

Scholars' Site Visit Report Charlestown Navy Yard, May 15-16, 2012

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What is the Charlestown Navy Yard? The sign that visitors encounter when they visit this unit of Boston National Historical Park summarizes more than two hundred years of history of the Navy and service to the fleet. Yet the visitor's attention is directed to just four selected "destinations" in an expansive landscape—the Visitor Center, the USS *Constitution*, the USS Constitution Museum, and the USS *Cassin Young*—suggesting that the spaces between and beyond these highlighted points are detached or less worthy. The red lines on the map delimit and chart a route through a space that is a parking lot, not only in appearance but in function. It is a parking lot for historic ships and tourist services, and it requires a high degree of self-motivation and interest on the



1. Sign at Entrance to Charlestown Navy Yard

part of visitors to penetrate the security barriers and to absorb enough small print from text panels to appreciate the significance of their surroundings. Even if they tour the four prescribed destinations, visitors have seen very little of the Charlestown Navy Yard, the great bulk of which lies beyond the red lines and dots on the map. If they take time to examine the exhibits in the Visitor Center Museum, along with the artifacts and stories of the Navy Yard they will encounter an opening panel titled "A Site Rich in History" that refers not to the Navy Yard but to the

Bunker Hill Monument and landing of British troops in 1775. This displays the National Park Service's recognition of visitor expectations when they come to Boston, but it also projects an institutional perception of the Navy Yard as a problematic site within Boston National Historical Park. Despite concern for "resources" (the ships and collections), the sense of the place is diminished.

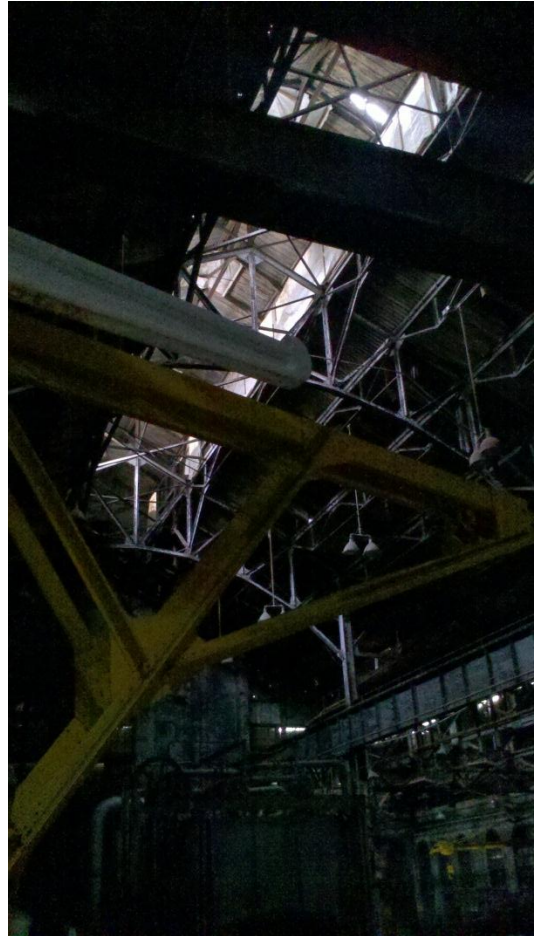
The perception that the Navy Yard is a problem for the Park Service is of course the motivation for inviting scholars to visit and assist in addressing the challenges of the site. I suggest that the questions posed may be approached not as problems but as opportunities:

- Given the array of existing resources within the Charlestown Navy Yard and the history of the place, what are the important themes of this place?
 - Within the Navy Yard there is a disparate array of resources spanning two centuries. How do we make sense of this?
 - How does the Charlestown Navy Yard, as separate and distinct from the U.S.S. *Constitution*, tie thematically to the larger park and *Freedom Trail* context?
 - How is the U.S.S. *Constitution* integrated into the Navy Yard story and the Freedom Trail?
 - What is the story (or stories) we should be telling here at the Charlestown Navy Yard and with what resources?

