“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History
Women’s History Doesn’t Begin or End: An Interview with Turkiya Lowe

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Turkiya Lowe has been the chief historian of the National Park Service (NPS) since 2017, but her tenure at the NPS spans two decades. Lowe entered into the Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program about 19 years ago, as a rising senior at Howard University. In the course of her time with the NPS, Lowe has seen a shift toward looking more expansively at the American story—from narratives that prioritized heroic, military men to ones that value the histories and experiences of underrepresented communities.

Lowe had been particularly gratified to promote the research and interpretation of women’s history, in particular that of women of color, at historic sites. We spoke with her about her work and about the evolution of women’s history sites within the NPS.
The NPS has been proactive in recognizing and celebrating the stories of all Americans, including by developing initiatives and theme studies for underrepresented groups. How were the investigations and outcomes around women’s history different from other theme studies?

We first undertook an investigation of women’s histories in the 1980s. Instead of developing a historic context with individual sites listed, the NPS generated a list of large-scale sites that we felt were nationally significant. That theme study was not an expansive investigation of women’s history. Rather, it focused on identifying sites that we knew right off the bat were significant for their associations with individual women who did amazing things, who were first in their field, who won congressional medals, and who had other large-scale accomplishments—and were being protected, or needed to be protected, through the National Historic Landmark (NHL) Program.

As part of the NPS “Telling All Americans’ Stories” initiative, in 2011 and 2012 we focused on women and began looking holistically at women’s history. This time around, we looked more at individual stories—everyday, lived histories of women within our sites. This represents a shift in thinking, away from focusing exclusively on the actions of men to including the actions of women as well as their contributions to building the whole story. As with some of our past theme studies, we still identified those individuals who contributed to significant events in history, but this time we were looking more at patterns—patterns of gender development; patterns of civil rights; patterns of engagement in politics, inside and outside the home; and patterns that capture the silent work that women do.

The stewards of many historic sites are revisiting their interpretation plans and doing new research to bring out a fuller story. Can you give an example of an NPS site where women’s history is now being told for the first time or in a different way? We’ve focused a lot in the last five to seven years on expanding the individual stories of women—their lived history within our
parks. We’ve expanded beyond our legislative purpose for our park units to really look at the participants. And while those participants have always included women, we may not have told their individual or collective stories at our sites.

One example is the Oney Judge story—the escape story at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. In implementing our “Civil War to Civil Rights” initiative, we created trading cards that presented individual stories within the parks. While making those, we realized that we had not previously interpreted the Oney Judge story—her escape from enslavement by George and Martha Washington.

Staff at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site in Vancouver, Washington, have been doing important research about women at the fort, particularly around the pre–Civil War era. They’ve uncovered the story of Monimia Travers—a woman who was enslaved by a U.S. army captain and freed in 1851. The park’s archives include her freedom papers. And the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site in Philip, South Dakota, is featuring great interpretation about women missileers—telling that more recent history from the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s of all-women crews as well as the first integrated crews on missile sites.

All these stories are new or updated in the spirit of this initiative based on research and our own resources. We are attempting to recapture such stories, to hear women’s voices and study their lived experiences within our parks and in relation to the nationally significant events that we document.

A number of the stories that you mentioned are intersectional—relating to the woman’s race as well as her gender. Has the NPS encountered challenges in doing that work? Can you speak specifically about intersectionality and telling women’s stories?

One of the challenges that we have encountered in the earlier study of women’s history is knowing where to begin and where to end—because it doesn’t begin or end. Women’s history is not a separate category, although we oftentimes view it that way for the purposes of scholarship. But lived experience isn’t separate:
Women are African American, they are racially identified, they are sexually identified. Women are interwoven into the definitions and identities of class.

Sometimes it’s a matter of bracketing the story. We at NPS are charged with telling the breadth of United States history, but it can be difficult to operationalize that in our individual units, each of which is charged with telling a specific story. In some ways we are bound by our legislative purpose—which is usually limited to one identity—and that becomes part of the challenge. We are also a very large and very bureaucratic organization, so sometimes integrating the most current scholarship, which is always evolving, into our interpretation can be challenging. But so many of us are trying.

As an agency, we are trying to meet these challenges in part through our online interpretation and research. Our Telling All Stories website gathers content from all around the NPS—from multiple parks, multiple programs, using tags such as “women’s history,” “women at work,” “women in the war.” So we’re pulling from multiple sites to create these stories, which are individual but also speak to the larger patterns in women’s history—what it means to be an African American woman, what it means to be a working-class woman, what it means to be a white woman—and what it has meant to be those women at different times, in different time periods. We have to be careful not to, in telling these individual stories, forget the multiple identities of all women in our history.

The centering of underrepresented communities has spurred the creation of new units of the NPS focused on women’s history. Could you talk about some of these new sites? How have they been received? Has this generated new interest in women’s history?

One of the sites that I want to highlight is the Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument in Washington, D.C., which was designated in 2017. This site is a companion to the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York, advancing the story of women’s suffrage and women’s rights from
the 18th to the 19th century. Belmont-Paul has spurred us to complicate the history of women’s rights and voting rights in interesting ways that again touch on intersections—in this case of gender and class. The tools that the women of the 18th and 19th centuries, often powerful women in formal spheres, used to address inequality and the lack of civil rights stand in juxtaposition to the women of the 20th century who used these activist techniques and their public voices to gain formal political power, voting rights, equal treatment, and justice.

Belmont-Paul has brought up questions about what it means to be a citizen of the United States, reminding women that we did not always have the vote, that women sacrificed and struggled, were
shunned, arrested, and ostracized to obtain those rights. What does that mean for today?

