort Fisher Archives.

\(^{50}\)Luckily, the marker request was never implemented due to the timing of the project and a lack of funding on the part of the Historical Marker Program. The North Carolina Civil War Trails Program placed a wayside label at Battery Buchanan in the 1990s. This text provides a well-rounded explanation of Battery Buchanan’s purpose and significance in relation to Fort Fisher, citing the date of construction, it’s role in monitoring New Inlet and the role of the USCT’s in the capture of the fort.
was still cited as the primary function of Fort Fisher, the battles dominated the interpretation, both contextually and spatially.

Where the Fort Fisher battles were not specifically mentioned in the exhibit area, the broader notion of conflict overshadowed many of the sub-themes presented to the public. Some of the new panels were dedicated to themes such as “Weapons and Technology,” “Torpedoes,” and “WWII.” Even the preservation panel was presented, not as a dilemma, but as a battle with the title “Shifting Sands: The Atlantic Attacks Fort Fisher.” The largest change to the fort’s interpretation was by far the fiber-optic map, installed directly in the center of the exhibit space. Due to its location and tactile appeal, the map became the focal point of the visitor center. When prompted, a narration of the second battle and capture of Fort Fisher begins. The script is replete with quotes from soldiers and officers, and is accompanied by a lighted guide through the battle over the topography of a three dimensional model.

Recent scholarship on Civil War memory addresses some of the issues faced by Fort Fisher interpreters during the twentieth century. Historian David Blight identifies three ways in which the war was remembered by the nation during the twentieth century: the reconciliationist vision that emerged out of the United States’ dealings with the dead and remembrance of the dead, the white supremacist vision which omitted the causes for the war and created a romantic vision of the antebellum South, and the emancipationist vision that grew out of the ways in which freedmen remembered their journey from slavery. Blight argues that “racial justice” after

52 A description of the fiber-optic map is provided on Fort Fisher’s website, http://www.nchistoricalsites.org/fisher/fiber-optic-map.htm. It reads, “The map is 16 feet long and encompasses the Federal Point peninsula as it appeared in 1865 – with three-dimensional models of Ft. Fisher and Battery Buchanan. Nine minutes of narration and 5,000 colored moving lights illustrate the final bloody hours of Ft. Fisher: the Union naval bombardment, the amphibious landing on Federal point, the Union ground attack, the Confederate surrender at Battery Buchanan, and the Union victory celebration. The narration is enhanced by exciting sound effects, and features commentary from combatants of both sides.”
the war was undermined by efforts to bridge the sectional divide between the North and the South. In other words, “reunion” trumped “race” in the way Americans chose to remember the Civil War. Blight further asserts, “the greatest enthusiasts for Civil War history and memory often displace complicated consequences by endlessly focusing on the contest itself.”

While relevant to contemporary issues, Blight’s arguments are not original critiques. Many prominent historians in the 1960s took offense to the manner in which the Civil War was commemorated. One such scholar was the noted African American historian John Hope Franklin. In his 1962 critique of the Civil War centennial, “A Century of Civil War Observance,” Franklin referred to the war as America’s first “common national experience.” Franklin argued that sectional peace between the North and the South was accomplished at the expense “of the rights of more than four million Negro citizens and the entrenchment and the application of the concept of second-class citizenship for those four million Negroes.”

With striking familiarity, Franklin concluded, “the war failed to confer complete freedom on the Negro… Any observance worthy of associating itself with the Civil War must acknowledge this incontrovertible fact.”

Although it was written almost fifty years before Blights, Franklin’s reaction to the centennial observances provides a concise summation of contemporary attitudes towards race, memory, and public commemoration.

Now, with the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War looming in the not-so-distant future, the cautionary provisos set forth by centennial scholars are more relevant than ever. This is especially true for sites like Fort Fisher, which do not fall into the patterns of

historical memory interpretation prescribed by contemporary historians of the Civil War. The State’s involvement with site interpretation has directed Fort Fisher’s narrative towards a conservative, martial focus, a trend that scholars hope to remedy with the sesquicentennial commemorations. Spearheading this movement (with North Carolina a distant second) is the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. While the official observances do not begin until 2011, Virginia’s sesquicentennial activities commenced in April of 2009 at the University of Richmond conference, “America on the Eve of the Civil War.” The four panels of historians present were limited in what they could and could not discuss, namely, they could not mention the Civil War. Panelists were not allowed to discuss any event occurring in American history past the date of 31 December 1859. The exercise was designed, according to University President Edward Ayers, to eliminate the temptingly “familiar and distorting luxury of looking ahead,” and to “see if people care about what led to the Civil War.”

The Virginia Commission began planning early, agreeing that the State’s anniversary motto should be “Understanding Our Past, Embracing Our Future.” The organization’s website features numerous articles listing Virginia’s qualifications as the nation’s leader in Civil War commemoration. Virginia provided the Confederacy with some of its highest-ranking generals, features the most Civil War sites, and, “three out of every five battles during the war occurred in

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Virginia.” Over $2.1 million have been appropriated for activities such as “traveling exhibits, developing an educational DVD, guided battlefield tours and a lecture series.”

On the other hand, the North Carolina Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee has taken a more thematic approach to the commemorative planning process. Although their website contains much of the same factual material as that of the Virginia Commission’s, this content is centered around three broad themes: “Memory, Freedom, Sacrifice.” These themes also serve as the states commemorative motto. Like Virginia, North Carolina organizers plan to include school-based programs and a lecture symposium in their observances. These projects are not slated to begin, however, until 2011. In the meantime, the committee has announced that seven of the state’s Civil War sites and six “non-traditional” sites will also offer commemorative programs. Without any specific references to the programs being offered, the committee asserts that the sesquicentennial program “will expand our sites’ view of the conflict, connecting the sites with a comprehensive approach that demonstrates how one event or aspect of the war impacted another.” The committee also disclosed that, “each of the thirteen sites has been asked to have a major project or interpretation related to the Civil War added to its permanent physical plant.”

The “ambitious” goals of North Carolina’s Sesquicentennial Committee for all state site interpretation for the 2011 commemorations, which encompass a broad interpretation of the Civil

60 Smith, “Virginia Gets Moving.”
War, acknowledge a shift in the way scholars and the public view time, history, and the relevance of memory to the formation of a national narrative. Like Virginia’s commission, North Carolina’s approach to this end is “a layered and interdisciplinary approach,” which encompasses a wide “understanding of the complexity of the issues surrounding the war,” and “transform[s] the interpretation of the events for a new generation.”64 Only time will tell if these goals are met, and to what degree they are developed at each specific site. Due to popular sentiments about Civil War interpretation, interpreters at Fort Fisher, which is North Carolina’s most visited state site, may have a harder time altering their interpretive approach than other sites in North Carolina’s historic landscape.

