

New Directions for the Boston National Historical Park's Charlestown Navy Yard

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The National Park Service faces significant challenges at the Charlestown Navy Yard. Large industrial structures are inherently difficult to preserve and interpret. The Boston National Historical Park's founding legislation did a poor job of explaining the role of the CNY in the larger park, and the focus of its interpretation, and remains inadequate. The story the park tries to tell is difficult: it covers almost two hundred years of history, with complex themes that don't lend themselves well to traditional means of interpretation. These challenges are compounded by the significant mismatch between the procedures and mindset of the National Park Service and the realities of working in a mixed-use, rapidly changing environment with many partners. The National Park Service has done some excellent work at the CNY, but to move ahead it must make some hard decisions, some of which may require breaking new ground for the organization.

This report outlines several possibilities for future management of the Navy Yard site. After a summary of the themes that seem appropriate for the site, and of the interpretive resources available there, it outlines the difficulties of attempting to continue to work in the present way. I believe that trying to preserve all of the buildings at the site, and to tell all of the stories they might tell, is not sustainable. The National Park Service must make some hard choices.

I offer two directions the National Park Service might consider in planning for future work at the site. It might focus its energy on a smaller number of structures and a shorter time period, tying interpretation to the era of the *USS Constitution* and connecting an interpretive theme of Freedom of the Seas to the present Freedom Trail themes. It might move some of its interpretation to virtual rather than physical

spaces. These alternative interpretive strategies, based on rethinking goals and methods, and finding new ways to cooperate with partners at the site, will allow the Charlestown Navy Yard site to tell important stories in a sustainable way.

Three themes, and the resources to tell their stories

The Charlestown Navy Yard site has the potential to tell important stories that are told nowhere else in the National Park system. These stories—the nation's use of the Navy to project power around the world, American industrial life and work, and of the rise and fall of industrial cities—are among the most important aspects of American history. But they are also among the most difficult to tell in traditional Park Service or museum ways. Their artifacts are large or diffuse; they are intrinsically political; and they are about policy and economics, war and diplomacy, topics that do not easily lend themselves to story telling with artifacts.

1. *Naval history.* The Navy plays a major role of the history of the United States' engagement with the rest of the world. This important story to tell, and the CNY is as good a place as any from which to tell it.

Navy yards provide support for the work of the Navy, and that work is to project American power around the world. It is impossible to understand the CNY separate from the work of the Navy. The size and expense of the operation, the effort put into innovation, the location, its rise and fall; all of these are based on the demands of the Navy, and beyond that, of US diplomacy and foreign policy. (It also tells a story of domestic politics—why this yard, here? Why was it closed?—that may be harder for the Park Service to tell.)

The Charlestown Navy Yard, then, provides an opportunity to tell the story of the Navy, and through that, the story of America and the world. This should be appealing to the National Park Service. It's a story of enormous national importance, and one that no other Park Service site can tell. From 1800 to 1974, ships built, provisioned, repaired, and maintained at the CNY were involved in every important

naval conflict. Some of those stories are well known: the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War II. Others deserve to be better known: the role of the Navy in blocking the slave trade, in American imperialist adventures at the turn of the twentieth century, and in the Cold War.

Of course, the navy yards play only a supporting role in these stories. The real action—not just the naval battles, but the far more common watching, waiting, and guarding—took place on the high seas, or off the coasts of lands far from Boston. But because little survives from naval battles or patrol, navy yards are as good a place as any to tell the story. (In a few rare cases, Navy ships survive; while the ships are grand artifacts, they have significant problems both of preservation and in the stories they can tell. More on that later.) Boston's role in the story is no more important than that of the other early navy yards, but it is the only Park Service site among that group, and the only one preserved, and open to the public.

2. Industrial work. Industrial work defines a century of American history. From about roughly 1880 to 1980, the United States thought of itself as an industrial nation. For much of that period, more workers were employed in factories than any other kind of workplace. At its peak, the Charlestown Navy yard employed some 50,000 industrial workers. The Yard was in many ways typical of large factories. It was a place of managerial oversight, work, innovation, labor strife, and personal ambition. The men and women who worked there built ships, repaired them, and refitted them. They invented new systems for use on ships, and new machines to make the specialized goods the Navy needed. They were part of a complex system of industrial management. Although the Navy Yard was part of a government operation, and therefore differed in some ways from a private business, the nature of work and organizational control was much the same.

The material culture of industrial work is revealing, especially today, when factories are disappearing from the American landscape and many visitors have no personal or family connection to factory work. Scale tells the story here, as do materials,

spaces, and organization. Buildings and machines capture something of the nature of work. Of course, not all of the buildings remain at the CNY, and many fewer of the machines. But there are sufficient material to provide a sense of the bigger story: dry docks, cranes, solid granite and brick buildings of peculiar layout organized on a grid of streets, some industrial machinery, even an industrial safety sign. The story of industrial work is, of course, much more than the story of machinery and factories, or of new technologies, but it may be possible to tell much of that story with what is available at CNY, complemented by images and words.

