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"That the Future May Learn from the Past": The Goals and Educational Value of Living History Museums

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"That the Future May Learn From the Past":
The Goals and Educational Value of
Living History Museums

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Nicole Mahoney

1998

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

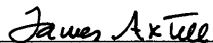
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Author

Approved, February 1998



James Axtell



Scott Nelson



Dale Hoak

~ FOR MY FAMILY ~

I COULDN'T HAVE DONE ANYTHING WITHOUT YOU.

~ AND FOR BRADLEY ~

IT'S YOU, AFTER ALL.

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Preface

In his essay "The Memory of History," Michael Frisch argues that "the relationship between history and memory is peculiarly and perhaps uniquely fractured in contemporary American life." The past is "disengaged" in the American mind, leaving "a present that seems to float in time—unencumbered, unconstrained, and uninstructed by any active sense of how it came to be." Repairing this fracture in American historical consciousness, Frisch concludes, must be a major goal of public historians if they hope to teach history effectively and to reunite people with "the sense of their own past."¹

Frisch is correct; the American public is sadly lacking in comprehension of its own history. Thirty-nine percent of eighth graders are not aware of even the most basic historical facts. Fifty-seven percent of high schoolers register "below basic" in their knowledge of

*"That the Future May Learn From the Past" is the motto of Colonial Williamsburg.

¹ Michael H. Frisch, "The Memory of History," in Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 6, 7-8, 17.

the nation's past. An April 1996 survey of college seniors revealed that fewer than half knew how many United States Senators there are; fewer than 10 percent knew that the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" came from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. A 1995 Harvard University-Washington Post poll revealed that not only did 50 percent of the adults polled not know who has "the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not," 40 percent could not name the current Vice President of the United States!² With disturbing and disheartening figures like this in mind, it is difficult for some historians to believe that they are doing important work. What is the point, they might ask, of preserving house museums that no one cares to visit? Why do volunteers spend hundreds of hours cleaning and maintaining study collections which very few people ever see?

² All statistics are taken from Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch, Educational Reform, 1995-1996: A Report from the Educational Excellence Network to its Education Policy Committee and the American People [available through the Educational Excellence Network, an online clearinghouse, www.edexcellence.net]; see also Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

These are the kinds of questions that have often troubled me. Having worked for years in both historic houses and living history museums, I have come to believe that the presentation of historical information is just as important to the learning process as the content of the information itself. Students are presented with historical facts daily, yet they clearly are not retaining them. The rote manner in which history is taught by the public school system, as well as the lack of importance attached to the subject by society at large, contributes to student (and later adult) apathy. A more engaging teaching method, such as first person interpretation, could excite more students and subsequently yield better results.

Many more people visit historical attractions than read academic histories, which presents a clear window of opportunity for historians to approach an otherwise uninterested populace. However, if historians hope to use living museums as a teaching tool, it is crucial that they look critically at the "history industry" (and it is a business) and deconstruct what it is that visitors are buying.

There is no objective past that we can uncover. History is our conception of the past, and the interpretation of any event changes according to the

perceptions and biases of the examiner. "The cultural style of each era has left its imprint on the presentation of history at Plimoth Plantation,"³ writes Stephen Eddy Snow, and the same holds true at every historic site or museum. In fact, there is *no* perspective on the past that is not socially constructed in the present. As Richard Handler and Eric Gable have recently written:

The dream of authenticity is a present-day myth. We cannot recreate, reconstruct, or recapture the past. We can only tell stories about the past in a present-day language, based on our present-day concerns and the knowledge (built, to be sure, out of documents and evidence) we construct today.⁴

Therefore, living history museums literally create history when they present images of other times. If this is true, then such museums have an enormous amount of influence over public understanding and a duty to use that power responsibly. It is my intention in this thesis to introduce the reader to the background and development of the living history industry, to examine more thoroughly two living history museums representing colonial America, and to conclude by discussing the educational value of the so-called "recreated past."

³ Stephen Eddy Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims: Documentation and Analysis of a 'Living History' Performance in Plymouth, Massachusetts" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1987), 90.

I hope that other historians will use the information in the final section to gain a more complete understanding of visitors to such museums; that understanding, in turn, will enable historians to better educate the public about American history and begin to heal the fracture in our national historic consciousness.

⁴ Richard Handler and Eric Gable, The New History in An Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.

Abstract

This thesis examines the origins of the living history museum in the United States. It focuses on two museums of the colonial era, Jamestown Settlement and Plimoth Plantation. Finally, it asks the question: are living history museums useful tools with which to teach the American public about its nation's past?

The conclusion reached is that, while not entirely historically accurate (due to factors such as lack of finances, fear of offending visitor sensibilities, or fear of harming employees), such museums are useful for educating people who lack a basic understanding of their own national history.

"THAT THE FUTURE MAY LEARN FROM THE PAST":
THE GOALS AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF
LIVING HISTORY MUSEUMS

Introduction

One of the ways in which humans express their desire to learn about the past is by visiting museums. Museums are not static institutions; they constantly change both their presentation and interpretation of history. Colonial and Victorian cabinets of curiosities gave way to formal, thematically organized displays, which were in turn replaced by interpretive exhibitions.¹ The most modern variation on the interpretive exhibition is the so-called living history museum. In order to appreciate the educational value of a living history museum, one must first understand what such a museum is; what sets it apart from other museums; why it uses the kind of historical interpretation it does; and what it actually teaches the visiting public about the past. Given the extraordinary popularity of these attractions – Colonial Williamsburg alone draws nearly one million visitors each year – it is crucial that museum workers and historians

¹ Jay Anderson, Time Machines: The World of Living History (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 45.

understand the living history industry and try to ascertain what messages the public is receiving from it.²

² Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site," American Anthropologist 98 (September 1996): 569.

Chapter One

"A Picture of the People Themselves" *The History of Living History*

The origins of the American living history museum can be traced back to the "open-air" museums of nineteenth-century Europe. Although Charles de Bonstetten, a Swiss scientist, suggested the founding of such a place in Denmark in the 1790s, credit for the first outdoor museum is generally given to ethnographer Arthur Hazelius, who founded the Skansen Museum in Stockholm in 1891.³ Skansen is now considered the prototype of all open-air museums because it was comprised of "structures and artifacts representative of each of Sweden's regions, classes, and major historical periods, from the 1600s to the present."⁴ Regional musicians, craftspeople, farmers, and ordinary folk were brought in to practice their arts and to demonstrate their customs.⁵ This kind of presentation in historical settings (whether authentic or recreated) defines the

³ Darwin P. Kelsey, "Outdoor Museums and Historical Agriculture," Agricultural History 46, no. 1 (January 1972): 112.