To state the question in its essence, what is the Charlestown Navy Yard?

If we release ourselves for a moment from the red lines on the maps, and the Freedom Trail, and understandings of history packed away in reports about historic resources and interpretive themes, what might we see? We might begin to recognize the opportunity that is before our eyes. In its current state, the Charlestown Navy Yard is an astonishing demonstration of the American experience of transition from an industrial to a post-industrial age—and thus a dramatic presentation of the history, issues, and challenges of our own time. Beyond the route currently mapped for visitors are the massive, haunting, beautiful and dangerous ruins of large-

scale industry. Industrialization and deindustrialization were the dominant forces shaping lives and American history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in northeastern cities. Does the National Park Service have a better opportunity to preserve and provide access to this history? If preserving buildings and machinery is beyond the realm of possibility, how might the experience be documented—not only through measurements and reports that will serve institutional purposes but through artistic expression to capture the essence and scale of light, sound, and feeling? Would it be impossible to light the interiors and allow visitors to glimpse this world of the recent past through glass?



2. Chain Forge interior

Or to animate the exteriors with sound?

The ruins are only part of the story, because redevelopment of the Charlestown Navy Yard also is part of its history, not just an inter-agency headache. In place of industry, there is the “meds and eds” economy, represented by the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Research Center, Partners Healthcare Systems, the Institute for Neurodegenerative Diseases, and others now occupying Navy Yard structures. Buildings that formerly served military and industrial purposes now house condominiums for professionals who commute to service-sector jobs in Boston. Amenities such as cafes and parks have been created for their enjoyment. The addition of the Navy Yard to Boston National Historical Park in 1974 is itself part of this story. In an age

of globalization, post-industrial cities compete on the basis of tourism, and especially on the basis of local histories that hold the potential to make any city distinctive from its competitors.¹ This is plainly visible—but yet unacknowledged—by the Charlestown Navy Yard’s presence on the Freedom Trail, itself a marketing tool.

Granted, the story of deindustrialization is not the history that brings visitors to Boston, but does that mean it should not be accessible? The changing landscape of the Charlestown Navy Yard over the last fifty years may not be the organizing theme for anyone’s vacation, but it would richly support the National Park Service’s commitment to civic engagement (<http://www.nps.gov/civic/>). In cooperation with the redevelopment authorities, the Navy Yard could be a living laboratory for high school or university programs in economy, business, and historic preservation, or a center for vocational training in construction or maritime trades. Perhaps with the underutilized Commandant’s House as a base of operation, it could be a forum or classroom for debating the choices we make in a changing world. The Navy Yard could be (and largely is) an experiment in regenerating a neighborhood. It could be more than it is at present, without diminishing its other significant histories.

Embracing this most recent period in the Navy Yard’s history would mean extending its period of “significance” beyond 1800-1974, but this can be achieved in coherence with the existing focus on earlier times. We were asked, “Given the array of existing resources within the Charlestown Navy Yard and the history of the place, what are the important themes of this place?” The Charlestown Navy Yard Historic Resource Study identifies four historical themes: the history of the American Navy; the history of technology; the history of social and worker

¹ David Held et. al., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Nezar Al Sayyad, ed., *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Steven V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850-2000* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Christopher M. Law, *Urban Tourism: The Visitor Economy and the Growth of Large Cities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002).

movements; and the history of American architectural design and planning.² We heard these categories echoed during our visit, particularly in concerns over choices to be made between emphasizing military or industrial history. But categories such as these create artificial separations between interrelated histories and therefore create a risk of distorting the past. Charlestown Navy Yard is about the connections between industrialization and the military; these are one story, and they foreshadow the “military-industrial complex.” In fact, new research is tracing the origins of the military-industrial complex to the late nineteenth century, opening the door to new interpretations for the Charlestown Navy Yard.³ Themes for the Charlestown Navy Yard should enable understanding of the ways that the military, technology, the workers, and the built environment functioned together.