3. *The city*, from preindustrial to industrial to post-industrial, is all around CNY, and that's a story that the National Park Service needs to tell. At its founding, the CNY was an industrial outpost in an agricultural and commercial city, one of a small number of shipyards in the area. In the late 19th century it was a major employer in the city, a defining characteristic of Charlestown and, to a lesser extent, Boston. During World War II it was likely the largest employer in the city, with over 50,000 workers at several sites. In the 1950s, it reflected Boston's new high-tech focus, with its role focused on upgrading ships with the new technologies of radar and sonar for the Cold War. Its closure was part of the disappearance of heavy industry from much of New England, and the decline of Boston and its Charlestown neighborhood. Today, it is a perfect microcosm of the post-industrial city of "eds, meds, feds, and beds," the former industrial buildings filled with universities, research centers, hospitals, government installations, and hotels.

The Navy, industrial work, the rise and fall of the industrial city: these are all important stories not told, or not told well, in the National Park Service system. Parks have a hard time representing battles at sea, and an even harder time telling the story of the patrolling of the world's oceans that was the duty of the Navy for most of American history. Industrial work is represented by a few sites in the Park Service (Harpers Ferry, Lowell, Steamtown, Rosie the Riveter, Rivers of Steel), but the story of the heavy, skilled manufacturing and repair of the sort that took place at

the Navy Yard is not well told. The story of industrial cities is told at Lowell and Paterson, but with a much different emphasis. And none of these sites have nearly the visitation of the Charlestown Navy Yard.

The Park Service should take advantage of the half-million visitors a year to the Navy Yard to tell these stories.

A range of resources

Boston National Historical Park has a range of resources with which to tell these stories. While some of these resources are powerful, even evocative, others are much less so. And it does not have sufficient resources to tell any of the stories to their full extent, or as well as they should be told. Thinking about resources will shape what stories the National Park Service can and should tell at the Navy Yard, and how it should tell them.

The story of the Navy projecting American force around the world is told by the ships, the USS *Constitution*, and USS *Cassin Young*, and by the infrastructure of the yard.

The ships, of course, are the most prominent part of the story, the artifacts that get visitors' attention. Both are challenging objects, in different ways. The *Constitution* is well taken care of, with superb financial support, though not under National Park Service control; the story the Navy tells there might not focus on the story that is most important for the Park Service. The *Cassin Young*, though also owned by the Navy, is more immediately under the control of the National Park Service. Its challenge comes in the continued costs to keep it afloat and the difficulty of getting visitors to focus on the National Park Service's storyline.

And these two ships tell only a part of the story, from roughly 1800 to 1850, and from 1940 to 1970. To tell the story of the Navy patrolling the seas, at least one more ship would be required, or represented: a ship from the turn of the 20th

century, to represent the Great White Fleet, the Spanish-American War, and World War I. (I'm not suggesting that the National Park Service acquire such a ship, necessarily. In general, ships are too expensive to maintain for the story they tell. Still, it's only reasonable to point out the *Olympia* is probably available...)

The infrastructure of the Yard tells something of the story of force projected around the world, but only by inference. Why was the federal government willing to invest the millions of dollars it did in navy yards? Some great national goal was achievable only by supporting the Navy at a very high level, building many buildings, buying many machines, hiring many men and women, and the CNY is a sign of that.

But the infrastructure more directly tells the story of industrial work. The chain forge tells this best. It's the only industrial building preserved with machinery intact. The machines, together with the most impressive material space come closest to providing visitors with a feeling for industrial work of any of sites at the Yard. But that is not very close. The machines are dead. The building is impressive, in its way, but it is a misleading representation of what it would have been like when it was in operation. The ropewalk, too, suggests something of the nature of the work that went on at the Navy Yard, or at least the scale of production. But that building too is misleading; the equipment is gone, the building dark. The exterior of the building, its specialized nature, the obvious expense that went into building it, might tell more than the interior. (It should be noted that the NPS does not own these buildings, but controls their interiors, leading to a stalemate that needs to be broken; it's only a matter of time before fire claims one or both of these buildings, or before the machinery in them is destroyed by rust and decay.)

It may well be that the buildings, equipment, and spaces of the Yard other than these buildings say more about the Yard. The scale of the space, the large cranes, the dry docks, and most important, the many buildings now in the BRA part of the yard, suggest the importance of the yard, the amount spent on it, the diverse nature of the work that went on. This suggests that interpretation should extend outdoors, and

beyond the National Park Service-controlled area of the site.