⁴ Jay Anderson, Time Machines: The World of Living History (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 17.

living history museum and sets it apart from other types of museums and exhibitions.

The tremendous success of Skansen inspired other nations. Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands are only some of the countries that obtained their own cultural centers, all three opening within twenty-one years of Sweden's.⁶ The trend eventually spread across the oceans, to both Asia and North America. No definitive count of outdoor museums has ever been completed, but it is estimated that the total numbers in the hundreds worldwide.⁷

The spread of the open-air museum to the United States followed the development of an American antiquarian/preservation movement that saved many old buildings in danger of being demolished in the name of progress. At the end of the nineteenth century, several elite "ancestral societies," such as the Sons (1889) and Daughters (1890) of the American Revolution, were founded. Historical preservation groups such as the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (1888) and the Society for the Preservation of New

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷ Kelsey, "Outdoor Museums," 112.

England Antiquities (1910) were formed to protect the sites and structures valued by the societies.⁸

Exactly why these societies valued the structures they did is a topic that has been extensively written about in the last half century. Richard Hofstadter in his Age of Reform pointed out that "old-family Americans" at the turn of the twentieth century were having psychological reactions to status changes, and "found satisfying compensation in turning to family glories of the past."⁹ They therefore devoted their energies and financial resources to rescuing structures they considered significant to the course of American history.

Historian Michael Wallace saw a more insidious agenda driving early twentieth-century antiquarianism. He argued that the preservation movement was born in opposition to a "free-wheeling, free market era, when profit-seeking Americans . . . routinely [committed] historicide" by destroying old buildings.¹⁰ He claimed

⁸ For a more complete discussion of the development of the American preservation movement, see Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965).

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 138-39.

¹⁰ Michael Wallace, "Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation," in Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 165.

further that the movement was part of a larger "cultural offensive" designed by the upper classes to defend the nation and its history against an influx of foreign immigrants. These wealthy elites wanted to both celebrate their own positions of power and also to create a "retrospective lineage for themselves by buying into the American past."¹¹

The most recent work on the subject is James M. Lindgren's Preserving Historic New England. The author gives an account of the founding of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) as a backdrop against which to discuss the broader themes of preservation, Progressivism, and memory. Lindgren and Hofstadter agree that the upper class had psychological traumas; Lindgren writes, "The shock of the new so troubled some preservationists, including [SPNEA founder William Sumner] Appleton, . . . that they suffered a nervous collapse; their therapy was an immersion of antiquarian studies."¹² Faced with technology and change,

¹¹ Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," Radical History Review 25 (1981): 67.

¹² James M. Lindgren, Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172. The nervous collapse to which the author refers is called neurasthenia, and is discussed at length in Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917

these individuals preferred to look back to what they believed were simpler and more noble times.

Preservationists strove to protect the places and objects they associated with the civic virtues of the Founding Fathers. Rough, handmade edifices of the colonial era stood in the antiquarians' minds for frugality, industry, and rugged individualism, and they sought to preserve the buildings (and their perceived meanings) for future generations.

It is this wish to educate that Lindgren sees as the connection between the development of American preservation and increased immigration. Preservationists were ethnocentric and even overtly racist, but their goals were broader than the hegemonic offensive described by Michael Wallace. It was their primary intention not only to protect their own history (or the history they created for themselves) but also to instruct immigrants and instill in them American virtues, what the author refers to as the "civil religion."¹³

The desire of antiquarians to save historic buildings led directly to the formation of the first American outdoor museums. SPNEA's William Sumner

(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), particularly 84-88.

¹³ Lindgren, Preserving Historic New England, particularly 35-42.

Appleton was among the earliest preservationists to urge the assembly of buildings scheduled for destruction into a kind of American Skansen:

In its ultimate consummation it shall be a collection of *homes* where one, as it were, can walk straight into the homes of the people who have lived there, learn to know their mode of living, their tastes, their work . . . [it shall be] a picture of the people themselves.¹⁴

In 1926 Congress authorized the first survey of historic sites in the country's history.¹⁵ It was also during the 1920s that the \$68 million preservation and restoration of Colonial Williamsburg by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. began. Wealthy industrialists such as Henry Ford and Theodore Pope Riddle formed their own villages, both as educational centers and tourist attractions. "Heritage has been an American buzzword ever since."¹⁶

One of the first and most enduringly popular types of living history museum in the United States was the farm. Many were assemblages of buildings that had been saved by the preservation movement, as Appleton hoped; the first opened in Iowa in 1925. The Living Historical

¹⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁵ Michael Kammen, "A Historian's Perspective," New York Times, 4 July 1982.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

Farms Handbook defines a living historical farm (LHF) as a place where

men farm as they once did during some specific time in the past. The farms have tools and equipment like those once used, and they raise the same types of livestock and plants used during the specified era. The operations are carried on in the presence of visitors.¹⁷

The Agricultural History Society was twice urged to establish national museums of agriculture, by Herbert Kellar in 1945 and by Marion Clawson twenty years later. In the 1960s the Living History Farms Project was created at the Smithsonian by curator of agriculture John Schlebecker. By 1970 living farms were so widespread that the Association of Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) was organized to facilitate communication between institutions. By the 1980s there were reportedly over two hundred LHF's in the United States.¹⁸

Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts is a typical living history museum that is composed of both newly

¹⁷ Quoted in Darwin P. Kelsey, "Harvests of History," Historic Preservation, July-September 1976, 20. For an examination of the development of LHF's, see Kelsey, "Outdoor Museums and Historical Agriculture."

¹⁸ Jay Anderson, "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums," American Quarterly 34, no. 3 (Bibliography 1982): 294-95; Kelsey, "Outdoor Museums," 24; Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt, "Living History Museums," in History Museums in the United States, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 70-71.

constructed and preserved buildings from the region. Founded by wealthy businessman Albert B. Wells, Sturbridge recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary (it opened in 1946) by welcoming its twenty-millionth visitor. The working farm, typical of 1830s New England, remains the most frequently visited attraction.¹⁹

To people working in the museum field, the popularity of the living history approach quickly became evident. The public appeared more engaged, interacting with interpreters, participating in activities, and enjoying craft demonstrations. The living history museum provided a multisensory engagement (talking, smelling, questioning, walking) that visitors seemed to prefer over the reading required by most indoor exhibitions.²⁰ Diverse institutions began adding living history aspects to their presentations, not always careful to check whether there were historical precedents to justify the inclusions.²¹

¹⁹ Alberta Sebolt George, "The Care and Nurturing of Museums," Old Sturbridge Visitor, (Winter 1996), 3. See also Kent McCallum, Old Sturbridge Village (New York: Abrams Publishing, 1996).

²⁰ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68. Leon and Piatt note that "without the financial or human resources of the larger institutions, the younger sites often incorporated aspects of the more established museums that were completely inappropriate to the new settings, regions, and time periods."

