

THEORY & PRACTICE

MUSEUM FUTURES: Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Justice

Volume 2, 2019

A Publication from the National Emerging Museum
Professional Network and The Museum Scholar



Peopling the Past: Living History and Inclusive Museum Practice

AJA BAIN, MA

Middle Tennessee State University

Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal

www.TheMuseumScholar.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.rogerspublishing.org

Cover photo: Antonio Molinari

©2019 The Museum Scholar

The National Emerging Museum Professionals Network

Theory and Practice is a peer reviewed Open Access Gold journal, permitting free online access to all articles, multi-media material, and scholarly research. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



Peopling the Past: Living History and Inclusive Museum Practice

AJA BAIN, MA
Middle Tennessee State University

Keywords Living history; Museum; Inclusion; Experiential; Interpretation

Abstract In seeking to understand the past through places, objects, and intangible heritage rather than documents exclusively, public history offers a democratizing and more diverse exploration of the past. But what about understanding the past through action? Living history, reenactment, and heritage skills connect both "doers" and "viewers" with the past through physicality and common experience, and can be transformative and transportive for both parties. Many museums today, while earnestly striving to expand the diversity and inclusivity of their interpretation, are often limited by the realities of their existence as object-dependent institutions. One potential solution to this issue is to learn from the opportunities of living history. Instead of lamenting the lack of material culture to inform inclusive interpretation, a people-centered approach can help reassert missing voices and repopulate the historical landscape with a more accurate depiction of its inhabitants and its relevance to today. Giving a literal voice to inclusive stories, rather than dictating they speak only through objects or documents, is a strength of the living history approach from which museums of all kinds can learn.

About the Author Aja Bain is the Program and Publications Manager for the American Association for State and Local History, where she serves as Associate Editor of *History News* and blog editor. She is also president of the Inter-Museum Council of Nashville. Aja holds a master's degree in public history from Middle Tennessee State University and a bachelor's degree in American history and anthropology from Vanderbilt University. Her research interests include Southern migration and the commodification of regional culture in globalized societies.

This article was published on July 8, 2019, at www.themuseumscholar.org

In seeking to understand the past through places, objects, and intangible heritage rather than documents exclusively, public history offers a democratizing and more diverse exploration of the past. Many museums today, while earnestly striving to expand the diversity and inclusivity of their interpretation, are often limited by the realities of their existence as object-dependent institutions. Most collections were built for the interests and worldviews of the white ruling elite, and object-centered interpretation inherently reflects that. Drawing inclusive stories out of exclusive collections can be difficult, if not impossible. Although many sites want to present more authentic and inclusive stories, they often feel hindered by the traditional requirements of museum practice. For most museums, objects are the bones upon which we build our stories, so how can we flesh out engaging and inclusive stories when the collections framework is not made for this purpose? How can we address the sins of omission we inherited from our museum ancestors?

One potential solution to this issue is to learn from the opportunities of living history, what historian Jay Anderson describes as “an attempt by people to simulate life in the past.”¹ Instead of lamenting the lack of material culture to inform inclusive interpretation, a people-centered approach can help reassert missing voices and repopulate the historical landscape with a more accurate depiction of its inhabitants and its relevance to today. Giving a literal voice to inclusive stories, rather than dictating they speak only through objects or documents, is a true strength of the living history approach from which museums of all kinds can learn.

Interpreting Through Action and Presence

Living history (participation in historical activities as a first or third-person interpreter) and reenactment (a type of living history involving first-person portrayal of actual historical events) connect both “doers” and “viewers” with the past through physicality and common experience, and can be transformative and transportive for both visitors and interpreters. History interpreted by a “character” who lived it can help shrink the distance at which the past is viewed by audiences. The tangibility of living history offers additional opportunities for demonstrating relevance that transcends generations and cultures as sites draw parallels between historic and contemporary universal themes such as food, work, and craft. “Living history is a form of theatre,” but it is often one in which visitors are able to participate by asking questions, examining artifacts and props, and replicating historic activities alongside an interpreter.² As former ALHFAM (Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums) president Debra A. Reid writes, “The best living history makes the audience living historians, too.”³

Many sites that focus on living history as a primary interpretive element (farms, settlements, battlefields, etc.) struggle with the same shortcomings as more traditional “white glove” museums where interpretation is passive and visitors are not physically involved. Many were founded during the Bicentennial era of American boosterism and nostalgia for an idealized colonial and settler past, and they often present monocultural and unidimensional stories that celebrate the experiences of a single group while also interpreting white America in a vacuum. Stories beyond a dominant white narrative, when present, are often unbalanced and segregated in a way that reflects a heritage of inequity and the self-perpetuating cycle of survival bias. There are dozens of “pioneer farms” and “frontier forts” that make little or no mention of Native Americans or any kind of cross-cultural contact, paralleling the classic historic house museum dilemma of a narrative that lacks discussion of the enslaved people or servants that maintained and operated the home. Without physical remnants, museums can see themselves as powerless (or worse, not obligated) to tell these stories.

