



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Preservationist August 2022

Editor's Note:

Welcome! This is Number 2, Volume III of a three times/year newsletter featuring historic sites across the country responding to various challenges involving preservation in some way. Until the last issue, it was the Persistent Pandemic Preservationist. The Pandemic may not be through with us, but we are moving into a different era where it is not uppermost in the minds of curators and park rangers. So, I have broadened our focus here somewhat. Each issue will still focus on preservation at one or more sites. This issue features a famous battlefield in Montana and an announcement from a long-time CAMP member.

The original Persistent Preservationist was an excellent newsletter produced by esteemed CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).

Best regards—Nick Reynolds, Editor

Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument

This monument means so many things to so many people, as I discovered when I visited on a sweltering day this July — only a little hotter than the 90-some degrees on the actual day of battle between the 7th Cavalry and the Lakota & Cheyenne in June 1876. The points of view, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, are those of the National Park Service, the Native American tribes, and the US Army and the settlers it protected—not to mention us, historians and the history we write. A small foretaste of the issues comes from learning about the changing names: the 1946 designation Custer Battlefield National Monument yielded to the current designation in accordance with a law signed by President H. W. Bush in 1991. A monument to one side became a monument to both sides—that happens to sit on the 3000-square mile Crow Reservation (some of whose ancestors scouted for the cavalry).

It is a surprisingly beautiful place in southeast Montana, grasslands set on low-rising hills, with larger hills and mountains to the south and a river, the Little Big Horn, flowing through a nearby ravine, its passage marked by trees that, in the day, helped to hide the enormous Native American village that Custer's men did not appreciate until it was too late. As you drive in, you notice a national military cemetery to the right, with neat rows of tombstones, not just for the Indian wars but for those fallen in other wars. A crowded visitor center features a small museum and gift shop.

The main attraction is far and away the battlefield itself, with walking and driving routes that make it possible for the visitor to recreate the battle for himself. Near the visitor center is Last Stand Hill, where Custer and many of his men died. The tombstones on the hill are actually markers showing where the soldiers fell. Other markers, mostly further out, show where some of their attackers died. There is a monument to Custer and literally across the street a monument to the native American warriors, featuring large metal horses. All the monuments are tasteful and respectful. The visitors by and large are quiet as they absorb the experience.

The two Rangers I spoke to had devoted years to studying and interpreting the battlefield. One of them was a college professor from Texas who spends every summer at LBH, and gives moving talks about the battle and the battlefield. I learned some surprising facts. It took many months before the US Government started to bring order to the site. Initially Custer and his men — some 250 died in the battle — were stripped of their clothes and usable equipment by the victors. Soldiers who came upon them in the days after the battle buried the dead in shallow graves but left horse carcasses and bits of military paraphernalia that would yield their stories up little by little over the coming century to archaeologists. The remains believed to be Custer's were taken to his alma mater, West Point, in 1877.

I asked the college professor why this is such a compelling site. One reason he cited was that here the visitor can get close to death; he can walk up to and almost touch the piece of ground where Custer died. In this it is like two other great sites, the Arizona memorial at Pearl Harbor and Gettysburg, that also mark inflection points in American history. This was a cataclysmic —and unexpected—victory by the Lakota and the Cheyenne that ironically sealed their fate as the US Government moved with overwhelming force to avenge the defeat and enforce its policies. The final reason was that Custer himself was already a controversial character; the Civil War hero was only 37 years old when he died.



Looking down Last Stand Hill towards the river
(NPS photo)

I searched in vain for a pandemic issue. The best I could come up with was that at the height of the pandemic the visitor center limited the number of indoor visitors. This however does point to another issue. In the year before the Pandemic, the number of visitors was 241,000 — good for generating revenue but perhaps not so good for the site itself. On the plus side, the Park Service plans to construct a new visitor center that will channel visitors more efficiently through the experience — as well as better protect the collection and perhaps the fragile environment. NPS is collaborating with a variety of interested parties — especially including Native Americans — as it plans this improvement.

CHIP FROM THE CAMPFIRE

From October 16 through 27, 2022, long-time CAMP member John Langellier will be leading a tour of the Apache Wars in the Southwest. The trip aboard a comfortable bus coach begins at Presidio San Agustín del Tucson and ends in Santa Fe near old Ft. Marcy. Among other highlights are Chiricahua National Monument, Fts Huachuca, Bowie, Bayard, Ft. Selden, and Stanton plus nearby Lincoln, New Mexico. For details about this Stephen Ambrose Historical Tour, visit <https://stephenambrosetours.com>.