The birth of the "new social history" in the second half of the twentieth century – focused on the everyday lives of ordinary people or "history from the bottom up" – caused a shift in museum interpretation. During the 1970s and 1980s many social historians (trained in the 1960s) joined museum staffs, often for lack of jobs in academia. As a result, standards for research and interpretation were raised and exhibition presentation was strengthened, even as the latter became more creative.²²

While preservation in the past had been undertaken by elite societies, it now became a more "grass roots" effort.²³ Less emphasis was placed on protecting homes of the wealthy and/or famous; the focus shifted to understanding the lives of the unsung lower classes. Visitors might still wish to see where George Washington slept, but a growing number wished to see where his slaves slept and worked as well. Cary Carson, vice-president for research at Colonial Williamsburg, believes that the viewing public had more influence on changes in museum interpretation than did social historians. In his opinion, it was not "a handful of renegades from

²² John D. Krugler, "Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., 48 (1991): 353-54.

university history departments" who ultimately made a difference; "credit for that really belongs to the visiting public" who demanded to know "what made human communities tick."²⁴ Those places not doing social history to the public's satisfaction – Colonial Williamsburg, for example – were charged with elitism and forced to adapt with the times.

The living history industry has grown and changed in the century since Skansen first opened to the public. Two of the most popular and well-known living history museums of the late twentieth century, Jamestown Settlement and Plimoth Plantation, are vastly different organizations than their nineteenth-century counterpart. An examination of their differing interpretive styles reveals much about these modern museums and the patrons who now seek admission to them.

²³ Wallace, "Visiting the Past," 85.

²⁴ Cary Carson, "Living Museums of Everyman's History," Harvard Magazine 83 (July-August 1981): 24.

Chapter Two
"To Educate and Promote Understanding and
Awareness"
*Two Living History Museums of Colonial
America*

A question that each living history museum must answer is how it will present interpretation on its site. The two most common approaches are "first-person" and "third-person." First-person interpretation is equivalent to role-playing: the interpreter assumes the identity of a person living in the past and responds to visitor questions as though the historical events described actually happened to him or her. Someone doing third-person interpretation is usually still in costume, but speaks about the past from a twentieth-century perspective. Some museums combine the two: Colonial Williamsburg, for example, mainly uses third-person but also schedules announced appearances by "a person of the past." Two living history museums, reenacting the same period of early American history, illuminate the reasoning behind both interpretive choices: Jamestown Settlement in Virginia and Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts.

Jamestown Settlement

Jamestown Settlement was originally called Jamestown Festival Park when it opened in 1957. The construction of a Visitor's Gallery and a re-created colonial fort were both part of a larger project to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. From the beginning, its founders wanted the design of the replicated fort to be "solidly based on historical research" and not "commercial, gaudy, or overpriced."²⁵ Originally, the committee overseeing the project wanted the fort built on Jamestown Island, site of the original settlement. The National Park Service and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) jointly owned the island; both organizations conducted archaeological digs in an effort to find the specific location of the 1607 fort. The attempts were unsuccessful and both groups decided to reject the idea of building a tourist attraction on such important and fragile land.²⁶ The

²⁵ Commonwealth of Virginia. House Document No. 32. Report of the Virginia 350th Anniversary Commission. Richmond: Division of Purchase and Printing, 1958. 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 20.

APVA, in fact, declared itself "opposed in principle to historic reconstruction" of any kind.²⁷

But the Anniversary Committee pressed on, determined to build a mock village that would make history "more tangible to visitors."²⁸ Land was acquired on the mainland, near Jamestown Island; new facilities were erected and the Colonial Parkway was completed from Williamsburg to Jamestown. The entire area was named Festival Park and was scheduled to be open from April 1 until November 30, 1957, the duration of the Jamestown Festival.²⁹

E. J. King Meehan, director of special projects, oversaw the research, design, and creation of James Fort. Both the National Park Service and Colonial Williamsburg assisted in the task. Donald Herold, director of exhibits at Jamestown, researched period furnishings and "borrowed, built, or bought hundreds of artifacts." Powhatan's Lodge, a mock native habitation, was built according to information provided by experts such as Dr. Ben C. McCary of the College of William and Mary.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ "'Jamestown Celebrates' Chronicles Two Centuries of Anniversary Events," Dispatch: A Quarterly Newsletter of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, (Winter 1997-8), 3.

³⁰ Report of the Virginia 350th Anniversary Commission, 33.

When the park opened to the public in 1957, neither the fort nor the lodge was empty. Members of the Rappahannock tribe of the Powhatan chiefdom were at the native site.³¹ James Fort was filled with soldiers from Fort Meyer, Virginia, in period dress, as well as "costumed interpreters provided by the Commission, including a minister, a woman settler, an apothecary, a storehouse keeper, and others, trained by Mr. Herold."³² The attraction was so popular – drawing over one million visitors in its first seven months, including Queen Elizabeth II of England – that the Anniversary Commission soon voted to keep the park open year-round.³³

Over the years, the staff tried many different methods of historical presentation.³⁴ Recordings played on "message repeaters" and signs made by the highway department were the norm in the 1960s. These items gradually gave way to human interpreters. Still, insiders felt that the fort was "little more than a

³¹ Ibid., 33.

³² Ibid., 35.

³³ Ibid., 173, 179.

³⁴ Unless otherwise cited, the information in the following paragraphs is taken from an interview with Jamestown Settlement curator Daniel Hawks. November 14, 1996.

tourist attraction" and there was "always the desire to improve the place."³⁵

In 1985 the decision was made to completely update and refurbish the indoor exhibition galleries.³⁶ Almost six million dollars were allotted for the renovation and expansion, and Jamestown Festival Park closed its doors in late 1987. When the museum reopened in April 1990 it had a new name and a new focus: "Jamestown Settlement" became a "Living History Museum [exclusively] of the 17th Century" with a new self-proclaimed "people orientation."

The old display unabashedly celebrated English male colonists and glorified their accomplishments in the "New World." The new exhibition includes women, black slaves, and Powhatan Indians.³⁷ Two separate gallery buildings

³⁵ The shift away from reliance on machines was for practical reasons: they broke down frequently.

³⁶ During the same period research began on a reconstruction of the ship Susan Constant. An earlier version, Susan Constant II, was built in 1956 for the anniversary celebration; by the 1980s it was rotting. Its replacement was christened in 1991 and is docked next to the settlement, alongside replicas of the Godspeed and the Discovery (both built in 1984). Bill Ruehlmann, "Ghost Ship," (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot, 22 January 1991. Located in NewsBank database: 1991 SCI 3: B2. Also Sandra Tan, "Jamestown Crews Make Sure Replicas Seaworthy, True," (Newport News) Daily Press, 22 July 1996. Located in NewsBank database: 1996 HSG 39: B6.