In hindsight, it may be easier to argue that “for all their efforts, Americans inside and outside the centennial establishment – the government bodies overseeing the exercise – did little to alter the ways ordinary people thought about (or did not think about) what novelist-turned-historian Shelby Foote called ‘the cross roads of our being’”65; that after initial grassroots efforts by Southerners to mobilize the centennial commemorations against desegregation initiatives put in place by the federal government, national interest in the celebrations waned; and finally, that any potential public awareness on the complex issue of race in America which may have been brought about because of the centennial observances were undermined and overshadowed by the political aspects of the civil rights movement and the consensus agenda of professional historians and the federal government.66 However, these concessions render all permanent institutions born from the centennial commemorations as ineffectual agents of public memory, unworthy of analysis. The popularity of Fort Fisher in the years since its designation as a State Historic Site

65 Cook, Troubled Commemoration, 14.
66 Cook, Troubled Commemoration, 264.
points to the lasting significance of the centennial observances to America’s collective memory of their first “common national experience.”\textsuperscript{67} The passion with which scholars associated with the sesquicentennial have denounced the one hundred year anniversary observances bolsters this fact. In his discussion of the successes of the University of Richmond symposium, David Blight called on the American public, politicians, and public historians alike to acknowledge the cause and consequences of the Civil War during the sesquicentennial as readily as they have embraced the valor of those who fought the war over the past one hundred and fifty years:

\begin{quote}
This time, we must commemorate our Civil War in all its meanings, but above all we must commemorate and understand emancipation as its most enduring challenge. This time, the fighting of the Civil War itself should not unite us in pathos and nostalgia alone; but maybe, just maybe, we will give ourselves the chance to find unity in a shared history of conflict, in a genuine sense of tragedy, and in a conflicted memory stared squarely in the face [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

It would be a mistake not to acknowledge that the drive to spend the Civil War’s one hundred and fiftieth anniversary discussing the causes and legacies of the conflict is spurred just as much by the follies of the centennial administration as it is by the historical significance of such an effort. Furthermore, the tendency of historians to “fast forward”\textsuperscript{69} from the centennial to the sesquicentennial divorces both commemorations from their historical context. The centennial observances should be treated with as much consideration by scholars as the Civil War itself because, if for no other reason, the centennial is part of the recent past – an actual shared and current national experience, complete with a living memory and a tangible legacy – where the Civil War is not. This is not to say that the Civil War does not merit consideration because it is part of the national memory and not part of the current generation’s accessible past. Indeed, the

\textsuperscript{67} Franklin, “A Century of Civil War Observance,” 98.
\textsuperscript{69} Blight, “The Civil War Sesquicentennial.”
very historical foundations of the centennial, as well as the turbulent events surrounding the observance, are grounded in Civil War memory. However, while the “causes” of the “political and historical debacle” that were the centennial commemorations are well established, scholars have just as thoroughly dismissed the consequences, perhaps to the detriment of the present administration’s noble objectives and goals.

As evidenced by the site’s interpretive evolution, Fort Fisher is an excellent example of a relic that belongs as equally to the centennial commemoration of the Civil War as it does to the war itself, and how memory and public places of remembrance reflect and perpetuate cultural attitudes and biases. Fort Fisher also exemplifies how mid-sized sites at the state level reveal the fusion of national and local influences on historic interpretation in the United States. The shift from celebratory to formalized rhetoric within the site’s different forms of interpretation depict a progression towards the static, battle-specific interpretation historians directly attribute to the centennial celebrations of the 1960s, a theory which was based on the widely accepted premise “that commemorations presented as official acts of consensus instead reflect the perspectives of particular groups.” While this sentiment may be true of the ephemeral nature of commemoration itself (that is, the act and ceremony of remembrance), it speaks nothing to the lasting and tangible impacts that these commemorations have on the public landscape; impacts which have resulted in the assimilation of many of the negative aspects of Civil War remembrance into nationally sanctioned public interpretations of that episode in American history. With the numerous and far-reaching activities in place for the sesquicentennial, historians especially are in danger of being preemptively self-congratulatory and overly

70 Blight, “The Civil War Sesquicentennial.”
confident that they have righted the wrongs of the centennial administration. They believe this to be true, ironically enough, because they have geared new interpretations to be more socially inclusive as well as encompassing of the broader causes and consequences of the war. However, the problems with the American Civil War centennial cannot be overcome if it is scrutinized as a static – or worse, inconsequential – event by the historians responsible for memory-making in the here and now.
Dear Sir,

I am writing you a few lines to ask you to please try that bill again about giving the poor old colored soldiers of “The Lost Cause” a pension in their last days in poverty and want. There was forty colored men went from Orange County with Mr. Manly Stroud at their head to Fort Fisher and Fort Caswell… You white people have it all in your hands and if you all don’t do it, no one else will. I am now 78 years old, so you see – it will not be for long you will have to give it to me…¹

And so goes one of the first pleas for government aid for “the poor old colored soldiers of ‘The Lost Cause’” by an ailing ex-laborer of Fort Fisher, North Carolina. Confederate veterans began receiving state pensions for their role in the “late unpleasantness” shortly after North Carolina was readmitted to the Union in 1868. This particular petition “for pensions for colored people who erected breastworks at Fort Fisher” was submitted in 1911, a full sixteen years before the North Carolina General Assembly enacted legislation that extended the provisions of Confederate Pensions “to such colored servants who went… to the war and can prove their service.”² Of the countless numbers of black men who endured the Civil War as laborers – free as well as enslaved – few survived long enough to apply for this overdue recompense. Yet, a story may be gleaned from these records; one that North Carolina State Archivist, Russell Scott Koonts, argues, “[has] received little attention.”³

The narrative Koonts refers to in his examination of “Black North Carolina Confederate Pensioners” is that of black Confederate soldiers who were “actually enlisted in the Confederate

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¹ Henry Pratt, Pension Request Letter from Henry Pratt, 1911 to Mr. John W. Graham, 25 February 1911, Archives General Assembly Session Records (Jan-Mar 1991), Washington, D.C.
² Public Laws of North Carolina, 1927, Chapter 96.
Army” in North Carolina during the Civil War, a small number of which were stationed at Fort Fisher. However, a larger number of these applicants were impressed into service as laborers, teamsters, cooks and body servants. The story of these men has received little to no attention in either the scholarly accounts or public interpretations of Fort Fisher’s significance in the Civil War, and yet is vitally important to a complete realization of both. What attention is paid to enslaved laborers in Fort Fisher’s exhibit hall is from the perspective of the officers in charge of the Confederate operations in the Lower Cape Fear district, General William H.C. Whiting and Colonel William Lamb. Needless to say, this sterilized, elite perspective of slave impressments at the site does not conform to the preferred interpretation methods of contemporary public historians. It also exists in stark contrast to the memorable presentation of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) activities at Fort Fisher in the site’s exhibit space. After the second battle of Fort Fisher in January 1865, the 27th Regiment, USCT participated in the final Union push to Battery Buchannan, thus solidifying the Northern victory on Federal Point. This significant action is documented in the exhibit hall’s main attraction, a large fiber-optic map, and on Battery Buchannan’s interpretive marker.

