



**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller  
 National Historical Park

54 Elm Street  
 Woodstock, VT 05091

**For Immediate Release:**  
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## Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park News Release

### Historians Praise “Woodstock’s Civil War: A Speakchorus”

Three nationally noted historians recently reviewed the film **Woodstock’s Civil War: A Speakchorus**, produced by Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in partnership with Woodstock Union High School (WUHS). The 22-minute film was directed and produced by local filmmaker Charles Rattigan and received a **2006 Leadership in American History Award from the American Association of State and Local History**.

**A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**  
**Woodstock's Civil War: A Speakchorus**

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller  
 National Historical Park

*"The precision elicited from the students is nothing short of astounding ... through passion, and with virtuosity a given, youth is given a voice that can't be ignored."* —Bob Merrill, Vermont Public Radio

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park offers the first-ever National Park Service program interpreting the Civil War Home Front. This program includes a walking tour of Woodstock's historic streets, and inspired Woodstock Union High School theater director Harriet Worrell to create a live original performance entitled *Woodstock's Civil War: A Speakchorus*.

This DVD chronicles the development of the speakchorus — a rapid-fire dramatic reading of diaries, letters, and quotations based on the themes of the Home Front tour — culminating with the live performance by the Yoh Theater Players. Three of the young performers interviewed in the film reflect on lessons of history and how their perspective on community is changing as a result of their participation in the speakchorus.

Created to advance civic engagement, the film explores how a national park can work with its community in unusual ways to create new venues for the exploration of heritage and thoughtful public dialogue.

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On the cover: *Elderly veterans on Central Street, Woodstock, Vermont, 1907. Photo courtesy Woodstock Historical Society*

**DVD** 52 minutes

*A Civic Engagement — Woodstock's Civil War: A Speakchorus*

**A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**  
**Woodstock's Civil War: A Speakchorus**  
*A film by Charles F. Rattigan*

**Robert R. Weyeneth, Professor of History and Co-Director, Public History Program**

**University of South Carolina wrote:** “In my opinion, this DVD is an outstanding example of a public history project that tells a little-known but hugely important story through an innovative and pioneering collaboration among the National Park Service, the community that neighbors the park, and most

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intriguing of all the local high school. The result is an enormously informative and stunningly entertaining film that merits wide circulation.

As someone who has lived in the American South for fourteen years, teaching and writing about African-American heritage preservation, I have become somewhat jaded about Civil War public history projects. Too many are narrowly conceived with their focus on counting cannon balls, extolling an unexamined Confederate heritage, and ignoring broader contexts. How refreshingly unexpected it was to view this DVD. How many of us associate Vermont with the Civil War? How many of us think about the home front in the Civil War, especially in the North? How many of us use a physical space like a cemetery to encourage student reflection about the past? How many of us even knew what a speakchorus was until we watched this DVD?

This film not only provokes us into thinking about the Civil War in fresh ways, it also encourages us to consider how its approach and method might be applied in other national parks, historic sites, and communities elsewhere in the country. It stimulates a range of questions: How is local history connected to national events? What is the local context for national history? How can schools partner with nearby heritage agencies? How can theater, film, and new media teach about history?"

**David Lowenthal, Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography, University College London** wrote: "I was stunned by its combination of historical scholarship and local immediacy. It brilliantly commingles narration and reflection, Civil War and post-Civil War scenes and reminiscences, national and local insights. It conveys extraordinary racial and social empathy. Above all, it portrays with utter conviction how, in the course of role-playing their village history, the young people who star in this production come to deepen their awareness of place and their appreciation of how the past informs and exalts the present in their own home town

Later I had many opportunities to learn that my reaction to this remarkable production and to the experience of making it was by no means mine alone. It was shared and reinforced by many local people and visitors to Woodstock. On later showings of my copy of the DVD audiences beyond Vermont proved no less fascinated and enamoured.

In sum, "Woodstock's Civil War" is a superb and exemplary approach to local history. It could serve as a model for community awareness in countless American locales for decades to come."

**Dwight T. Pitcaithley, Ph.D., Chief Historian (Retired) of the National Park Service** wrote: "It is an exceptional piece of work for several reasons, but largely because 1) most interpretations of the Civil War do not include areas of the country removed from the scene of battle and 2) the medium used is a group of high school students. Quoting original letters from the Civil War era Woodstock, the students collectively and individually give voice to sentiments and human expression from this tragic period.

While I did not see the actual production in Woodstock, I have viewed the DVD numerous times and use it in my Civil War Era course at New Mexico State University. It has a mesmerizing affect on my students. It broadens their sense of those affected by the War, provides hard evidence that the war was not just something that occurred in Virginia and Georgia, and brings the meaning of the war down to a very human level. The Woodstock Speakchorus connects us in a very personal and imaginative and magical way to those who experienced the war almost one hundred and fifty years ago. This is public history at its glorious best."

**-MORE-**

Marsh-Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park is the first National Park to offer a walking tour devoted to the Civil War home front. The ranger-led tour through the village center includes the

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Congregational Church, site of early anti-slavery activity, the Phoenix Block, recently identified as the nerve center for Vermont's war effort, and River Street Cemetery, where black Civil War veterans from Woodstock's free African American community are buried side by side with white veterans. Research has been guided by Howard Coffin with park rangers working side by side with student interns combing home front records, from the Woodstock Historical Society to the pension files of the National Archives.

This program inspired WUHS Theater Director Harriet Worrell to create an original performance entitled **Woodstock's Civil War: A Speakchorus** based on the themes of the tour. Supported by a National Park Service Civic Engagement Grant, Rattigan's film chronicles the development of the *speakchorus*, a rapid-fire dramatic reading of material drawn largely from personal diaries and letters of the period. The film also captures the experiences of the ten student performers as they use theater and film to research and interpret local history and in many ways reconnect to their community.



For copies of the film/DVD and dates and times for upcoming Civil War Home Front tours please call (802) 457-3368, ext 22.

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