³⁷ The Powhatan Indian Gallery describes the ways in which life changed for the indigenous people of the region in the ten thousand years before contact with Europeans. An impressive array of Indian artifacts is on display, many from the collection of James R. Coates of Norfolk, Virginia. When Coates died in 1987, he donated

were torn down to make room for the new structure, allowing visitors to experience a seamless tour that blends all of these perspectives.

During the renovation, the curatorial staff was working toward accreditation for the museum. Money set aside for the expansion was not available for purchasing artifacts. The staff was forced to raise funds through the private sector and through a related educational foundation, the Jamestown-Yorktown Educational Trust. By the time the museum reopened, they had raised about \$690,000 and spent it at auction houses and antique shops, both in Virginia and abroad.³⁸ Their efforts did not go unrewarded; Jamestown Settlement was accredited by the American Association of Museums before the exhibition galleries ever reopened.

During the closure of the gallery the outdoor exhibitions remained open, "well on their way to becoming living history entities." Training and research improved, a new costume program was instituted, and many structures were rebuilt to conform with more up-to-date scholarship. Curator Daniel Hawks states unequivocally

some 250,000 objects to the museum. Teresa Annas, "Resettling Jamestown," (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot, 15 April 1990. Located in NewsBank database: 1990 HSG 23:A4.

³⁸ Ibid.

that it was not until the "mid- to late-80s that we became a 'real' living history museum."

The site is now run by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation and still strives "to educate and promote understanding and awareness of Virginia's role in the creation of the United States of America."³⁹

³⁹ Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation Mission Statement.

Interpretation

Jamestown Settlement has used third-person interpretation since it opened in 1957. Though the staff has experimented in the past with "vignettes" (brief periods of prescheduled acting within the fort) there has never been an institutional desire to do only first-person interpretation.⁴⁰

Credible role-playing is difficult. Staff members must know the history of their period; they must also be familiar with teaching methods, alien speech patterns, and theatrical techniques.⁴¹ If any one of these areas is lacking, the interpretation may suffer. Personnel must answer questions in character, even if the historical evidence is unclear, just as they must feign ignorance of the present.⁴² Staff members might even try to subtly help visitors understand, perhaps coming slightly out of character to do so.

By presenting a twentieth-century perspective, Jamestown employees believe they can more effectively put the past into context. In other words, because they need

⁴⁰ Interview with Daniel Hawks. November 14, 1996.

⁴¹ Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt, "Living History Museums," in History Museums in the United States, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 89.

not act the part of seventeenth-century persons, they can tell visitors about the centuries that followed and explain the consequences of the colonists' actions. The interpreters admit that it is also easier for them; they need not stay in character nor maintain accurate period dialects. Visitors feel more comfortable, interpreters say, and as a consequence ask more questions and are more satisfied with the answers they receive.

From the perspective of the visitor, role-playing can be "threatening and off-putting."⁴³ Some tourists find the entire concept of living history humorous and try harder to trick interpreters into coming out of character than to learn. Attempts by the public to bring the staff out of character are referred to at Plimoth Plantation as "Pilgrim-baiting."⁴⁴

More commonly, however, the public is simply perplexed by role-playing. The Jamestown staff feels strongly that first-person can "be very confusing" to visitors. Two examples illustrate this point. Interpreters at Plimoth Plantation often relate an anecdote about a group of visitors who listened to the story of the privations of the winter of 1621. They left

⁴³ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁴ Stephen Eddy Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims: Documentation and Analysis of a 'Living History'"

the museum and returned several hours later, when they presented a bag of just-purchased groceries to two very surprised (and amused) employees. Another set of visitors watched men drilling with muskets, went into one of the houses, and in hushed voices offered to call the police "if those men with the guns are holding you here against your will."⁴⁵ Simply put, there are those who do not "get" the concept of first-person interpretation.

Plimoth Plantation

Plimoth Plantation is a non-profit educational organization, founded in 1947 "to create an understanding of the Pilgrims and seventeenth-century America through exhibits, publications, films, and educational programs."⁴⁶

The man who conceived the idea of rebuilding the settlement was Henry Hornblower II, a history lover and summer resident of Plymouth. Hornblower supposedly visited Salem Pioneer Village, an early open-air museum in Massachusetts, and decided to try the same thing in

Performance in Plymouth, Massachusetts" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1987), 143.

⁴⁵ Both of these anecdotes were related to me by interpreters during my employment at Plimoth Plantation, 1995-96.

⁴⁶ James Deetz, "The Reality of the Pilgrim Fathers," Natural History 78, no.9 (November 1969): 36.

Plymouth.⁴⁷ In December 1945 he convinced his father, Ralph, to donate \$20,000 to the Pilgrim Society for the construction of a mock village. Ralph could afford to be generous; he was one of the six wealthiest men in New England.⁴⁸

Construction began in September 1949. The first buildings were two small houses on the waterfront near Plymouth Rock.⁴⁹ "First House" was a kind of promotional attraction, a preview of the larger village to come. In 1955 "1627 House" was built next to "First House." It became apparent, however, that the facilities were too limited to accommodate the huge crowds drawn to the attraction. Over 390,000 people visited "First House" in its inaugural year.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Miriam Weinstein, "Presenting the Past," Boston Globe, 29 October 1995. Located in NewsBank database: 1995 HSG 48: B4. Pioneer Village was commissioned by the town of Salem in 1930; \$300,000 was set aside for a city park but SPNEA founder William S. Appleton instead urged the creation of a living museum. The result was a mock settlement and ship that were far from accurate but proved to be popular tourist attractions. James M. Lindgren, Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 169-70.

⁴⁸ Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 50.

⁴⁹ These buildings still stand and are now used as a bake shop and a gift shop for Mayflower II, docked at the nearby state pier.

⁵⁰ Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 54. It was also in 1955 that Project Mayflower, an Anglo-American venture to reproduce the ship that carried the Pilgrims to the New World, got underway. Completed in September 1956, Mayflower II sailed from Devon, England to its new home

Expansion was not possible at the waterfront site. In 1956 Mrs. Hattie Hornblower (Harry's grandmother) solved that problem by donating fifty acres from the Hornblower family's summer estate on the Eel River, three miles away. The main house was torn down and construction of the village began on terrain similar to that of the original plantation. Nineteen fifty-nine was its first full season as an outdoor museum.⁵¹ James Baker, vice-president of research at Plimoth Plantation, recalls that Plimoth was "the standard outdoor museum of the time, with labels on the walls, lots of mannequins, and a record playing hymns . . . The costumes were polyester."⁵²

At that time, "guides and hostesses" staffed the houses. These first employees were trained by Plymouth High School history teacher Arthur Pyle, who eventually became the first director of education at the plantation. The staff was dressed in the polyester costumes Baker described, answering visitors' questions from a twentieth-century perspective. There were no formal speeches; as Baker explained it, guides offered "a natural presentation of information, based on what the

in Plymouth to much public fanfare; this, in turn, drew attention to the village reconstruction project (55-59).