These two narratives (that of impressed laborers and USCT) share a common oral tradition in Fort Fisher’s educational programming, such as guided interpretive tours and special event programming, but more attention is paid to USCT in the site’s permanent exhibit space. Consequently, more authority lies with Fort Fisher’s USCT interpretation, which has a strong

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5 The men referred to above are Private Charles Dempsey, Private Henry Dempsey, Daniel Herring, Private Arthur Reed, Private Miles Reed, Private J. Doyle, and Private Everett Hayes. The full military service of these men is documented in Volume I of the North Carolina Troop Rosters. It must also be noted that, although these men were indeed listed as “Negro” soldiers in the state rosters, this does not necessarily mean that they were African American. Many Native American and Hispanic soldiers were listed as “Negro” soldiers during the war. Therefore, since the records are unclear, more research needs to be done to substantiate the assumption that these men were African Americans.
presence in both the exhibit hall and supplementary program planning, making this narrative the one more widely accepted by the public. The success of one African American narrative over another at Fort Fisher imparts the necessity of a unified message in every element of site interpretation, including permanent installations and secondary educational programming.

Discrepancies within Fort Fisher’s interpretive plan are not exclusive to its African American components. Fort Fisher’s interpretive plans maintain that the central idea of the exhibit hall is that the stronghold played a vital role as the protector of the last major Confederate seaport open to blockaders, stating that “the story in the visitor center-museum at Fort Fisher should be a continuous one, weaving together the events of the period regarding blockade running and the protection of this activity by Fort Fisher.” However, the overemphasis of conflict-based interpretation throughout the site’s educational programming waylaid Fort Fisher’s primarily economic message, and made the introduction of any social or cultural interpretations to the site’s permanent educational modules more difficult.

The blockade running museum that predated the fort’s present Visitor Center emphasized the importance of blockade running to the Confederate war effort, as well as Fort Fisher’s role in that narrative. Blockade running was a vital maritime aspect of the South’s logistical strategy during the Civil War. Fort Fisher maintained the supply routes between European ports in Bermuda and the Bahamas to the Southern port city of Wilmington. Blockade running was maintained as the Visitor Center’s primary interpretive topic. However, this important historical narrative was sidelined throughout the site in favor of popular Civil War

7 The visitor center was built during the national observances of the centennial anniversary of the Civil War from 1960-1965. Many of the exhibits from the blockade-runner museum were transferred to the Cape Fear Museum, located in downtown Wilmington, North Carolina.
centennial themes such as Confederate sacrifice, regional triumphs in site preservation and the valor of men in battle.

While local constituents fostered this Lost Cause pathos in Fort Fisher’s anniversary observances, the narrative developing inside the Visitor Center museum went a different direction. In 1964, Historic Sites Superintendent, W.S. Tarlton, sent a request to Fort Fisher archaeologist, Stanley South, for “a general outline… on what the museum should cover in a storyline.”

South replied with an interpretive plan that entailed “four major phases of interpretation.” The four interpretive phases South argued for were “A MOMENT OF HISTORY,” “THE EFFECT OF TIME,” “GATHERING THE CLUES” and “RESTORATION AND INTERPRETATION.”

The “A moment of history” section detailed the short period of time during which Fort Fisher was an active war fortification. “The effect of time” dealt with the man-made and natural forces that had transformed Fort Fisher over the past century. “Gathering the clues” outlined the efforts of the Department of Archives and History to research and interpret the site, while “Restoration and Interpretation” examined the process of artifact and site preservation.

South’s preference for preservation and research interpretation at Fort Fisher was undoubtedly influenced by his vocation in archaeology. However, other important factors played into his reasoning, such as the availability of artifacts. When the visitor center opened in 1965, site interpreter’s access to artifacts was limited to those “obtainable through archaeology or diving operations.”

South also put out a call in the local papers “to people who have items to

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8 W.S. Tarlton, to Stanley A. South, 26 May 1964, Fort Fisher Archives.
9 South, “A Story Outline,” 2.
11 Stanley A. South, to Frank, n.d. Fort Fisher Archives.
loan,” although he admitted that he was “not very hopeful of producing much in this manner.”

Noting at the outset that “some disappointment was expressed that there were not more, and more of a variety of artifacts available,” South proclaimed:

> It would seem to me that the concentrated effort as far as displays are concerned would be to construct displays utilizing the artifacts available rather than bemoaning what is not available… I am sure you three exhibit designers can do much better if you will concentrate on working with the materials at hand rather than concentrating on what is not available from the period.

South’s advice was heeded, resulting in the strong presence of preservation interpretation in the Visitor Center. Where exhibit designers failed to adhere to South’s vision was in fostering the “developing and interrelated” relationship between blockade running and the battles of Fort Fisher. Instead, the battles were given a distinct story separate from South’s vision. This autonomy paved the way for the later dominance of martial themes in Fort Fisher’s interpretation.

When site interpreters were presented with the opportunity to renovate Fort Fisher’s visitor center and exhibit hall in 2000, their efforts were no longer impeded by the limited availability of artifacts. The list of military artifacts added to the displays during the 2000-2002 renovations was substantial, and it is evident that this list and the subsequent military emphasis in interpretation was the result of the extensive networks and authority provided to the site by its status as a North Carolina State Historic Site. An “Artifact Wishlist,” composed by NCDCR curators and Fort Fisher site employees, included objects from several sources and of various

12 South to Frank, n.d.
13 South to Frank, n.d.
14 South to Frank, n.d.
historical periods.° Civil War related artifacts entailed “Enfield rifles,” “Naval curved blade” swords and an “1861 .36 Caliber” rifle. While such items as a “Rocket Launcher Bazooka,” an “Anti-aircraft gun,” and a “.50 Cal. Machine Gun” made up the World War II exhibit list.®

Funding for artifacts came from NCDCR, the Fort Fisher Restoration Committee, and funds appropriated from a recently passed North Carolina state legislature bill, which allocated a total of “$1 million for the development of the state’s Civil War sites.”°

Battle and conflict came to dominate site interpretation, both contextually and spatially. Moreover, the present success of USCT interpretation at Fort Fisher is directly attributable to the excessive presence of martial themes incorporated into the site’s interpretation during the 2000 NCDCR exhibit renovations. Comparing two similar anniversary events that centered on the role of USCT at Fort Fisher, but were met with very different reactions from visitors, supports this claim.