Interestingly, the various aspects of the Navy Yard’s history that are affirmed as separate categories in the 2010 Historic Resource Study are mixed together in the Interpretive Themes stated in the Boston National Historical Park Long-Range Interpretive Plan (2002). In the Interpretive Plan, the listed “themes” and “subthemes” constitute a lengthy sequence of facts rather than a thematic focus for interpretation, but they contain useful connections to the dynamics of work, life, and history at the Charlestown Navy Yard. Some correspond to themes that I perceive as promising for enhancing interpretation at the Navy Yard and connecting with other resources in Boston National Historical Park.

Power. The Navy Yard tells the story of military, industrial, and national power, thus offering chapters in the nation’s history following the American Revolution. This may be interpreted quite literally, through the forms of power that drive the machinery of ships and the

² Stephen P. Carlson, *Charlestown Navy Yard Historical Resource Study*, Extracts for Scholars Visit (Boston: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2010), 3.

³ Katherine Epstein, “Inventing the Military Industrial Complex: Torpedo Development, Property Rights, and Naval Warfare in the United States and Great Britain Before World War I” (Diss., Ohio State University, 2011).

shipyard, and through the manpower required to put this into action. This theme also allows interpretation to encompass the projection of the nation's power to the world. In the current Interpretive Themes, the Navy Yard is identified as “symbolizing the nation's commitment to defend the republic and assert American power,” but I did not perceive an emphasis on this during our visit. Such a theme connects well with the history of the American Revolution, an uprising against abuses of power. And it connects with the post-industrial history of the Navy Yard, which offers opportunities for understanding how sources of power change. If the United States is no longer an industrial power, then what are the sources of its influence? How does it project its power to the world today?

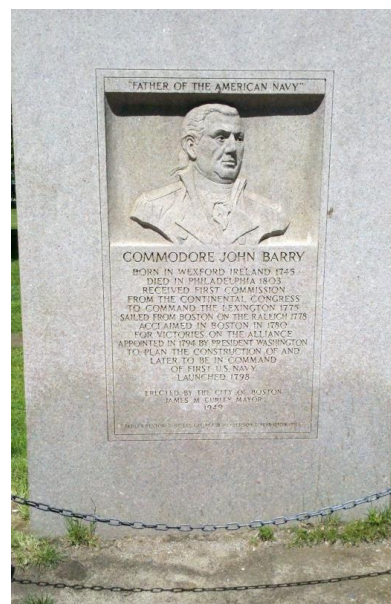
Innovation in the Face of Necessity. The redevelopment of the Navy Yard in recent years is only the latest example of a long history of responding to change with innovations. The existing Navy Yard subthemes state that “the Charlestown Navy Yard helped to develop and implement new technology to meet the changing needs of a changing navy” and that the buildings have changed “in response to changing needs over time.” The *Charlestown Navy Yard* historic handbook is full of examples, including changes in the yard as a result of changing economic conditions—certainly a resonate theme in our times. This again is a theme that is known but not foregrounded in the visitor experience, so far as I could tell. If care is taken to explain not only what changed, but why, and how, this theme has the advantage of linking to the recent history of the yard as well as to the Revolutionary-era history of Boston, which could also be understood in terms of social and political innovations in the face of necessity. The theme of innovation also opens opportunities for partnership with the Boston History Collaborative, which has stressed this aspect of the city's history, and the envisioned Boston History Museum, which if realized would feature an Innovation Gallery (<http://bostonmuseum.org/vision.html>).