⁵¹ Ibid., 60. Descendants were approached for the funds to rebuild their "ancestral" homes.

⁵² Weinstein, "Presenting the Past," NewsBank: 1995 HSG 48: B4.

visitor was heading towards or interested in." In 1964 tape-recorded narrations were installed in some of the houses. These machines coexisted with the guides, who continued to lecture from behind velvet ropes until 1969.⁵³

The staff for the first few seasons was entirely part-time, a season lasting only four months. But the costumes and architecture gradually improved and activities were soon added to the daily routine. The mannequins to which Baker referred were added to the display at that time. "For over a decade, these mannequins were the centerpiece of the historical exhibition at Plimoth Plantation." The faux-Pilgrims were not removed from the village until the early 1970s and continued to be present onboard Mayflower II until 1980.⁵⁴

Archaeologist James Deetz joined the plantation staff in 1959, just before the social history "craze" of the 1960s. He and historian David Freeman wanted to ground interpretation in solid historical research. Archaeology students from Brown University were brought

⁵³ Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 61, 67.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63-68.

in to excavate local sites and to research historical records.⁵⁵

As years passed, the scholarship and accuracy of the village increased. By opening day 1969, Deetz had removed all of the furniture that was inaccurate—and most of the mannequins as well. The plantation auctioned off many of its antiques and poured the money it made back into the settlement. Guides became known as interpreters. It was in 1969 that 1627 was first designated as the single year being interpreted.⁵⁶ The intent during the 1960s was "to take the Pilgrims down from their pedestal and show them for what they really were—hard-working farmers."⁵⁷

By the 1970s standards had certainly risen. The staff was expected to know the history of the colony from 1620 to 1692; exams were administered to make sure they were knowledgeable.⁵⁸ But the interpreters were still not satisfied with their own work. Some gradually began to speak in dialect or to assume the roles of well-known

⁵⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁶ The year 1627 was selected because it "is the most fully documented of any year after the first." 1627 was the year in which the settlers' original seven-year communal agreement ended; detailed records were made of all the colonists, livestock, and available provisions in order for an even division of goods to be made. Plimoth Plantation: A Pictorial Guide, 13.

⁵⁷ Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 70-74, 79.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76.

people in Plymouth history, such as Myles Standish. "Guerrilla theater" was tried; staff members invited visitors to role-play and act out hypothetical situations in character.⁵⁹

In 1978 the decision was made to shift exclusively to first-person. Each employee is now assigned the role of an actual inhabitant of Plymouth Colony in 1627. Extensive linguistic research was conducted and each interpreter is trained to speak in the regional dialect of his/her "character."⁶⁰ Nothing within the village reminds the visitor of the twentieth century (no signs, garbage cans, restrooms, etc.) nor do the interpreters ever come out of character in the presence of a guest.

Interpretation

Beyond merely re-creating a village, it seemed logical to James Deetz and the plantation staff that the interpreters ought to be re-creations too. Their

⁵⁹ Holly Sidford, "Stepping into History," Museum News, November 1974, 33-34. The "guerrilla theater" was not successful, as visitors found themselves "without adequate information or understanding of the historical situation" to respond appropriately.

⁶⁰ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 88; Weinstein, "Presenting the Past," NewsBank: 1995 HSG 48: B4. In 1984, the plantation received a grant for \$45,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities for further research. Staff efforts to trace seventeenth-century dialects were chronicled in the 1986 PBS

reasoning was that the visitor would function as an anthropological field worker observing an alien culture.⁶¹ The shift to first-person occurred naturally, they claimed, almost "without a word being said."⁶² Deetz firmly believes that first-person interpretation is the only appropriate choice: "To do otherwise makes it difficult or impossible to justify the time, effort, and expense devoted to the creation of thoroughly researched, documented, and carefully reproduced buildings, artifacts and costumes."⁶³

The advocates of first-person contend that third-person does not go far enough to convey the pastness of the past. They feel that it is confusing for visitors to see employees in historical dress who continue to use modern language. First-person interpreters claim to have more freedom to explore difficult issues such as racism

documentary The Story of English (episode 3, "A Muse of Fire"). Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 267.

⁶¹ James Deetz, "The Link from Object to Person to Concept," in Museums, Adults and The Humanities: A Guide for Educational Programming, ed. Zipporah W. Collins (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1981), 32.

⁶² James Deetz, "The Changing Historic House Museum," Historic Preservation, January-March 1971, 54.

⁶³ Quoted in Jay Anderson, Time Machines: The World of Living History (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 49.

while in character than a present-day interpreter who must use politically correct language.⁶⁴

Of course, the staff acknowledges that first-person interpretation cannot fully convey what life was like in the past. There is no attempt at Plimoth Plantation to overtly discuss sexuality, bodily functions, or most genuine human suffering like that caused by disease or infant mortality.⁶⁵ While the interpretive staff strives to be as historically accurate as possible, they have no wish to offend or embarrass the public. Protecting the sensibilities of visitors is a major consideration for personnel, and one focus of the next chapter.

⁶⁴ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 89.

⁶⁵ Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims," 243-44. Snow refers to these omissions as the "shadow side" of the plantation and goes so far as to add, "The truth is that the more one looks at the historical records, the more one realizes that, even today, the general portrayal of the Pilgrims, at Plimoth Plantation, is a kind of cover-up." I disagree with this critique. One of the major reenactments each year is that of Mary Brewster's funeral. I witnessed the 1996 event and was moved by the seemingly genuine suffering of the deceased's family and friends. The young woman portraying Brewster's daughter wept all day, most poignantly at her "mother's" graveside. Interpreters do not deliberately embarrass visitors, but neither do they minimize the suffering the original settlers endured.

Chapter Three

"Tourists See What They Want to See" *The Challenges of Presenting 'Authentic' History*

Jay Anderson observed that "students of museums have continually noted an American preoccupation with the educational responsibility of their institutions."⁶⁶

Living history museums seem to owe some of their popularity to this very preoccupation; Americans visit precisely because the institutions claim to represent the past as it truly was. Yet a debate over the historical authenticity of sites such as Colonial Williamsburg has been raging for years. Historians, anthropologists, and even architects say that many living museums are historically inaccurate and that such museums are aware of their own failings. How historically incorrect are these museums – and does the public really care?