The planners of the “125th Commemoration of the Civil War in North Carolina” charged all sites participating in the observance with conforming their educational activities to three topics: “the black struggle for freedom, the contributions of women and children on the homefront, [and] Union and Confederate troop movements within North Carolina.”° The planning phase of this commemoration began in 1988 and entailed collaboration between the NCDCR, fourteen of North Carolina’s state historic properties, “many participating historical agencies and organizations from both public and private sectors of [the] community.”° The foundation on which NCDCR planners laid their commemorative efforts was the idea that “only

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17 “Fort Fisher Artifact Meeting; Memorandum from David Latham to Barbara Hoppe,” 1997, Fort Fisher Archives.
19 “Fort Fisher Artifact Meeting Memo.”
21 NCDCR Brochure, “The Civil War in NC.”
by understanding our past – our history – can we truly anticipate the future and plan for progress… [on] the belief that remembering the realities of war is the first step towards progress.” The broad connection of past hardships to future prosperity made by the NCDCR allowed for, what anniversary planners described as, “the black perspective of the war.” Event organizers declared further that this frame of reference “begins with a simple economic fact: blacks were the backbone of the North Carolina economy. They also provided the majority of labor for the construction of Fort Fisher, which protected the last major seaport in the Confederacy.”

However, the NCDCR concise summation of the role of slaves at Fort Fisher and the stronghold’s significance to the Southern war effort touched on two key, historical points that were not elaborated during the 125th commemorations at the site. Interpreters instead focused on the symbolic event of the 27th USCT role in the surrender of Fort Fisher in January 1865.

The preference of Fort Fisher employees to USCT interpretation over that of labor was logical in light of national trends in popular culture at the time. Fort Fisher’s anniversary program took place over the weekend of 13 January 1990. Later that same year, the widely acclaimed film, *Glory*, as well as Ken Burns’ pivotal documentary, *The Civil War* were released. Many parallels were drawn between *Glory*, a period piece based on the heroic feats of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw’s black regiment, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, and the USCT presence in Fort Fisher’s program as media coverage of both events ran concurrently. Moreover, the USCT reenactors that participated in Fort Fisher’s living history program, a group out of Washington, D.C., also participated in the film.

22 NCDCR Brochure, “The Civil War in NC.”
Full-page editorials outlined the motivations of *Glory*’s big-name actors, while vivid
descriptions of the experiences of the more than 250 volunteers at Fort Fisher’s program
appeared in features throughout the state.23 One periodical featured two articles on its front page
titled, “A Civil War reenactment,” which pertained to Fort Fisher’s 125th program, and “‘Glory’,
Glory Hallelujah,” that praised the film’s recognition of “the men who spilled their blood on the
beaches and cornfields of this nation when it was young: no matter the color of their skin.”24 A
small local gazette went as far as to note the ease with which history had “gloss[ed] over an irony
of the surrender of Fort Fisher to Union black soldiers, soldiers barely acknowledged as existing
in the first place until the recent release of the movie, Glory.”25 The editorial went on to urge “all
area residents, black and white,” to visit Fort Fisher’s anniversary program.26

Fort Fisher also received due attention in the press for “re-writing”27 the historical
account of African Americans at the site, independent from the popular success surrounding
*Glory*.28 At the time of the program, the role of black soldiers at Fort Fisher was newly
discovered information for local residents, as site interpreter Leland Smith conceded, “We really
didn’t know about the surrender until about the last year when we began research on this
program.”29 Like many of the articles advertising the role of USCT at Fort Fisher, Smith

23 “Actor reaches for ‘Glory:’ Civil War story depicts struggle of black regiment,” *Wilmington Morning Star*
Altamont Enterprise*, 8 February 1990.
25 “125th Anniversary worth taking the time to visit,” *The Island Gazette* (Carolina Beach, NC), 10 January 1990.
27 “Black soldiers accepted surrender at Fort Fisher,” *The Island Gazette* (Carolina Beach, NC), 10 January 1990.
Fayetteville Observer* (Fayetteville, NC), 31 December 1989; “Role of black soldiers part of program’s focus,”
*Goldsboro News-Argus* (Goldsboro, NC), 7 January 1990.
encouraged the local African American population to “come and find out what happened at Fort Fisher because sometimes ‘the Confederate Flag puts people off.”’

Fort Fisher’s 125th anniversary program did not mark the desired change in local perceptions of the role African Americans played in the history of the site, despite the best efforts of site employees, volunteers and the local press. One of the members of the African American reenactor group that depicted the 27th USCT during the anniversary program was cited in the papers as saying that he was “disappointed that more black people did not attend Saturday’s activities.”

More disappointing than low African American attendance at the program was the reaction from local residents to the inclusion of USCT in Fort Fisher’s event. These reactions ranged from one visitor’s mild insistence that people should adhere to the traditional narrative of the fort’s surrender to outright denial and sarcasm by others.

One such individual reacted to the USCT articles by dismissing the role of African American troops, asserting that the “true blame for the fall of the greatest earthen fort in the world lies with Gen. Braxton Bragg… who refused to supply the brave Colonel Lamb with the proper troops.” Another local reader followed suit, stating, “in no way do I want to take any honor or glory from black soldiers who fought so gallantly in the Civil War. History is history, however, and there was no surrender of battery Buchannan, as was stated at the Fort Fisher re-encampment.” The most aggressive attack from a local resident published in the papers was printed under the header, “An insult,” and read as follows:

I found your Jan. 12 write-up on the 27th U.S. colored regiment very interesting. This regiment was allowed the privilege of accepting the surrender of Confederate forces

30 “Black soldiers,” The Island Gazette, 10 January 1990.
31 “Fort Fisher recalls Civil War assault,” Wilmington Star News (Wilmington, NC), 14 January 1990.
at Fort Fisher. Perhaps your readers would like to follow the history of the illustrious 27th regiment after the war.

Exactly what role did they play in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, or did they perhaps assist General MacArthur aboard the USS Missouri in 1945? Of course not. As a matter of fact, not one Afro-American was present during either ceremony. The truth being the 27th U.S. colored regiment was used by the Washington government in 1865 only to humiliate and insult the Southern people.

Congratulations, Mr. Lincoln, on your victory at Fort Fisher. We still carry your picture in our pockets, but we celebrate another’s birthday.  

