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The Battle That Disney Should Have Won

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So much for Disney's America. Our national mythmakers and their plans for a glorious theme park in Prince William County, Virginia, have been stymied by a cabal of aristocrats, horse breeders, environmentalists, literati, and historian-philosophers. But it isn't clear why the critics were so worried. Disney's take on American history might not have been the most original around, but it hardly posed a threat to the cultural integrity of the nation. The park might even have marked a leap forward in the production and marketing—tantamount, of course, to the consumption—of this country's past.

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The vision the critics had of Disney's America—mindless hordes flocking to celebrate "McHistory" rather than real history—was not only apocalyptic, it was hypocritical. Their attacks entirely ignored the course that the public presentation of American history has taken over the past hundred years or so. Since 1850, when the gentlewomen of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association raised a public subscription to purchase and then restore the home of our country's father and open it up to the masses, America's contribution to public history has been cruelly iconographic, channeling nostalgia through an astonishing number of supposedly restored historical sites. The 1876 centennial celebration and the colonial revival that followed spawned local historical societies all over the country. Historic homes went public, and in their depiction of the lives and times of the Founding Fathers they promoted a view of the past that was essentially landed and wealthy and aristocratic—a reaction to a contemporary world dominated by cities, industry, and the presence of new immigrants. Fifty years later, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Reverend

by Neil Asher Silberman
W.A.R. Goodwin established Colonial Williamsburg as a response to a disturbing cynicism for traditional values—it was meant to “impress upon coming generations deathless ideals.”

With the passage of the federal Historic Sites Act of 1935 and the absorption of scores of monuments and sites into the National Park Service, Big Government began manifesting its own interest in big-history-with-a-message. Closely mimicking turn-of-the-century historical pageants that told the uplifting story of a town’s growth—from the Edenic days of the Indians, through the first pioneer settlement, wars, and natural disasters, and onward to the inevitably prosperous present—the National Park Service started to select historic sites that would illustrate the most important stages of “man’s life on this continent,” as they put it. By 1972, the Park Service had so regimented its historical framework that every site had to fit into one of nine major themes—the Original Inhabitants, the Revolution, Westward Expansion, Industrialization, Society and Social Conscience, and more. It’s a vision of America not so different from what Disney’s America might have been.

Critics also seemed to imply that, in the past, the representation of history was somehow immune to the concerns of market forces. That just isn’t so. The business potential of tourism has always convinced local boosters and chambers of commerce to subsidize the local historical societies. The development of open-air attractions, like Plimouth Plantation, a kitschy shrine to the Pilgrims, and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, where the homes of famous Americans have been transplanted and restored, was directly tied to the ever-greater mobility of vacationing families. Colonial Williamsburg, believing it might be outdone by these other attractions, began marketing itself in magazines and on TV; you can now make a reservation at the Williamsburg Inn by dialing 1-800-HISTORY.

So what makes us think Disney’s America would have been so much worse than all the other monuments to facile notions of patriotism and good citizenship? To judge from its promotional literature, Disney’s America would have been nothing less than a computer-driven, virtual-reality incarnation of all those patriotic, 100 percent-American epics we once read about or watched—electronically jazzed up through the magic of Disney’s Audio-Animatronics® and carefully layered with a politically correct concern for Native Americans and other ethnic minorities. Business calculations would have ensured that all interpretations of the past would be acceptable to the broadest spectrum of the American population; they would, of course, have been middle of the road.

But Disney’s America would also have been far more exciting than any other historical park. Had the park’s gates opened as planned in the summer of 1998, visitors would have immediately entered Crossroads U.S.A.—a movie-set re-creation of a bustling once-upon-a-time town (no particular place) filled with people in period costume (in no particular ethnic or regional tradition) that would have been the starting point for an antique-train ride, “launching guests on an unforgettable journey through the
vivid tapestry of American history,” according to one P.R. brochure. Visitors to Disney’s America would have then gone on to explore nine contiguous “territories,” each conveying—a la National Park Service—a predictably upbeat historical theme. From the timeless ecowisdom of Native Americans, to the thrill of the Industrial Revolution, to the noble sacrifices of the Civil War, to the simple virtues of the American Family Farm, the park’s meticulously planned geography would have offered a pleasing, orderly landscape of clustered icons: a circle of tepees here and a quaint New England factory there; a Civil War fort looming over a peaceful Midwestern farmstead; replicas of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island facing a 1930s state fair (complete with Ferris wheel and ballpark), and a World War II airfield. This would not have been just another open-air museum.

What Disney was proposing to do in Virginia was combine the genius of P.T. Barnum with the inspiration of George Ferris—feeding the tourist’s desire to marvel at historical curiosities while satisfying the fairgoer’s craving for a mechanical thrill. In the Native American Village, for instance, visitors would have first viewed Audio-Animatronic® displays of Native Americans in blissful “accord with the environment.” They would then have climbed into huge rafts to experience “a harrowing Lewis and Clark raft expedition through pounding rapids and churning whirlpools.” And in the bustling town of Enterprise (just to the left of Presidents’ Square), parents and children would have boarded “The Industrial Revolution,” which—rather than spewing out the usual factory statistics and inventors’ biographies—would have taken its passengers on “a high-speed adventure through a turn-of-the-century mill, culminating in a narrow escape from its fiery vat of molten steel.”