Both Jamestown Settlement and Plimoth Plantation claim to be as historically accurate as current scholarship, finances, and public decorum will allow. Admittedly, these are three large caveats. Yet within those boundaries each institution is continually

researching and restructuring in an effort to improve itself.

The recent refurbishing and expansion of Jamestown Settlement's exhibition gallery has already been noted.⁶⁷ The gallery was completely redesigned to include the perspectives of women, blacks, and Indians. The outdoor fort has also undergone periodic updates, as has the Powhatan Indian village. "Great strides toward authenticity" have been made in the last decade and the work is ongoing. The church, storehouse, and guardhouse are all scheduled for major renovation as funds permit; their new interiors will reflect the changing philosophy of the institution and the current understanding of the period from 1610 to 1614. Within five years, the staff promises, visitors will no longer recognize the fort as it exists today.⁶⁸

In 1989 Plimoth Plantation spent \$125,000 to alter the existing houses in the village, bringing them in line with current scholarship. Clapboard siding was removed to make way for wattle and daub; machine-cut wood was

⁶⁶ Jay Anderson, "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums," American Quarterly 34, no. 3 (Bibliography 1982): 295.

⁶⁷ Teresa Annas, "Resettling Jamestown," (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot, 15 April 1990. Located in NewsBank database: 1990 HSG 23: A4.

⁶⁸ Interview with Jamestown Settlement curator Daniel Hawks, November 14, 1996.

replaced with hand-riven boards. The result was a rougher and more period-correct look.⁶⁹ Two years ago a new, permanent exhibition opened in the visitor's center. "Irreconcilable Differences" traces the lives of an English woman and a Wampanoag woman through seventy years of colonial history, from 1620 to 1692. It also places the plantation within the historical context of seventeenth-century Massachusetts history; it is hoped that this approach will answer visitors' questions about what happened after the year 1627, one of the staff's primary concerns.⁷⁰

Yet what does all of this destruction and reconstruction mean for these museums? It would appear

⁶⁹ Felice J. Freyer, "History being 'updated': 20 years of study leads to revisions in Plimoth Plantation's 17th century village," (Providence, Rhode Island) Journal, 7 May 1989. Located in NewsBank database: 1989 HSG 30: C8. This is not to say that the plantation is totally accurate. To cite only a few examples: the staff is aware that the hill on which the reconstructed village is built is not quite as high as the original hill; nor is the palisade as large as it probably would have been. The Fort-Meeting House was reconstructed in 1986, but is still set farther forward than its seventeenth-century counterpart. Stephen Eddy Snow, "Theatre of the Pilgrims: Documentation and Analysis of a 'Living History' Performance in Plymouth, Massachusetts" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1987), 108.

⁷⁰ Paula Peters Maher, "Plimoth Plantation bridges 'Irreconcilable Differences,'" (Hyannis, Massachusetts) Cape Cod Times, 30 July 1995. Located in NewsBank database: 1995 HSG 33: A11. The year 1692 was chosen as an endpoint because that was the year in which

that there is an attainable goal, "Total Historical Accuracy," for which they are striving. Their failure to reach that goal after so many years of study would seem to reflect badly on them.

Jamestown Settlement, Plimoth Plantation, and all other living history museums fail to achieve "Total Historical Accuracy" because it is simply impossible to do. Each generation reinvents its conception of the past; just as employees today joke about the "Polyester Pilgrims" of years gone by, so too will future generations question the judgments of *their* predecessors. What appears to be progress toward an inevitable goal is in fact a constant metamorphosis, an adaptation and manipulation of data about the past into a narrative that present generations feel comfortable using for their own purposes, whatever those might be. In the modern world it is fashionable to be inclusive and egalitarian; as a consequence, museum exhibits and academic histories include different voices than those used in previous years. If, in years to come, it becomes fashionable again to leave those voices out, no doubt historical exhibitions will be reinterpreted to reflect the trend.

Plymouth Colony was absorbed into the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Plimoth Plantation and Jamestown Settlement have faced difficulties presenting their versions of history; so, too, has Colonial Williamsburg, America's premier living history museum. All three organizations have been criticized for omitting perspectives, or focusing too heavily on certain issues, to the exclusion of others. Though Colonial Williamsburg's accuracy as a living history museum has been questioned, particularly in years past, it has made ongoing efforts to adapt to new trends in historical interpretation. Living history museums large and small have similar problems, but recently published studies make Colonial Williamsburg an excellent candidate for closer examination.

The Case of Colonial Williamsburg

Two anthropologists, Eric Gable and Richard Handler, have published a series of articles and a recent book critiquing the historical presentation at Colonial Williamsburg. In "The Authenticity of Documents at Some American History Museums," they point out that no matter how excellent Colonial Williamsburg's research is, that information can still be inaccurately communicated by front-line (mostly seasonal) employees. Myths that find their way into tours, they claim, arise from at least three sources: 1) the historic sites themselves, which

have myths associated with them, such as the Refusal Room at Carter's Grove⁷¹; 2) the public that wants to hear the myths; and 3) the interpreters who want to please the public.⁷² Getting rid of these myths was likened to "pulling weeds" by one manager: "no matter how diligent supervisors are, the fictions keep cropping up."⁷³

Gable and Handler next pointed out inaccuracies in the sensorial depiction of eighteenth-century life. They note that Colonial Williamsburg lacks the "filth and

⁷¹ Carter's Grove is a property owned and maintained by Colonial Williamsburg. Exhibits describe how life has changed on the property over the course of four centuries. Legend has it that the Refusal Room is where both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had marriage proposals rejected. Interpreters still tell visitors the story, as well as a disclaimer; the question remains as to whether the visitors later remember that the legend is untrue.

⁷² Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "The Authority of Documents at Some American History Museums," Journal of American History 81 (June 1994): 127.

⁷³ Ibid., 124. See also Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt, "Living History Museums," in History Museums in the United States, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 79-82. "In an environment in which so much is passed on verbally and is repeated so many times over the course of a day, it is easy for information to change subtly and unconsciously over time" (81). Having worked with the public at a living history museum, I have personal experience with this phenomenon. The interpreters, full-time employees who did historical research, were sometimes intimidating to members of the public. On occasion, visitors preferred to approach the support staff with questions. Unfortunately, the support staff was composed primarily of high school and college students - part-time, seasonal employees who had very little historical information at their command and less desire to spend their summer doing research.

stench that would have been commonplace in an eighteenth-century town."⁷⁴ Certainly there are no trash deposits or open sewers in the Historic District. Modern elements such as lights, soda machines, air conditioners, and garbage cans are present, though usually concealed.⁷⁵ Trees that were not present in the eighteenth century line the paved streets, for the relief of summer tourists. Christmas decorations are a major attraction each year, though they are known to be "not true" to the colonial era.⁷⁶

Other critics have noted that the famous colonial capitol is actually a recreation of a building that burned in 1747, decades before the era Colonial Williamsburg supposedly represents. The decision to build the earlier structure was made in 1929. At that time, the burned capital was considered more architecturally interesting and more attractive than the chronologically correct building.⁷⁷ In each of these examples, it was deemed necessary to place visitor

⁷⁴ Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site," American Anthropologist 98 (September 1996): 570.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 572.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 573.