Despite local residents of both races’ indifference or rejection of African American history at Fort Fisher, there were some positive and lasting effects from the program on USCT interpretation at the site, as well as throughout the state. A Durham lecture series explored the role of African Americans during the Civil War in such capacities as “slavery, black troops, the Freedmen’s Bureau and … black legislators” as part of the 125th observances in other areas of North Carolina. Another event in Durham, North Carolina that occurred roughly a month after Fort Fisher’s program at Stagville historic site was a symposium titled, “The African-American Experience During the Civil War and Reconstruction.” This program featured topics such as the African American family, lynching and freedmen’s property rites during Reconstruction. Meanwhile, site administrators at Fort Fisher pledged to erect a marker dedicated to interpreting the role of USCT in the capture of Fort Fisher at Battery Buchannan. This marker was the first of two important additions to Fort Fisher’s interpretation regarding USCT.

The other addition to Fort Fisher’s educational cache came during the 2000 NCDCR renovations in the form of a fiber-optic map, located in the hub of the visitor center exhibit hall.

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36 “The African-American Experience During the Civil War and Reconstruction; Schedule of Events,” 24 February 1990, Stagville Center, North Carolina Division of Archives and History.
37 “Black soldiers,” The Island Gazette (Carolina Beach, NC), 10 January 1990.
38 Battery Buchannan’s present-day marker was placed in front of the earthwork as part of the North Carolina Civil War Trails Marker project.
The map has become the focal point of the Fort Fisher museum, partly because of its location, and also for its tactile appeal. When prompted, an audio narration imparts the details of the January 1865 battle and capture of Fort Fisher to visitors, accompanied by a fiber-optic light demonstration of troop movements across the map’s surface. Towards the end of the recitation, the narrator declares, “by 9 p.m. the federal mop-up operation was underway… the 27th U.S. Colored Troops enter the fort, and aid in the push to Battery Buchanan.”

This concise statement of the role of USCT, presented in Fort Fisher’s most popular exhibit attraction, has done much to legitimize African American interpretation at the site, and perhaps in Civil War public history venues as a whole.

The efforts of Fort Fisher’s museum staff during the 125th anniversary program greatly elevated USCT interpretation at Civil War sites. However, the assimilation of African Americans into Civil War memory was also augmented by scholarship contemporary to these achievements by public historians. Published in 1991, Rod Gragg’s important work on the battles of Fort Fisher, *Confederate Goliath*, briefly outlined the role of USCT in the surrender of the fort. Gragg also incorporated first-hand accounts from prominent USCT such as Reverend Henry M. Turner and Sergeant Christian Fleetwood in his description of the Fort Fisher battles.

Chris E. Fonvielle Jr.’s publication, *The Wilmington Campaign*, followed Gragg’s in 1999. The scope of Fonvielle’s work, which covered the entirety of the Federal campaign to capture Wilmington, allowed him to explore USCT participation in southeastern North Carolina to a greater degree than Gragg’s limited view. While the USCT, in Gragg’s words, were “largely unused throughout

39 Fiber-optic map, Fort Fisher Exhibit Hall, date accessed; 7 February 2010.
the battle, except for clearing the advance of brush and holding down the rear line,”\textsuperscript{41} they participated in several deadly skirmishes during the Union assault on Wilmington, which fell to the Federals on 22 February 1865. Fonvielle related one touching account of Wilmington’s occupation by Union troops in which a slave woman recognized her son marching with the USCT in a Union parade, ran “to embrace him in the ranks, and together they cried.”\textsuperscript{42}

Another significant publication on USCT by Richard M. Reid titled, \textit{Freedom For Themselves}, analyzed the formation of USCT regiments from North Carolina’s slave population during the Civil War. Reid’s book outlined each regiment’s unique role in the war, including their services during Reconstruction. Other themes included the hardships faced by soldiers’ families, contraband camp life, and the social discontent of black veterans. Reid’s work signifies an expansion of USCT history, as it comprises both the social and military histories of North Carolina African American troops who fought for the Union.

Almost a decade after the fiber-optic map was installed in the exhibit hall, the narrative of black Union troops has been more effectively assimilated into Fort Fisher’s historical presentation. The evidence of this claim lies with the successful inclusion of USCT into the site’s 145\textsuperscript{th} anniversary observances in 2010. During a panel discussion titled “Black Men Bearing Freedom; U.S. Colored Troops and their Impact in North Carolina,” hosted by Fort Fisher at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Dr. Fonvielle recounted the story of the slave mother and her soldier son to a crowd of eager listeners. Dr. Reid was also a panelist for the “Black Men Bearing Freedom” discussion, as were Dr. Mark Elliot and Dr. John Haley.\textsuperscript{43} The standing-room-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Gragg, \textit{Confederate Goliath}, 227.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Chris E. Fonvielle, \textit{The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope} (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 441.
\end{itemize}
only event took place the weekend of Fort Fisher’s 145th anniversary program, which highlighted the role of USCT in the capture of the stronghold.

In a National Public Radio interview about the panel, NCDCR employee, Michelle Lanier stated, “many of our historic sites work very hard to tell the story of the Civil War.” Lanier went on to state that the study of USCT offers historians a unique perspective on the war because “many African Americans during this time period saw the tear in the fabric of our nation and chose to walk through that tear toward humanity, even if it meant sacrificing their own body.” Fellow guest-speakers, NCDCR employee Dr. Jeffery Crow, and “Black Men Bearing Freedom” panelist Dr. Richard Reid, provided listeners with the historical context for Lanier’s public history analysis. Crow outlined the typical North Carolina slave experience, stating that North Carolina had a relatively small slave-owning population when compared to the rest of the South (twenty-seven percent of the state’s white residents owned slaves before the outbreak of the war). Crow went on to argue that this figure stands in sharp contrast to North Carolina’s overall black population, which comprised roughly one-third of the state’s residents in 1860. Reid concluded the segment by comparing the ease with which one could find primary source accounts from Northern USCT as opposed to their Southern counterparts. Reid did, however, offer one exception to this frustrating state of affairs:

One of the sources that lets you get into the voice of the soldiers themselves are the pension records. When the war is over, black soldiers as well as white soldiers, and black dependents as well as white dependents, could ultimately apply for Civil War pensions and in doing so they had to give all kinds of background information. That’s one of the few avenues into the lives of these North Carolina black soldiers.

Reid’s assessment of Southern-based USCT sources may also be applied to the analysis of labor impressments during the Civil War. The “background information” supplied by these applicants provides a crucial perspective into the inner-workings of the Confederacy during the war.

