Carl Becker defines history as “the knowledge of events that have occurred in the past.”[[1]](#footnote-1) For this definition to work historians need to examine three aspects: knowledge, events, and past. Knowledge is the bank of memories stored about events. Events have implications, and can include anything spoken or acted out physically. The past, Becker, claims, is the most ambiguous because it is something that seems vastly distant, but is in fact inclusive of all we say and do in our own everyday lives.[[2]](#footnote-2) History is something that is enacted by every person on the planet and is something that everyone inherently knows, but is not necessarily understood. It is a collection of memories of both the recent past and the past of the greats, such as George Washing, Benjamin Franklin, or Caesar.

History cannot be only absolute or only relative, but must maintain a balance of each. Absolute aspects of history are the actual people and events that took place. These are statistics that cannot be changed. Relative history is how these same aspects are interpreted as a whole. Relativity is what ascribes meaning to an aspect of history.[[3]](#footnote-3) History has to have experiences and statistics. Becker states that history is basically a story which uses all the same elements as a literary narrative. There are events, people, and an ultimate meaning. Historians are likened to authors of literature, blending together “truth and fancy” in a way that will be perceived as valid by audiences. Like with popular folk tales, there are always new versions coming into play and challenging old views, thus rendering certain truths as invalid. History, in the same way, also seems to fall victim largely to public scrutiny.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Historical facts are already provided to us by those who came before us. The job of historians is to find patterns and themes in these facts which thus ascribes to popular opinions, which later get retold to students as they grow. Americans believe that history portrays themselves as heroes of both morality and opportunity. This is what has led to emphasis on the greats in education rather than history of the masses. American citizens thus want to believe history which makes them the nation out as a land of bravery and victory[[5]](#footnote-5)

Linenthal points out the tendency of American history and education to ignore aspects of history which seem to be horrific in nature or causes for victimization of certain groups. He uses the example of Colonial Williamsburg, which has “struggled with the issue of how to interpret slavery without disturbing the sensibilities of its guests.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Americans want to give visitors a history that values growth and progressivity rather than “conflict and strife.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore, Linenthal states that history and studies of memory are acts of “construction” which in turn support the establishment of national identity. Versions of American history that challenge the public notions of valor and gallantry thus are viewed with negativity, and sometimes hostility, by those who believe that their beliefs are being threatened.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is an anxiety among academic historians that not enough people outside the world of scholarship have an interest in what they are saying. In the increasingly technological world it has become more important for interest in history to reach beyond that of academic professionals. This is why the transformation of museums and historic preservation of sites and landmarks over the last century is important.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Museums and historic sites are places where the public can view, touch, and experience history that has already been interpreted for them. One of the most obvious examples of how historians can reach audiences that are both professional and non-academic are the places which the National Park Service is responsible for maintaining and orchestrating. Starting in the late 20th century the NPS gained notoriety for incorporating public opinion and assistance in the creation of exhibits, literature, and historic programs. An example can be seen in the National Monument at the Little Big Horn Battlefield.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For a long time the monument stood as a celebration of Custer’s stand and viewed his leadership and his Seventh Cavalry as god-like warriors who fought for the American Dream: expansion into the West. During this time the Indians who had been massacred during the battle were characterized as barbarians who, though brave, had to be “civilized” by the white man in order to make the land safe for settlement and travel. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the NPS began to receive some criticism for their emphasis on Custer Hill at the expense of also sharing the history of the Indian site right beside it. This is when the NPS started to realize that being a figure in public history meant that the sites should be accessible to Americans of all demographics and ethnicities. Sometimes, in order to reach a variety of different publics, it is then necessary to alter the way that a certain historical narrative has been told.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In reference to the Little Big Horn monument, this came about in the re-writing of literature, alteration of displays, and the expansion of programs and tours to include the Indian Village. The NPS also began telling the story of Little Big Horn and the Wounded Knee massacre as a “conflict of cultures rather than a triumphant march of civilization westward.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Once they were finished there, they then moved on to re-evaluating other sites that may have had similar problems of emphasis on one aspect while feigning ignorance of another. This is what Carl Becker refers to as “new history” which “in every age rises to confound and supplant the old.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

What the National Park Service realized was that history was not static, but an evolution of interpretation over time. These interpretations change as new generations come along and new historical discoveries are made. History is a construction in which normal citizens can interpret historical events and sites in ways which reveal to them themes of hope, fear, prejudice, and other ideals of past generations of Americans.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The modern era of historical interpretation has to both keep alive past figures and events while also perpetuating popular opinion enough so that the historical record can be accepted by the general public of a nation, town, or region. Over the last 100 years historians are “turning away from interpretation to the rigorous examination of the factual event.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The ever-increasing amount of literature and literature review shows how much time historians today spend in reviewing past historical investigations and reevaluating their conclusions in order to ascertain the best version of the historical truth. The most important thing that historians have to keep in mind is that history today needs to be more accessible to “normal” people, or those who are not immersed in the world of academia. History needs to be able to be understood by the masses. Becker says that “our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Making use of history does not mean forcing a certain version on society, but allowing society to have a say in what that version actually will be. Knowing the facts of history does not do human kind any good if there are no valid theories to come out of them. The interpretation of history is what makes up the whole history of human existence and endeavor. Likewise, the interpretation of history is what we use as a society to help us move forward in politics, culture, economics, and society overall.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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