

Altogether Fitting and Proper: Civil War Battlefield Preservation in History, Memory, and Policy, 1861-2015

Jonathan D. Neu
Carnegie Mellon University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Neu, Jonathan D.. "Altogether Fitting and Proper: Civil War Battlefield Preservation in History, Memory, and Policy, 1861-2015." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 205-207.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12509>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Altogether Fitting and Proper: Civil War Battlefield Preservation in History, Memory, and Policy, 1861–2015, by Timothy B. Smith. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2017. xxiv, 328 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jonathan D. Neu is a Ph.D. candidate in history at Carnegie Mellon University. His research focuses on the Grand Army of the Republic and Union veterans' civic and reform activities around the turn of the twentieth century.

The Civil War sesquicentennial now lies behind us. But with continued commercial encroachment on historic lands, new threats to the 1906 Antiquities Act and our national parks, and intensifying debates surrounding Confederate monuments, current events have ensured that the war and its sacred sites have not strayed far from the nation's collective interest. In this sense, historian Timothy B. Smith's latest work tracing the history of Civil War battlefield preservation is especially pertinent as Americans continue to grapple with the ways we remember and conserve our heritage.

Smith's volume discusses several distinct eras of battlefield preservation—an activity that he convincingly demonstrates is “an evolutionary process”—each with its own accomplishments, failures, and major players (xvi). He tracks four key entities over time (federal, state, and local governments, as well as private organizations), assesses their strengths and limitations, and ultimately applauds the good work that grassroots initiatives have achieved in filling the vacuum that a comprehensive, federally backed preservation policy should have provided from the beginning.

Nascent battlefield tourism and the burial of Union soldiers in proliferating national cemeteries sparked the earliest preservation efforts. The wartime and Reconstruction-era years were dominated by non-government and veterans groups whose activities, Smith argues, largely resulted in “disjointed and partisan” outcomes (16). That gave way to a “golden age” of battlefield preservation (the subject of Smith's 2008 book, *The Golden Age of Battlefield Preservation: The Decade of the 1890s and the Establishment of America's First Five Military Parks*) that emerged as a result of North-South reconciliation and the willingness of a veteran-dominated Congress to establish national military parks around the turn of the twentieth century.

Later chapters break new ground by carrying the story up to the present day. The early twentieth-century transfer of battlefields from the War Department to National Park Service control, for instance, was a watershed moment marked by “change from veteran stewardship and visitation to nonveteran operation and clientele” (99). The

New Deal era brought money and labor to help consolidate and improve existing parks, even as the federal government began ceding new preservation efforts to state and local entities, as well as private groups. That trend intensified from the Civil War centennial through the era of 1980s fiscal conservatism (a preservation “dark age,” according to Smith), steeling historians and preservationists to take control through grassroots activism. Smith concludes by touting such private organizations, particularly the Civil War Trust, which he admiringly credits as “an all-out, comprehensive, undeniable” leader in today’s preservation efforts (192).

Readers may be struck by Smith’s assertion that postwar reconciliation between white Northerners and white Southerners (a phenomenon that historians have long linked to hindered social progress for African Americans and contemporary Americans’ obscured understanding of race and slavery as key causes of the war) had a forgotten silver lining. North-South accord, Smith argues, was a prerequisite for successful battlefield preservation as “the two sections . . . eagerly toiled in the same efforts” (35). That said, Smith at times overstates the amicability between Union and Confederate veterans, downplaying the many instances (recently highlighted by historians like John R. Neff, Barbara A. Gannon, and Caroline E. Janney) when white Union veterans stood up for their African American comrades and against Lost Cause mythology. More discussion explaining why cross-sectional cooperation over battlefield preservation transcended Union and Confederate veterans’ lingering hostilities may have given Smith a greater claim to engage with this newer scholarship on the boundaries of Civil War reconciliationism.

Meanwhile, historians of state or local history will likely appreciate the lengths to which Smith goes in describing lower-level governmental efforts to preserve the many peripheral battlefields that escaped the federal government’s attention. Smith frequently analyzes the ways federal legislation (for instance, the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act) presented new opportunities for state and local entities to wrest control of preservation policy. The narrative occasionally gets bogged down in long lists of preservation initiatives that may have been better addressed in appendixes. But this should not take away from the recognition that the author has done yeoman’s work compiling countless state and local preservation projects, backed by an impressive array of archival documentation.

The book’s greatest strength lies in persuasively characterizing battlefield preservation policy as ever changing and sensitive to political, economic, and cultural trends occurring in U.S. society. Smith also pro-

vides insightful suggestions about how and why certain persons or entities wield the power not only to preserve battlefields but also to interpret those sites for the public at large. With so many Civil War memory studies populating academic discourse recently, Smith has commendably added battlefield preservation policy as yet another concept influenced by Americans' contentious relationship with the war's legacy.

Great Plains Bison, by Dan O'Brien. Discover the Great Plains Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xiii, 150 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Gregory J. Dehler is a history instructor at Front Range Community College. He is the author of *The Most Defiant Devil: William Temple Hornaday and His Controversial Crusade to Save American Wildlife* (2013).

The decline of the American bison, more commonly referred to as the buffalo, is a well-known story. At one point as many as 30 million buffalo thundered across the Great Plains and beyond, but by 1890 only a handful of wild animals remained in its vast former range. Dan O'Brien does not introduce any new research on this historical drama but brings a fresh perspective as a South Dakota buffalo rancher. His love and appreciation of the animal and its natural habitat come through the pages of *Great Plains Bison*. As part of the University of Nebraska Press's Discover the Great Plains series, this slim volume of just over 100 pages is an introduction designed to be a quick-reading historical and ecological overview of the bioregion's keystone species.

Even though tens of millions of buffalo ranged through the Great Plains, the region always seemed vacant to successive waves of white settlers. According to the prevailing mindset, elimination of the buffalo was a prerequisite to settlement and development. But without the buffalo, the flora and fauna of the region were likewise destroyed, with disastrous ecological consequences. Cattle ranches were the first to fill the void, but the inhospitable Great Plains, with its blizzards and droughts, ended that experiment. Throughout the twentieth century chemical-intensive industrial agriculture expanded to almost every available acre, replacing the native environment with a regime of imported crops and animals that were protected by artificial fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, and supported by government policies and subsidies.

O'Brien's strongest chapters are the ones on agriculture, land use and transformation, and ranching, which are clearly the subjects the author knows the best. He shares several personal, almost spiritual, observations from his career as a buffalo rancher, which are the most thought-provoking and valuable aspects of the book. His closing chapter calls for greater respect for the buffalo and the environment.