⁷⁷ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 77. Unfortunately, though there is now a desire to build the "correct" capitol building, the cost would be prohibitive.

preferences and/or comfort ahead of contemporary notions of historical accuracy.

A more striking omission from the historian's perspective, though perhaps not the visitor's, is that of the lower classes. Few lower-class houses exist on the Historic District's 173 acres, though plans to build more tenements, for example, are in progress.⁷⁸ As for poorer people, not until the 1970s was there any real effort to depict slave culture, though approximately half of the colonial population of Williamsburg was black.⁷⁹ Progress has been made in that area as well, but blacks are still under-represented on the staff when compared to the colonial population.⁸⁰ Critics once felt that "visitors [could not] leave town without a skewed understanding of the composition of colonial society,"⁸¹ but new programs such as "The Other Half" orientation tour and "Jumping the Broom" (a simulated slave wedding held regularly in

⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁹ Carroll Van West and Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "'Slumbering On Its Old Foundations': Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg," South Atlantic Quarterly 83, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 172.

⁸⁰ The Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation (AAIP) remains a small department; currently there are 14 members of the AAIP—several of them white—as opposed to some 300 white interpreters. It must be noted, however, that only fifteen years ago the department did not exist at all. Presentation by Brigitte Jackson, Colonial Williamsburg interpreter and AAIP staff member, April 22, 1997.

the quarters at Carter's Grove Plantation) now attempt to balance the depiction of colonial life.

Another program designed to expose visitors to Williamsburg's black inhabitants was the mock slave auction held in October 1994. Certain members of the African-American community, including the political director of the Virginia branch of the NAACP, were upset by the proposed activity, fearing that the pain of their ancestors would be used for "sideshow" entertainment. Protesters attempted to interrupt the event and were booed by spectators. There was even a brief scuffle between the protesters and several employees of Colonial Williamsburg.

Christy Coleman, current head of the AAIP, was then portraying a pregnant house slave who was to be sold at auction. She came out and addressed the crowd, asking them to watch and judge the value of the program "with honest hearts and honest minds." At that point the crowd quieted and the presentation proceeded.⁸² Another slave auction has not been attempted since, but the staff defends the value of such an exhibition in trying to

⁸¹ Van West and Hoffschwelle, "Slumbering On Its Old Foundations," 170.

⁸² Michael J. Anofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves: Education or Outrage?" New York Times, 8 October 1994, sec. 1. "Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale," New York Times, 11 October 1994, sec A.

present a more complete, if sometimes painful, picture of life in a slave-holding society.

Gable and Handler also argue that a more insidious problem than overt discrimination is that of biased interpretation. They contend that, for all the research that has been done in the field of African-American history and culture, interpreters at the museum present information about blacks as though it was "less true" than information presented about whites. "Black history is seen as 'conjectural' and impoverished in comparison with other histories displayed at Colonial Williamsburg" because there are comparatively fewer existing artifacts from African-American sites.⁸³ Because slave material culture is less likely to have survived, the authors argue that interpreters hold up talks on African Americans as speculative history.

Members of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation (AAIP) object vigorously to this kind of subtle dismissal. "Black history is discredited," one staff member claims. "How do we know what was really said and done [in the past]?"⁸⁴ It is difficult to dismiss the assertion outright, when staff

⁸³ Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg," American Ethnologist 19, no 4 (1992): 796.

at Carter's Grove "emphasize the conjecture in their presentations, focusing on the absence of fact, the inability to know" as opposed to the "educated guesses" that have enabled staff to decorate the Governor's Mansion using only a very imprecise inventory.⁸⁵ Hopefully, the number of recent archaeological excavations of slave quarters and colonial towns will build up the kind of evidence that will encourage interpreters to present the "facts" of African-American history with the same conviction they present the white history of Virginia's colonial capital.

Tourists "neither want nor expect to learn disturbing information about the past."⁸⁶ Were places such as Colonial Williamsburg to make more sudden, drastic changes toward authenticity, it would no doubt "endanger visitor safety, create intolerable staff working conditions, and, most importantly, sharply reduce ticket sales." This is more than speculation; as Colonial Williamsburg relaxed its maintenance standards (by neither trimming lawns nor frequently repainting buildings) to become more period-correct, longtime

⁸⁴ Presentation by Brigette Jackson, April 22, 1997.

⁸⁵ Gable, Handler and Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism," 801.

⁸⁶ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 75.

visitors stopped coming. One former guest wrote, "We can see all the dust and lint balls we want without ever leaving home."⁸⁷ Many people who visit living history museums, it seems, have no real interest in the so-called authentic past.

Ultimately, living history museums need visitation to survive. While they may strive to be more accurate, they must recognize their own limitations. Plimoth's James Baker wrote:

While we cannot use dialect which is so authentic that it thoroughly obscures our message, follow period sanitary practices such as public urination, or entirely replicate the bias against Papists, we must still try to approach the goal of presenting an entirely re-created society for our visitors to experience.⁸⁸

In other words, living museums must do the best they can with the resources they have available to them, all the while keeping in mind their audience and its desires and/or biases.

Even if one were to assume, for argument's sake, that every living history museum were as historically accurate (according to the standards of its time) as possible, the question of what the visitor actually

⁸⁷ Quoted in Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 75.

learns about history by going there is still debatable. One could suggest that "what people see and experience in such places is generally more important than what they read or hear."⁸⁹ Part of the appeal of living museums is their interactive nature, yet experts wonder what the public truly learns about the complexities of the past by observing activities such as weaving or candle dipping. "Most people," writes Cary Carson, "bother to make no sense of it at all."⁹⁰ They observe without analyzing and do not – or perhaps are not able to – put the event into a larger context.

A common obstacle to understanding is modern technological bias. Having only twentieth-century experiences against which to judge, visitors are appalled by what they perceive to be the "inferior" living conditions of earlier centuries.⁹¹ While there does seem to be a sense of nostalgia for a "simpler" era among the general public, it is balanced by "an attitude of superiority

⁸⁸ Quoted in Miriam Weinstein, "Presenting the Past," Boston Globe, 29 October 1995. Located in NewsBank database: 1995 HSG 48: B4.

⁸⁹ Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 74.

⁹⁰ Cary Carson, "Living Museums of Everyman's History," Harvard Magazine 83 (July-August 1981): 28.