The commandant's house also helps to tell the story of the site, overall. Its commanding location and elegant interiors suggest the importance of the supervisor of the Yard. Unfortunately, so little remains of the interior that it's hard to tell the story of the Yard from the house. Even if it refurnished it would be a difficult resource to use well.

Finally, the story of the changing industrial city is told in some of buildings that still survive at the Yard and, presumably, beyond. The gate and the walls tell the story of an industrial enclave. The buildings, in their modern reuse, tell very well the story of change over time, especially over the past few decades. Charlestown's history is connected to the Yard; we didn't see enough of the city to know if worker housing, bars, and other structures might be interpreted to fill out the story of the city that surrounded the Yard, and how it reflects the changing workforce of the Yard, and their daily lives, or the ways in which contemporary Charlestown interconnects with the contemporary adaptively reused Yard.

Two Interpretive Possibilities

The Charlestown Navy Yard, with its complicated stories, multiple partners, and incomplete and confusing, though important, resources, does not lend itself to easy interpretation. That's clear from the long history of the National Park Service work at the site. While significant progress has been made (the acquisition and repair of the *Cassin Young* and the new interpretive center, for example), the long-time stalemate on the chain forge and ropewalk buildings and, more generally, a lack of coherent presentation that takes advantage of the whole site suggests the problems—and possibilities.

The problems with a traditional Park Service approach are clear. That approach would be to embrace the complexity of the site, and try to tell all of its important stories, over its entire life span. Imagine a Park Service with sufficient funds to tell

the whole story: the Chain Forge, brought to life in a sound and light show; the Ropewalk put back into action, making rope; the *Cassin Young* recreated as a ship being worked on in dry dock—perhaps the moment of repair in the 1950s, put to use to tell the story of skill and technological change at the CNY during the Cold War (highlight the cranes, find equipment like the guns that were taken off in the 1950s, repair and put them on the dock nearby); the *Constitution* reinterpreted, at least in part, as a story of shipbuilding and repair. A Navy ship from the Great White Fleet, or the Spanish American War (the USS *Olympia* is available!) to fill out the story....

All of this is possible, but none of it is cheap. Restoring the Chain Forge building is several tens of millions of dollars; telling that story in a visually exciting way another few million; adding a new ship to the roster would be millions more. And these expenses would be ongoing; ships need constant repair, industrial activities need many interpreters; the larger area being interpreted would require significant additional staff and fund to maintain. And even were this done, it's not certain that the audience at the site—mostly there for the Freedom Trail, and the *Constitution*, would flock to the new attractions.

In any case, it is unlikely that the National Park Service will have the funds to tell this whole story, at least not in a traditional way. And so I present here two interpretive suggestions. The first is to focus the story on the early history of the Yard, and tie it to the Freedom Trail. The second—if it seems essential to tell the whole story because of the legislation that founded the Park, or for political purposes, or because it's the Park Service way—is to tell that story in a new way, using new tools. It's possible to combine these proposals, telling the story of the early period in artifacts, the latter part virtually. Neither of these proposals fit easily within the Park Service rules and traditions for how sites are to be interpreted. But those rules were not made for and do not work well for sites like the CNY, and the site might serve as an excellent test bed for new interpretive techniques.

1. *Focus on the era of the USS Constitution*, from roughly 1800, the year of the

founding of the Charlestown Navy Yard, to 1855, when the *Constitution* saw its last active duty. The mission of the US Navy in the first half of the nineteenth century was to insure the freedom of the seas to American commerce, and to enforce the ban on the slave trade. These missions make for an excellent fit with the Freedom Trail and the Black Heritage Trail. Indeed, one might imagine branding this story as the Freedom of the Seas Trail. It also makes for a straightforward and coherent story.

It would be fairly simple to focus the story told at the CNY on this story. The story of the *Constitution* is well told by the Navy and the USS *Constitution* Museum. While they do not directly address the theme of the freedom of the seas—they focus on the War of 1812, on just the one ship, and the work of sailors aboard ship rather than the politics that sent the ships to sea—there's enough overlap that they could tell significant parts of this theme, and the National Park Service tell the rest.

Telling this story would make interpreting the Commandant's House quite easy. Restored and furnished to some point in this period it would serve to tie the work of the Yard to hierarchy of the Navy. Several dates are possibilities: perhaps 1805, when it was newly built, and when Samuel Nicholson (first Commandant of the Yard, and before that Captain of the *Constitution*) lived there; perhaps 1812, to talk about that war; or perhaps 1816, when the *Constitution* was being worked on at the Navy Yard.