The success of USCT educational programs such as the recent UNCW panel discussion, living history interpreters and radio interviews would not have been possible without the group’s permanent presence in Fort Fisher’s exhibit hall and scholarly accounts of the site. Conversely, the unsuccessful interpretation of Fort Fisher’s slave laborers is directly attributable to its treatment in both the public history and scholarly accounts of the stronghold. In Fort Fisher’s exhibit hall, an outline of the significant points in the fort’s creation appears on an interpretive panel titled “Fort Construction.” The names of the officers in charge of the fort’s construction over the course of the war, as well as quotes from these men pertaining to the fort, appear on the wall above the artifact display case. These bios and quotations comprise the primary labels for the “Fort Construction” panel. Secondary and tertiary labels appear in the display case next to the artifacts. The two secondary labels read: “These tools, recovered from the fort, were used in its construction and maintenance,” and “Sword of Col. Charles Fisher. Fisher died at the First Battle of Manassas. The fort was named in his memory.” The label dedicated to Col. Charles Fisher belongs with his sword, which is the centerpiece of the exhibit case. The tools label and the tertiary labels accompany the rest of the artifacts in the case. They are: “short blade,” “hoe blade,” “mattock head,” “ripsaw fragment,” “ax heads,” “file,” “auger,” “hinge,” “strap hinges” and a “piece of palisade fence.”

Having Colonel Fisher’s sword with its corresponding explanatory label as the centerpiece of the artifact display detracts from the importance of the tools to the fort

47 “Fort Construction Exhibit,” Fort Fisher Exhibit Hall, date accessed; 7 February 2010.
construction exhibit. Consequently, it also diminishes the narrative of the men who used these tools in Fort Fisher’s historical account. While there are other examples of tertiary labeling in Fort Fisher’s hall, such as “dice,” “shell fragment,” “wine bottle,” etc., the use of objects such as augers and ripsaws is not common knowledge for visitors, and therefore deserve further explanation. Moreover, the account of Fort Fisher’s labor force that appears on the construction panel comes, not from the laborers themselves, but from the perspective of the fort’s commanding officer, Colonel William Lamb. There are no known diaries from impressed laborers at Fort Fisher to corroborate or refute the testimony of Confederate officers. However, the story may be fleshed out with the first-hand accounts of laborers who applied for state pensions in the 1920s.

However tirelessly impressed laborers toiled to build Fort Fisher during the Civil War, they had to work equally as hard after the conflict to receive any recognition or compensation for their efforts. The reason for North Carolina’s tardiness in awarding African American pensions may be traced back to the violent overthrow of Wilmington’s municipal government in 1898, an event commonly referred to as the “Wilmington Race Riot.” This is ironic, considering the fact that a significant portion of the African American war pension applicants toiled for the Confederate government in the Wilmington area. The decades before the race riot marked a high point in African American achievement in the post-bellum era. Wilmington remained North Carolina’s largest city after the Civil War, and also boasted the state’s largest black community. Although Democrats representing the city’s affluent white population held political power, the city was mostly comprised of African Americans and Republicans. Many black businessmen came to power during this time, and education for African Americans improved. Tensions began when the Populist and Republican parties united to challenge the Democrats’ grip on city
politics. This feud escalated and eventually prompted a violent reaction by white supremacists against the local black community, resulting in “the deaths of an unknown number of African Americans and the overthrow of the city government.”

There were several short-term effects of the 1898 riot cited by historians as being specific to Wilmington. For example, many of the city’s influential black leaders were banished after the violence subsided. Moreover, advancements made by African Americans in local business affairs suffered greatly because of the violence inflicted upon an unknown number of their community during the riot. On a grander scale, the long-term educational goals of blacks were also hindered as a result of the coup. Moreover, LeRae Sikes Umfleet, lead researcher for the Wilmington Race Riot Commission and author of *A Day of Blood*, asserts, “what happened in Wilmington… was part of a larger campaign to take over state government in 1898;” and a successful one at that. As a direct result of the race riot, North Carolina’s General Assembly passed the Suffrage Amendment in 1899, which curtailed the voting power of African Americans on the basis of literacy. Consequently, Republicans distanced themselves from their African American constituents following the ratification of the 1899 Suffrage Amendment, effectively ending hopes of a black presence in North Carolina’s political affairs for decades to come.

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49 The general condition of African American education in the South after Reconstruction is outlined in: James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Anderson asserts that there was a lack of secondary education for blacks between 1880 and 1935. Teacher training was also an issue. Furthermore, the notion of racial superiority came to play an important part in the stifling of African American education because planter elites had to make political concessions concerning education to the white Southern working class in order to halt the academic advancements of African American communities. The concession came in the form of universal education for white children, paid for with funds originally allocated to black Southern schools.
Umfleet carries her assessment of the cultural and economic impact of the Wilmington Race Riot up to the beginning of World War I, due to the fact that it was at this time “the port city began to undergo a series of economic changes similar to those occurring in the rest of the state and nation that affected all citizens, regardless of race.”\textsuperscript{51} Then, in 1927, African Americans became entitled to a two hundred dollar pension for services rendered to the Confederate government during the Civil War. This same document amended a previous pension act for white Confederate soldiers, increasing their benefits to three hundred and sixty-five dollars.\textsuperscript{52} It was difficult for black applicants to attain pensions because they had no written record of service, and there were few survivors who could corroborate their statements. Additionally, applicants were usually sick or infirmed, leaving it to their family members to find affidavits and apply on their behalf.

The manner in which pensioners came to work at Fort Fisher varied greatly. Some came as body servants to their masters, others were leased from their masters, while others still were, what white administrators referred to, of “the old issue of free negroes”\textsuperscript{53} who were conscripted into service by North Carolina State law. These men were collected from numerous counties around the state, such as Vance, Wayne, and Harnett.\textsuperscript{54}

The hardships faced by these men as impressed laborers knew no bounds. One applicant by the name of Hamp Cuthbertson recalled, while “building fortification and performing other strenuous manual labors under the direction and command of his masters,” he endured “severe

\textsuperscript{51} Umfleet, \textit{A Day of Blood}, xvii.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{North Carolina Public Laws}, Chapter 96, 322.
privation, hunger, illness, and punishments.”\textsuperscript{55} Another complained of the loss of the use of his feet “due to exposure.”\textsuperscript{56} Injuries abounded, as in the case of Nathan Bridges whose doctor noted:

I have examined Nathan Bridges (col) I find him not able for manual labor, more than (3/4) of his time. An account of an injury which he received while in the service in the late confederate war between the states while making breast works. He was winding with tackle block the rope broke. The crank struck him on the left hip and made a thickening of the membrane as he is a cripple from the lick.\textsuperscript{57}

More various than the hardships faced by these men were the types of work they undertook for the Confederacy. Most of the applications cited “building breastworks” as the petitioner’s occupation during service, but many others were teamsters, cooks, and body servants. Louis Thomlinson helped build telegraph lines, James McDaniel hauled “war freight” in Wilmington, Press Ledbetter was injured while attending horses and Jack Ingram stated, “On several occasions he was called out at night to stand guard and watch, as a soldier would do.”\textsuperscript{58}