Individual and Collective Action. As the U.S.S. *Constitution* Museum demonstrates, a deep engagement with history may be achieved through the stories of individuals. In the larger scope of the Navy Yard, the opportunity lies in bringing to life the way that thousands of individual stories comprise the nation's ability to build power and wage war. In addition, this theme allows for attention to the way that forces beyond our control, such as economic downturns or world events, shape individual lives. As the Interpretive Themes state, "The Charlestown Navy Yard, USS *Constitution*, and USS *Cassin Young* are physical reminders of the willingness of citizens to defend the republic..." but the citizens also need to be present in the interpretation. The role of individuals is communicated well in the Charlestown Navy Yard film, but visitors seldom see it. The film could be put to better use in the form of clips available on screens in the Visitor Center Museum exhibits, or better yet on the exterior walls of the Visitor Center or in the park's developing smartphone applications. A focus on the role of individual citizens allows the Navy Yard story to connect with the surrounding neighborhoods of Charlestown, with the story of the American Revolution, and the continuing story of the Navy Yard as a neighborhood and workplace for Bostonians today.

Boston and the Sea (the United States and the World). Understanding the significance of the Charlestown Navy Yard, and Boston's place in American history, requires a leap of perception for today's visitor. Waterways must be perceived as places and connections between the United States and the world, not as barriers between masses of land. Boston is ideally suited to present the historic significance of the sea, but I do not recall anything from two scholars visits to Boston National Historical Park that engaged us in seeing or experiencing waterways. The ships, anchored in their parking lot, are out of their natural context. The tourist naturally focuses on the things inside, not the world outside. As the Interpretive Themes state, Boston is "a city

shaped by the sea,” but the words on paper do not seem to be translated into the visitor experience. This offers another connection between the Revolutionary era, the Navy Yard’s productive years, and the recent years of recreational uses of urban waterfronts that are no longer sites of industrial production. It is also an opportunity for connections and partnerships. Boston is filled with scattered references and markers of maritime history. At the Museum of Fine Arts are magnificent paintings of ships and the sea, including John Singleton Copley’s *Watson and the Shark*. The monuments in the Public Garden include a memorial to John Barry, the Irish-American hero of the Revolution-era Navy. On the streets of Boston are markers that no one seems to notice for “The Norman B. Leventhal Walk to the Sea,” a mile-long trail from the State House to the waterfront. If anyone paid attention, this offers the remarkable experience of walking on ground that once was an active harbor. All of this is to suggest that the Charlestown Navy Yard, together with the rest of Boston National Historical Park and other sites in Boston, could look more to the sea for the opportunity to engage visitors with a history that they may not put together for themselves.

3. Fragments of maritime history in Boston



The themes that I highlight here are embedded in the planning documents of Boston National Historical Park, but in practice they did not come through to me as a visitor. I did not, of course, have the experience of a typical visitor, but it appears that the variety of resources has focused staff attention on the appearance of incoherence and away from the histories that allow for very natural connections to be made. This is compounded by the various entities interpreting the Navy Yard's resources—the National Park Service, the Navy, the operators of the *Constitution* Museum, and the redevelopment authorities. And it is embedded in maps and signage that point out disconnected “destinations” and arbitrary boundaries, such as the lines showing what lies in the control of the National Park Service and what does not. The one recurrent message, it seemed to me, was that the Charlestown Navy Yard is “old” and therefore something to see.

Of course, themes only have value if they are interpreted effectively for visitors. It was not possible in this visit to evaluate techniques of interpretation because in most cases we had special tours, not the standard visitor experience. There were, nevertheless, some indications of opportunity for enriched interpretation. One challenge mirrors the park's concern for connections among its various resources; to this, I would add the challenge of making connections from “resources” (objects and landscape features) to stories and to themes. It is good interpretive practice to use the resources at hand, of course, but even Freeman Tilden's time-honored principles call for leveraging the resources in provocative ways.⁴ The Visitor Center Museum unfortunately does not provide interpreters with a model for interpreting material culture in ways that lead to new knowledge of culture of society. Our visit there was brief, but the artifacts seemed to be displayed as illustrations for stories on separate text panels, not as access points for

⁴ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

knowledge and discovery, which might be achieved by applying methods of material culture interpretation.⁵ For a visitor, the most basic identification of objects—the starting point for understanding—is difficult because labels are often separated from the objects.