Another example is Harriet Tubman National Historical Park in Auburn, New York, and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad park in Church Creek, Maryland. The park in Maryland is focused on Tubman’s work as an Underground Railroad activist, as a freedom seeker herself, whereas the site in Auburn addresses her post-slavery and post–Civil War social work. The two parks reflect different narratives about womanhood—the fighter and the caregiver—both of which have influenced how women focus their energies and have shaped women’s achievements and accomplishments. Two park sites dedicated to interpreting the history of one woman shows that her one life can create multiple legacies and different impacts.

These units have been very well received. Visitorship to those parks has been excellent in the first year, especially at Belmont-Paul—which is near the Capitol, and so has attracted not only tour groups but also congressional visitation. Some of the public engagement meetings that the U.S. Treasury Department hosted around the inclusion of women on the $20 bill were held at the Belmont-Paul House.

The local community has been helping us tell the stories at the Harriet Tubman sites as well as at Belmont-Paul. And the National Women’s Party has been instrumental in maintaining Belmont-Paul, helping with its interpretation, and ensuring the accessibility of documents and research.

The National Register of Historic Places and the NHL Program are potential tools for promoting women’s history. Can you give some examples of properties nominated thanks to the NPS focus on underrepresented communities? What has the NPS done to dismantle obstacles to nominating properties associated with underrepresented groups?

One of my favorite sites is the Pauli Murray Family Home in Durham, North Carolina. We partnered with the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites [NCWHS] to nominate
that site, which is focused on Reverend Pauli Murray’s civil rights work as an attorney as well as her role in the National Women’s Party. The site is therefore connected with contemporary advocacy and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The nomination of this site came out of the focus on telling all American stories and particularly our focus on women’s history.

The Casa Dra. Concha Meléndez Ramírez in San Juan, Puerto Rico—which honors literary critic Concha Meléndez Ramírez—is unique because we had not previously designated a site for a Puerto Rican woman. It was an honor to do research and participate in the creation of that NHL for a site that also came out of the Telling All Stories initiative and the focus on women’s history.

One of the barriers we’ve identified to nominating properties associated with underrepresented groups is simply the lack of necessary information. We’re, again, a bureaucratic agency with criteria and paperwork that members of the public may not understand or may not know how to access—often because we haven’t reached out to them.
Public outreach to ensure that community groups, which are already preserving many sites at the local and even state levels, starts with introducing those communities to the NHL program and the associated criteria. The next step is providing training and on-site assistance to help those communities document their own histories. Through the Telling All Stories initiative, we have made a concentrated, targeted effort to say, “We are here. We understand that your story is nationally significant. You’re already doing the work on the ground, but the NHL program is another tool through which to tell your story. We can use this tool to assist you in your preservation efforts.” I am thinking specifically of the Asian American Pacific Islander National Historic Landmarks Theme Study as an example of successful public outreach.

One challenge that is often associated with nominations to the National Register and the NHL program, is having enough information to meet the integrity standard. How does the NPS help groups manage those criteria?

Part of our job is to communicate to the community that a resource with “high integrity” is not necessarily one that meets all seven integrity criteria; all of the criteria are important, but not all of them are equally important for every property. The criteria that best illustrate why a site is significant are the ones that should be emphasized when writing a description of that site or thinking about its preservation.

That said, there are very real barriers to access. We have to acknowledge that the integrity of historic resources is oftentimes affected by the race and class of the surrounding communities. Historical barriers to accessing funds have made it difficult to maintain and preserve a site’s physical appearance from a particular period. And when telling the story, we need to acknowledge that that fact might be part of the story—that the change in the physical appearance of a place and its setting could be part of its legacy and a contributing aspect to its integrity.
In 2012 the NPS and the NCWHS hosted the “Telling the Whole Story: Women and the Making of the United States” workshop focusing on the need to research, interpret, and preserve women’s history within NPS parks and programs. How have recommendations from that workshop been implemented and/or expanded upon? What recent successes can be attributed to the outcomes of the workshop?

The movement on the women’s history theme study—nominating individual sites like the Pauli Murray House—is one of the recommendations that came out of the workshop. The workshop also precipitated a shift in mindset. As we moved forward into celebrating the NPS centennial and the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, we really started focusing our interpretation on what was happening with the women who experienced historic events. What was the experience of women in the Gold Rush? What was the experience of women at battle sites—as nurses, as fighters, as spies? We have started telling those stories through our individual sites—like the story of Cathay Williams, the only known woman Buffalo Soldier.

In the Park History Office, we are undertaking an oral history project about civil rights in the NPS, spurred by an interview that our program conducted with Tina Short, one of the first African American women to serve as a park ranger in the National Capitol Region. We’re interested in placing women back in the story not only as historical actors but also recent participants.

I would say that the increase in the number of NHLs related to women’s history and in the number of history sites that are specifically legislated for women’s history are both markers of success—but so is the inclusion of individual, everyday women’s stories in our narratives of the past.

The NPS is seeking to expand our stories, and we need partnerships to do that. Partnerships with scholars, partnerships with organizations such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation can help us identify what should be preserved and tell the stories that need to be interpreted. The patterns of our designations in the last couple of years reveal that we’ve really
focused on partnership parks because we realize that many people and organizations are already telling women’s stories. As an agency, we just need to provide the mechanism to amplify that work. FJ

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TAKEAWAY
Explore the women’s history archives of the National Park Service’s “Telling All Americans’ Stories” initiative.