⁹¹ David Lowenthal, The Past Is A Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 28.

toward the past."⁹² In that case, the tourist may leave a living history museum with no profounder thought than "Thank God I live in the twentieth century!"

The public persists in its belief in the preeminence of the present, even when museums attempt to demonstrate otherwise. Parker Potter wrote about his experiences with the "Archaeology in Annapolis" project and concluded that guests were leaving with a lesson diametrically opposed to the one the museum intended. Instead of seeing "evidence for the beginnings of some taken-for-granted element of contemporary life" (as the curators hoped they would), guests filling out questionnaires wrote that they had learned only that "history repeats itself." Those same guests saw the differences between then and now as "beneficial progress," leading Potter to lament,


For these people, the agents of change are not hidden but glorified, yet the result is the same; the status quo is seen to be the way the world is supposed to be and is beyond question and challenge.⁹³

Potter's conclusion was that people have adopted a "biological evolution" metaphor for change; in other

⁹² James R. Short, "Comments on Museums and Agricultural History," Agricultural History 46, no. 1 (January 1972): 132.

⁹³ Parker B. Potter, Jr., "Critical Archaeology: In the Ground and on the Street," Historical Archaeology 26, no. 3 (1992):125.

words, humans accept-any-shift that occurs as inevitable and natural. That line of reasoning elevates the present to the status of the most evolved and most advanced age yet possible and gives people feelings of superiority. (It also explains, incidentally, why people believe modern museums to be the most accurate and authentic museums possible.) Potter was clearly troubled by this calm acceptance of evolutionary theory on the part of the visiting public and argued that holding this view "entraps" people in their lives; in other words, if change is inevitable, no one has agency nor can anyone make a difference in the world.⁹⁴

If the accuracy of living history museums is high – but not complete, even for their time – and the public is not particularly interested in truly accurate history from the start, the question becomes: why do people visit living history museums at all? There are scholars who argue the opposite of the "superiority" theory: they believe that visitors to cultural tourism sites crave a sense of community and values believed lost.⁹⁵ In addition to the desire for personal interaction and 

⁹⁴ Ibid, 125.

⁹⁵ Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood, "The Authentic Interior: Questing *Gemeinschaft* in Post-

genuine sensation, tourists also seek an escape from the "growing realization of instability and uncertainty" of the modern world.⁹⁶) They are fleeing the "sterility of suburban life," some analysts posit, in the hope of experiencing something more "authentic" and human.⁹⁷ In effect, they are seeking refuge from the present in the past, using the past for their own purposes. Ultimately, whether at Plimoth, Williamsburg, or Annapolis, "tourists see what they want to see."⁹⁸

I offer another, more cynical, theory: many visitors to living history museums are not looking for simplicity or morality. They may not even be looking for history: according to the Virginia Tourism Corporation's 1992 survey, 80,000 U.S. households rank "historical importance" among the *least* compelling reasons to visit the Commonwealth. A director of the Corporation adds, "There is nothing to indicate that history is a

Industrial Society," Human Organization 53 (Spring 1994): 21-32.

⁹⁶ Miles Orvell, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xix.

⁹⁷ Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," Radical History Review 25 (1981): 89-90.

⁹⁸ James M. Lindgren, Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 176.

motivating factor in visitation."⁹⁹ Modern-day pilgrims may bring their children to Jamestown Settlement and take pride in both entertaining *and* educating them; however, those same people are also planning family trips to Disney World and Graceland.¹⁰⁰

Colonial Williamsburg claims that its visitors are more highly educated and earn higher wages than the average American tourist.¹⁰¹ I do not doubt that this is true. It is my personal experience, however, that one of the questions most frequently asked by visitors to Mayflower II was, "Where are the other two ships?"¹⁰² Higher wages and graduate degrees do not necessarily mean that tourists know (or even want to know) about their country's past. As an interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg complained, "Most people come here to be entertained, like at Busch Gardens, not to learn . . ." →

⁹⁹ Kathleen Phalen, "Taking on Disney," Virginia Business 13, no.1 (January 1998): 25.

¹⁰⁰ That same Virginia Tourism Corporation study revealed that 18 percent of the Americans polled would classify theme parks as "heritage tourism," and 30 percent consider Graceland a "cultural stop." Ibid., 26.

¹⁰¹ Presentation by Jean Hancock, employee of Colonial Williamsburg's Human Resources Department. September 10, 1997. Hancock reported that 55 percent of ticket-purchasing visitors to Colonial Williamsburg hold a graduate degree, and that almost 75 percent of visitors earn over \$31,000 per year.

¹⁰² Mistaking the original Mayflower for one of Christopher Columbus's three vessels was by far the most common error of visitors to the plantation. The three

[They] aren't prepared. They don't know history. They don't know why they are here."¹⁰³

It is the appalling lack of public knowledge of even the most basic facts of American history that must be rectified. In this era in which the public school system is faltering, living history museums are viable media through which to reach both those interested in history and those interested in history only when it is concealed in entertainment. In spite of their flaws, living history museums reach far too many people every year to be discounted as an educational option.

Yet any organization cannot do all of the work. A living history museum is an admittedly imperfect representation of the past. But it can still be an effective forum for teaching history, provided the visitor is receptive to the lesson. It does no good to send a message, no matter how sophisticated, if that message is not being received.

ships at Jamestown Settlement are similarly mistaken for Columbus's.

¹⁰³ Richard Handler and Eric Gable, The New History in An Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 189.

Conclusion

Given all of these considerations – unavoidable inaccuracies, visitor confusion and/or apathy – it would be easy to suggest that living history museums have taken on an impossible task. Yet even Robert Ronsheim, who pronounced the past both dead and unrecoverable, added that a “living history program is an important, even an essential tool” for educating the public about the past.¹⁰⁴ Excepting those extremists who believe that any effort to convey the past is an exercise in futility, most historians believe that such programs can be used to teach historical facts and current interpretations of those facts to the public.

Whether or not they believe that living history is a useful educational device, historians cannot ignore the existence of such museums or the impressive size of the audience they reach. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observed, “Lots more people pass through Plimoth than

¹⁰⁴ Robert D. Ronsheim, “Is the Past Dead?” Museum News 53, no. 3 (November 1974): 62.

ever read a book."¹⁰⁵ For better or worse, living museums are diffusing historical information to the American public. One need look no further for confirmation of that fact than Colonial Williamsburg; if the organization's statistics are accurate, each year approximately one out of every 260 Americans walks Duke of Gloucester Street. It is in the best interests of historians to be involved with museums if they wish to reach visitors with information as "historically accurate" as modern-day research and interpretation allow.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Miriam Weinstein, "Presenting the Past," Boston Globe, 29 October 1995. Located in NewsBank database: 1995 HSG 48: B4.

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