The current experience of the Charlestown Navy Yard also seems to assume that visitors will arrive with enough knowledge of historical contexts to understand where they are and what they see. The concerns expressed over confusion of chronology (the American Revolution vs. the War of 1812) distract from the larger issue, which is the need for access to understanding the various events and eras that the resources represent. What was the War of 1812 about? Or the Civil War, or World War II? What was the world like for the people of Boston, and for Americans, who experienced those times? Technologies such as touch-screen kiosks and cell phone applications will provide points of access for these contexts, but they need to be evident enough in on-site interpretation to awaken visitors' curiosity. There seems to be a particular need for background on the Cold War, which is a factor in the Visitor Center Museum and on the *Cassin Young* but never explained. (The Massachusetts Korean War Veterans Memorial in Shipyard Park is an underutilized resource for tapping into this period and also demonstrates how sound can be used to animate a landscape feature.) Explanation also is lacking for the closing of the Navy Yard and its transition to a tourist attraction and redevelopment site.

How to move forward? It appears that the National Park Service has a challenge in overcoming ambivalence about this site so that its significance can be communicated with enthusiasm. As a starting point, the interpret themes need to be focused so that they are indeed themes, rather than lists of topics and facts, and so they address not only *what* but also *how* and

⁵ See methods described in Thomas Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman Altamira, 1982), and Jules David Prown, ed., *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000).

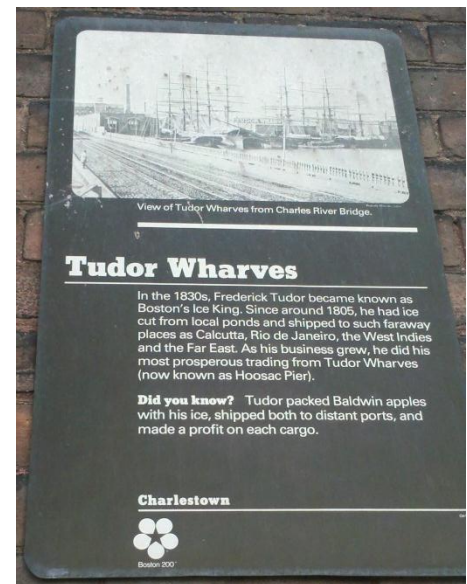
why. If the themes can be phrased as questions, so much the better. To the extent possible, the themes should be agreed upon and implemented by the various entities at the Navy Yard.

How to make the connections and transitions from other sites that focus on the American Revolution? As discussed during the scholars' visit in 2011, the pivot points between the units of Boston National Historical Park could be used to



4. Approach to Charlestown Navy Yard

orient visitors toward their next destination. Something along the bridge and the streets approaching the Charlestown Navy Yard should entice visitors forward. First of all, what is Charlestown? Are they in a neighborhood of Boston? In a separate town? And what does this have to do with the Navy? At the pivot, visitors can be made aware that they are stepping forward in the chronology of events. Something visual or aural, or both, should pull them forward and offer them cues for how to see “something” in place of “nothing.” Something needs to animate the expanse of brick wall that



5. Marker on approach to Charlestown Navy Yard, telling the story of the "Boston Ice King"

appears to be nothing but is in fact the remnant of a nineteenth-century ice house—that is interesting! Something needs to train the eye to recognize that the parking lot is embedded with rail lines, and where there are rail lines there once were trains. Something needs to pull the vast

scope and scale of the Charlestown Navy Yard into view, not push it into the background. For visitors who have trudged across on the Freedom Trail, there needs to a place to sit down, refuel, and prepare to take all of this in.

What is the Charlestown Navy Yard? It is a functioning Navy base, it is a neighborhood in the midst of revitalization, and it is a place to experience American Naval and industrial history and the life of the sea. It is the nation's history, it is living history, and it could be amazing.