At the (wheelchair accessible) Civil War Fort, meticulously reconstructed in consultation with scholars, the wizardry of Disney’s Circle Vision 360 technology would have transported visitors “into the center of Civil War combat.” And in the World War II-era Victory Field, visitors would have been able, “with the assistance of modern technology,” to “parachute from a plane or operate tanks and weapons in combat, and experience firsthand what America’s soldiers have faced.” Here at Disney, personal experience would have been all. You might even say that Disney’s America would have marked a dramatic shift from reverence of the past to satisfaction in it.

I don’t mean to suggest that Disney’s proposed 3,000-acre theme park, commercial center, and residential development wouldn’t have had its annoying downsides. It would have been yet another expensive place you’d have had to take your children, and its historical backdrops would have become tiresomely familiar locales for TV interviews with politicians and celebrities. But those aren’t good enough reasons to have stopped the project. The people who brought you Disney World and Epcot Center, Aladdin, Beauty and the Beast, and The Lion King have honed their mythmaking techniques to the point where they’ve become an acknowledged part of our national cultural heritage—and it would have been fascinating to see what the company’s so-called Imagineers would have done.

There are, of course, the familiar economic arguments to be made for or against letting a giant corporation into your backyard. There are the thousands of jobs and new tax revenues Disney would have brought to Prince William County. There are also the urban sprawl, the pollution, and the traffic. Disney did muster its own battery of concerned experts and included in its plans provisions for a large buffer of green space (including timberlands, wetlands and a golf course) to shield the surrounding country from the park; a moderate pacing of its planned residential development into three-five year phases (each subject to local approval); and a carefully planned rerouting of traffic to reduce auto exhaust.

I do think Disney could have gone further: it could have proposed ferrying visitors by train from Washington, D.C. That would have eliminated the need for any new roads, and at the same time Disney would have gotten to re-create the great age of rail travel. Perhaps R & K Memorial Stadium, soon to be abandoned by the Redskins, could have been transformed into a vast, quaint rail terminus, replete with conductors, porters, and station masters, all in colorful period costumes. It already has a huge parking lot.

But it is the argument about Disney’s impending violation of hallowed ground (the Manassas National Battlefield Park is only three miles away from the proposed site) that rings the most hollow. Urban sprawl and commercial blight far worse than that likely to be caused by Disney hasn’t dimmed our national veneration for Bunker Hill (surrounded by the high-rises of Charlestown, South Carolina) or the Alamo (hidden deep in downtown San Antonio). And besides, there’s a prob-

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lem with Manassas itself. It may, as the historian James McPherson says, be “hauntingly like it was” 130 years ago, but one of the reasons the 5,000-acre Manassas National Battlefield Park is so disturbing is that relatively few people actually visit it. The emptiness of the fields might be one of the most moving things about Manassas, but it also represents, well, emptiness—the absence of visitors.

What seems to have really been at stake in the battle over Disney’s America was the grating mock-naïveté with which the Disney planners trumpeted the project’s basic message: “We want people to leave the park feeling good about their country,” which is how leading Imagineer Robert Weis put it. This and similar feel-good pronouncements raised the hackles of respected historians like McPherson, David McCullough, C. Vann Woodward, and John Hope Franklin, all of whom charged that Disney’s America would dilute appreciation for real history.

But Disney or no Disney, the commercialization of public history is well underway. The depleted endowments and shrinking foundation grants for private restoration projects have forced them to become ever-more relevant and attractive to today’s vacationers. New exhibits and demonstrations dealing with ecology, social history, and the role of minorities have been promoted as a way of appealing to younger and broader segments of the national audience. Over the last twenty-five years, Plimoth Plantation has undergone a thorough retraining of its costumed interpreters, making them

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interact more directly with visitors and creating a grittier, funkier Pilgrim image, side by side with a family homesite of the ecologically aware Wampanoag. Colonial Williamsburg now downplays Rockefeller-style elegance and focuses on the lives of everyday citizens and on presentations of African-American history. This past October, the town staged a mock slave auction, an event which didn’t go down too well with the NAACP. Christy Coleman, the director of the African-American Department at Colonial Williamsburg, defended the show: “I recognize that this is a very, very sensitive issue. But it is also very real history.” Likewise, in the elaborate restoration of Ellis Island and in the establishment of other sites as the Women’s Rights National Historical Park and the Martin Luther King Jr. Preservation District, the National Park Service is targeting a wider audience. “Look, we’re not historians,” a Park Service contractor once told me. “We’re designers, and we’re always looking for the most powerful way to reach the greatest number of people with the optimum impact.”

For the main players in the “legitimate” history biz, the greatest threat posed by Disney’s America was its frightening reflection of what they were becoming themselves. Disney’s America would have been different from the more respectable forms of historical entertainment in America only in its vastly superior ability to build robots and thrill rides, not in its shallowness. Disney had the means and the willingness to hire historical consultants, Columbia University’s Eric Foner among them, and it would have brought the techniques of American historical mythopoiesis to their sublimest stage of development. That the depiction of history should be completely market-oriented and consumer-driven is clearly an idea whose time has arrived. Disney will undoubtedly build its America somewhere else in the country, where the competition with preexisting historic shrines isn’t quite so direct or intense. The main achievement of Disney’s America’s critics has been to temporarily blind us from seeing the theme park as the epitome—not the antithesis—of 1990s-style American public history.

Neil Asch Silberman is an author with a particular interest in the politics of historical presentation. His most recent book, The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism, and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls was published by Putnam in October.