More information is provided by the affidavits that accompany these applications. For example, to prove that Isaac High had served the Confederacy during the Civil War, Francis Williams signed an affidavit stating:

I well recall hearing during the Civil war my master say that help was needed to build brest works at Wilmington and that Green High would have to send Isaac because, he was the best hand in his place. So Isaac went and I remember him going it was in March. He stayed in Wilmington and Raleigh 18 months. After he came back he often told his expierences there and we negros enjoyed hearing him. He is the oldest High living.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Hilyard Crudup, “Soldier’s Application for Pension, State of North Carolina,” North Carolina State Archives, 22 April 1930.
\textsuperscript{57} Nathan Bridges, “Soldier’s Application for Pension, State of North Carolina,” North Carolina State Archives, 7 June 1909.
This statement testifies to the fact that oral traditions among slave communities formed lasting and important networks for blacks, especially in the post-war era. It also reveals how the culture of war and hardship at Fort Fisher has endured in African American memory since the Civil War.

A closer examination of sources such as the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, which supplied Fort Fisher curators with the officer quotes on the construction panel, provides a fuller understanding of officer’s attitudes toward impressed laborers, free as well as enslaved. The quote currently on display states:

Col. Lamb later recalled that an estimated “500 colored men” assisted in the construction of Fort Fisher. He pleaded with North Carolina’s governor, Zebulon Vance, after the first attack on the fort to “please send me five hundred [more] Negroes at once if possible with tools and rations. I will shelter them… Every Negro you send me adds to the protection of our soldiers and the safety [of] our homes. Too much precious time is being lost.”

This excerpt is meant to convey the approximate number of slaves that may have been laboring at Fort Fisher at any given time during the war. However, the number of laborers varied throughout the course of the war. In a letter dated 9 January 1865, from General Whiting to Major-General Gilmer, a Confederate engineer stationed in Richmond, Virginia, Whiting complained that, due to a lack of clothing, the labor force “seldom exceeds 600 for duty, all told, and distributed at Bald Head, Fisher, Oak Island, Smithville, and the city. This includes also all timber-cutters, mill-hands, and flatboatmen… so that the laboring force required to put up works is altogether too small.” Whiting added, “Desertions are constant, and I have no doubt that their...
owners encourage it, especially when the negro has been impressed. Some very severe example, such as trial by court-martial and shooting, is necessary.”

Whiting’s letter sheds more light on the slave experience at Fort Fisher than the quote currently displayed in state historic site’s exhibit hall. It outlines how workers were distributed throughout the Lower Cape Fear defenses, what type of work they did and the “hardship and exposure” they faced due to a persistence lack of clothing. The latter part of the letter, which dealt with desertion and punishment, reveals the desperation felt by Confederates on Federal Point after the first battle of Fort Fisher. It also demonstrates Whiting’s preference for free labor over that of slave labor at Fort Fisher, as does a second letter written by Whiting in early January 1865:

I am earnestly desirous of releasing all slaves, especially in view of the complaints I learn relative to clothing them… The act provides for the conscription of free negroes before impressing the slaves, and I hope, with your aid and that of your militia organization, to obtain a sufficient number of free negroes and to get back those that have deserted.

These documents give a whole new perspective to the African American experience at Fort Fisher during the Civil War; one that stands in stark contrast to the heroic USCT narrative currently on display at the site. However, rather than diminishing USCT interpretation, providing a full account of the fort’s impressed labor force would only serve to enhance Fort Fisher’s African American narrative in its entirety.

During the “Black Men Bearing Freedom” National Public Radio segment, Michelle Lanier, who is also a member of the North Carolina Sesquicentennial Commission, stated:

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As we approach the Civil War one-fifty, as we look at themes of freedom and sacrifice and memory, [we see] that there is room enough at this table for American Indian memory, for African American memory, for the memory of our new residents and visitors. Regardless of ethnicity there is room at the table to think about and reflect on what this amazing historical moment meant.\(^{64}\)

The success of the radio broadcast was due to the fact that the speakers provided a full view of the “African American memory” in question, incorporating both the slave and the soldier’s experience during the Civil War. But this multi-perspective approach has not been assimilated into every aspect of African American interpretation at North Carolina State Historic Sites. The preference for one aspect of ethnic interpretation over another at Fort Fisher may seem reasonable in light of the cultural, financial and scholarly influences at the site. However, Fort Fisher’s USCT interpretation cannot be fully understood unless it is in the context of its relationship to Fort Fisher’s impressed labor force, which was the largest group of African Americans to occupy the stronghold over the longest period of time.

These issues are indicative of the problems faced by state historic sites, which, in turn, coincide with many of the concerns confronted by national battlefields and parks. The National Park Service (NPS), for example, made drastic changes to its Civil War interpretation during the 1990s. Dwight Pitcaithley, once Chief Historian for the NPS, acknowledged, “Until very recently, the causes and consequences of the Civil War were studiously avoided in NPS literature and exhibits.”\(^{65}\) Pitcaithley went on to explain that the NPS desired to change their historical perspective because “the visiting public deserved more at these special places than a mere recounting of the battle.”\(^{66}\) The change was not received well by the public, as evidenced by the

\(^{64}\) “Black Men Bearing Freedom,” The State of Things, NPR.


numerous visitor complaints Pitcaithley cited in his study. The majority of these complaints came from local interest groups, such as the Sons of the Confederate Veterans. However, Pitcaithley merely noted these grievances, generalizing that Southerners tended to view any “mention of slavery in connection with the Civil War as disparaging, insulting, slandering, South-bashing propaganda.”\textsuperscript{67} The NPS easily continued its educational overhaul in spite of the “approximately 2,200 cards and letters of complaint.”\textsuperscript{68} Interestingly, Pitcaithley concluded that the problem did not lie in the communication between federal agencies and local constituencies, but rather between “professional historians and nonacademic historians of the Civil War.”\textsuperscript{69}

For the purposes of this study, it is perhaps a little too convenient to point to the disconnect between public and scholarly historians as the cause for the national tendency to perpetuate Civil War myths. While this rift is certainly an issue, state historic sites such as Fort Fisher have stronger ties to their regional support groups than their federal counterparts such as the NPS. The preference for USCT interpretation at Fort Fisher is attributable to national trends during the 1990s to assimilate African American narratives into Civil War memory. This includes shifts in public history such as the ones that occurred within the NPS at that time. However, it was only after these changes were established in Fort Fisher’s permanent historical interpretation that they were accepted at the local level. The reason for the success of USCT interpretation over that of impressed laborers is also apparent when viewed in light of the difficulties “that public historians encounter in dealing with the nation’s most enduring contradiction: the history of American slavery in a country dedicated to freedom.”\textsuperscript{70} USCT embody the national ideals of freedom, sacrifice and hope. As a result, their story has become

\textsuperscript{67} Pitcaithley, “A Cosmic Threat,” 176.
\textsuperscript{68} Pitcaithley, “A Cosmic Threat,” 176.
\textsuperscript{69} Pitcaithley, “A Cosmic Threat,” 184.
more popular than that of slaves in a country whose national narrative is “dedicated to freedom.”