Focusing on the *Constitution* would allow the Park to return the *Cassin Young* to the Navy. Perhaps its story could be told at the new Rosie the Riveter WWII Homefront National Historical Park in California; perhaps a city would find the ship useful. While the Park has invested a great deal in the *Cassin Young*, it will always be an expensive ship to maintain. It will probably require the dry dock full time, before long, conflicting with the maintenance needs of the *Constitution*. Eliminating it from the CNY will allow the Park to use funds currently spent on its maintenance to tell a coherent story well, rather than trying to tell a large and complex story without sufficient resources.

Many of the buildings at the site date from this period, and their stories could be told using the virtual techniques outlined below. It might make sense, in this scenario, to consider putting significant effort into interpreting the ropewalk building. It's of the right era, and tells the story of mechanized, industrialized labor in support of the fleet. It provides for a good transition from craft to industrial skill, a key story not just for the Navy but also for American history more generally. On the other hand, it's a difficult building to interpret, with very little remaining machinery, and a distant location. I'm not sure it's worth it.

Of course, much of the surviving landscape of the Yard dates from after this period. That probably will not confuse visitors, though: enough of the buildings are from the first half of the nineteenth century to provide context, and much of the rest is far enough removed from the period under discussion that it's unlikely to confuse them. And I don't think that visitors expect the ship to be in a pristine nineteenth-century setting, any more than they expect the Revolutionary building in downtown Boston to be in an eighteenth-century city. Leaving the traces of the later Yard in place, perhaps with virtual interpretation (see below) would work well.

2. Embrace the full complexity of the site, tell the whole story, but do it virtually. As noted above, it's very expensive to renovate the buildings, find and restore appropriate machinery, and add exciting modern interpretation to the entire site. Even if there were funds to do that, there are other problems: the National Park Service does not own much of the site; there's a hodgepodge of historical time periods and contemporary uses that will always be confusing; and there are many overlapping stories to be told, many of them without good physical resources.

It might be that new techniques for virtual interpretation, using mobile devices, will allow the Park Service to tell the stories of the Charlestown Navy Yard. The Park Service has begun to experiment with mobile interpretation, including an iPhone app for the Boston National Historical Park. The Charlestown Navy Yard, a

technological site in a city that prides itself on technological innovation, would be an ideal place to go further.

There are a variety of ways to rethink the interpretation of the site using these new tools. One can simply explain what's there, adding a layer of information to existing buildings and structures. One can virtually add back in missing artifacts, providing a more in-depth experience for visitors. There might be ways to do combinations of real and virtual, adding small exhibits around the site to attract the attention, and add physical reality, to the users of virtual tour devices. If the Park Service decides to focus on the 1800-1850 era, Option 1 above, the period after that might be interpreted using mobile devices. Using mobile devices would allow the National Park Service to interpret not just the areas under its control, but also the areas for which the Boston Redevelopment Authority is responsible.

This technology, and especially its use in historical interpretation, is still in its early phases. A few examples suggest the possibilities: the Museum of London's Streetmuseum and its successors (Streetmuseum Londinium) allow a visitor to see how the part of the city they're visiting looked at an earlier date.¹ Cleveland Historical allows for video and audio tours tied to location.² HistoryPin allows for overlays of historic images on contemporary sites.³

Some examples of how this technology might be used:

- Tell the story of the ships that were repaired here by showing them, virtually, in both dry docks—visitors could pick a date and see what was going on in the dry dock at that date
- The *Cassin Young* might be interpreted to tell both WWII and Cold War stories
- Use QR codes or similar technology to allow visitors to learn more about, or to take virtual tours of, the buildings that are in the part of the Yard controlled

¹ <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Resources/app/you-are-here-app/home.html> and <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Resources/app/Streetmuseum-Londinium/index.html>

² <http://clevelandhistorical.org/>

³ <http://www.good.is/post/historypin-app-uses-augmented-reality-to-visualize-the-past/>

by the BRA. Use augmented reality to allow visitors to look into buildings that are closed to them

- Bring the cranes to life, using the work they once did to explain the changes in the work of the Yard
- Use the Commandants House as a place for an overview of the yard, with virtual reality telescopes mounted on the porch to portray the Yard at different moments in time.

Moving interpretation into the virtual will allow the Park to extend the story both geographically and chronologically, at significantly lower cost than traditional techniques.

Conclusion

The Charlestown Navy Yard has important stories to tell, but they can't be told in the usual Park Service way. It is important for the NPS to make some bold (if difficult) decisions that allow it to focus its time and money on first-rate interpretation at the Navy Yard, rather than trying to cover many stories poorly. Focusing on the first half of the nineteenth century is one way to do that; using virtual tour techniques that allow the full story to be told without the expense of owning and renovating historic buildings is another. A combination of these techniques is possible, of course, and may be the best option. But some choice should be made, and soon.