**“The Third Battle of Manassas”:**

**The Blue, the Grey, and the Mouse**

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On November 10, 1993, the Walt Disney Company announced its proposal for a history-based theme park in northern Virginia: “Disney’s America.” The location the billion-dollar corporation selected lay thirty miles outside of Washington D.C., just five miles west of Manassas National Battlefield Park, and 150 miles northwest of the nation’s premier public history site, Colonial Williamsburg. The park’s planned interpretation of American history, and potential challenge to “real” historical locations nearby, became a point of contention that ensnared not just local residents, but state and national political and business leaders, history buffs and even academic historians. This paper focuses on the blurred lines of the two seemingly antagonistic goals at sites of historical interpretation: first, to educate the public and second, to operate as a profitable business focused on sales and entertainment. While critics quickly acknowledged these competing goals in the design of Disney’s America, with attractions like Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown and the battlefield at Manassas these same critics generally focused on the first goal and ignored how these existing sites needed to appeal to the greatest number of people in much the same way.

This paper argues that the battle over Disney’s America revealed the ironies and contradictions in how the public and academic historians think about American historical interpretation. Academic historians stopped short at critically engaging with the narrative constructed at sites like Manassas and Colonial Williamsburg, ignoring the intellectual and economic constraints of interpreting the past within the context of American materialism and the determination to be uplifted and entertained.