While this is a part of the story, the ultimate goal of African American interpretation in the twenty-first century is for Americans to “learn from the ‘tough stuff’ of their history and how they apply the lessons learned to the challenges of their present and their future.”

However, this goal cannot be achieved without acknowledging the narrative of slavery in a way that is meaningful in the present.

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72 Horton, “Intro,” xiii.
CONCLUSION

In *History Museums in the United States*, Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig contend that “the lack of commentary on displays of local historical societies, short-term temporary exhibits, [and] out-of-the-way historic houses” by scholars and public historians is, though “lamentable,” to be expected, while “the reluctance to address historical presentations that affect the perceptions of literally millions of Americans” at institutions such as the Smithsonian is “harder to explain or justify.”¹ The majority of state-run historic battlefields arguably fall into the former of these categories, which Leon and Rosenzweig vaguely dub any of the “less well-known institutions” than sites such as the Smithsonian, Gettysburg or Mount Vernon. These assertions are made based on the premise of visitation, prompting Leon and Rosenzweig to conclude that “museum-based historical presentations” are of primary importance “in shaping the public’s perception of the past.”²

Conversely, historians such as Cynthia Mills argue that public monuments erected by Confederate veterans, women’s organizations and Civil War soldier’s descendants “became a central means of rewriting history from the Confederate perspective” in the early twentieth century.³ These “messengers from the past” impart the Southern ideals of “honor, courage, duty, state’s rights, and northern aggression” to present generations.⁴ John R. Neff concurs with Mill’s

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² Leon and Rosenzweig, *History Museums*, xii.
⁴ Mills, *Monuments to the Lost Cause*, xv.
assertions, stating “the frequency with which individuals and groups of ordinary citizens erected [Civil War] monuments… speaks to the importance of such activities.”

Since historians have elected to examine either large public institutions or monuments erected by local interest groups, little room is left for discussions of moderately sized, state-run public history venues. However, mid-level sites encompass the positive and negative aspects of historical interpretation prevalent in the national and grass-roots examples studied by modern scholars of historical memory. State historic sites carry the weight of institutional authority because of their affiliation with state government. This bond also allows historic sites privileged access to artifacts that would have been out of their means otherwise, as well as to a stable funding source. A site’s ties to state bureaucracy can also be restricting, as in-house revisions to educational programming are not permissible. On an ideological level, interpretation at state historic sites is sterilized through the bureaucratic process so that it may adhere more readily to the national historical consensus. This generalized interpretive style does not allow for alterations or exceptions to the prescribed storyline. It also tends to omit narratives that are deemed by some as gratuitous or superfluous to the status quo.

Alternatively, state historic sites also enjoy a large base of regional support. Like their counterparts in the state department, these local groups provide funding and support for the museum’s mission. They also help sustain visitation at the site, and provide site staff with a group opinion independent from the influences of state bureaucracy. However, historically grounded regional ideals about pride, identity and memory make it difficult for local groups to see the benefits of objectively interpreting site history. Therefore, these groups lobby for

5 John R. Neff, Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 3.
interpretation that sheds local history in the most favorable light, thereby emitting a measure of ownership over the site, as well as over public perceptions of the past as a whole.

Fort Fisher’s interpretive evolution exemplifies the fusion of bureaucratic practices with local agendas that occur at moderately sized sites in the public history field. During America’s Civil War centennial observances, Fort Fisher’s local constituencies bolstered a “Lost Cause” perspective in secondary educational programming, as well as a celebratory outlook on site preservation in the exhibit hall. The museum’s main interpretive theme pertaining to Fort Fisher’s importance as the protector of Confederate supply routes was undermined while the social aspects of the war, its causes and consequences, were not examined at all. Martial themes came to dominate site interpretation after the state bureaucracy gained influence over Fort Fisher’s educational programming during site renovations in 2000. The result was an interpretive model that adhered to the nationally accepted Civil War narrative without offending the dominant views of the site’s regional advocates.

Shortly before the Visitor Center renovation, Fort Fisher interpreters attempted to incorporate USCT information into their secondary educational programming. The impetus for this change was threefold: Site staff uncovered new information about the role of USCT in the capture of the stronghold, NCDCR prescribed a three-part educational agenda for the state’s 145th anniversary observances that included “the black struggle for freedom,” and the national cultural climate became more inclusive of African American Civil War history through popular films such as Glory. However, many local residents resisted the change. It took a permanent alteration to Fort Fisher’s primary educational programming, as well as in contemporary Civil

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War scholarship, for the inclusion of USCT interpretation to gain total acceptance at the site and in the community.

Today, USCT interpretation thrives in both Fort Fisher’s primary and secondary educational programming. However, due to its adherence to national and regional historic agendas, the museum is lacking in an inclusive social history, one that would incorporate the narrative of impressed laborers at the fort. While the successful inclusion of USCT interpretation at Fort Fisher did not attain the obvious goal of attracting more African American visitors to the site, it has made Fort Fisher’s staple visitor base more accepting of an inclusive Civil War history. It would be reasonable to assume that a permanent alteration to the site’s construction interpretation would have the same effect on visitor perceptions of the impressed labor experience at the fort. Additions to secondary programming during the sesquicentennial such as symposiums, reenactments and site tours are necessary steps towards attaining contemporary educators and historian’s goals of a broad social interpretation of the Civil War. However, these scholars must also look beyond the commemoration to the lasting impression historic site interpretation has on American Civil War memory, and lobby for changes accordingly.

While some historians such as Richard Handler and Eric Gable argue that the “new social history” does not fuse well with traditional museum practices, many scholars like James and Lois Horton counter that including slave interpretation in America’s Civil War sites is imperative to a full understanding of the confluence of race and power in contemporary society. This study’s conclusions support the latter of these arguments. Furthermore, a complete comprehension of the importance of USCT in Fort Fishers history is not attainable without first

unveiling their relationship to the fort’s slave laborers. These two dynamic stories of Fort Fisher’s African American groups are interrelated. Interpreted concurrently, they would provide a new and powerful perspective into the importance of Fort Fisher to America’s collective remembrance of its Civil War.
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