In the past several years, several high-profile presidential museums have challenged themselves to tell more inclusive stories, even without the objects, documents, or oral histories they are used to relying on for interpretational support. In many cases, this challenge becomes a mission to find artifacts and documents that have been left out of the official record and to re-examine existing items for alternate interpretative value. Monticello’s restoration of Mulberry Row, for example, is emblematic of this renaissance. In 2011, only four building foundations remained from the once bustling work center of the 5,000-acre plantation. Mount Vernon only began interpreting slavery in 1995 (also when they hired their first African American interpreter), although the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association had reconstructed the greenhouse slave quarters in 1950.⁴ The recent award-winning exhibit *The*

Mere Distinction of Colour at James Madison's Montpelier takes this model a step further, not only reintroducing the stories of enslaved people through archaeological and historical research, but actively working with descendants to include diverse contemporary voices. The National Summit on Teaching Slavery convened at Montpelier in 2018 to further this work, producing the powerful step-by-step rubric "Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites" to help guide other sites and encourage a continual reevaluation of the ways in which institutions seek to tell a more complete American story.⁵

Presenting a Revolution

Desires to tell inclusive stories, to give voice to the voiceless, and to right the historical record have led to abundant ways to interpret past stories. Thoughtful and inclusive living history methods present a powerful antidote to the practice of leaving the stories of silenced groups untold because sites do not have material culture or records to display and inform interpretation. As more sites seek to help visitors grasp the presence and humanity of those whose names are found only on slave schedules or in colonial accounts, one underutilized method of doing so is to put faces with names through living history interpretation.

Living history practice is in the midst of a revolution, with a central role played by independent interpreter historians with a passion for portraying the past. There are now interpreters reclaiming physical and historical space for enslaved people, free blacks, servants, women, Native Americans, commoners, and others who became so easy to overlook in traditional museums for their lack of "stuff," as well as racist and classist interpretive biases. For instance, a group known as On the Army's Strength, Inc., is dedicated to interpreting the experiences of the American Revolution's support staff: the unnamed cooks, nurses, sutlers, and wives that worked behind the scenes of Washington's army. "Below stairs" tours and interpreters at historic house museums are bringing the experiences of the working-class and servants to the visitor, even as the homes themselves were designed to conceal their presence.

Interpreters of color are leading the charge on uncovering and amplifying silenced stories: Azie Mira Dungey portrayed historic black women around the D.C. metro area, including as a housemaid at Mount Vernon, before creating her popular and enlightening living history web series *Ask a Slave*. Cheyney McKnight, the museum consultant behind "Not Your Momma's History," develops programming for sites to interpret the black experience of eighteenth and nineteenth-century America. Through tours, school and camp programs, performances, and a YouTube series, Cheyney brings the stories of enslaved and free African American women to audiences whose historical education has been neglected or misled by traditional museum offerings.

In 2005, black Civil War historians formed the United States Colored Troops Living History Association, reasserting the African American experience into the artificially white landscape of Civil War history reenactment. Joseph McGill, the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project, realized as a reenactor the profound statement he could make as a black living historian reclaiming whitewashed and hidden historic spaces for truth. Another African American living history group, the Sons and Daughters of Ham, interprets antebellum and Civil War era black experiences through events like contraband camp interpretation at Harpers Ferry. Particularly

with Civil War history and events, these interpreters are striking a powerful blow for inclusive and authentic history with their statement: we are here now, just like we were here then.

Sites across the southeast where the Indigenous landscape has been obliterated host Native American interpreters who reassert this history and their contemporary survival. This movement is particularly intriguing when interpreters present programs in locations that lack state or federally-recognized tribes, such as Tennessee (Fort Loudoun encampments), Kentucky (Grand Council at Old Fort Harrod State Park), and Ohio (Living History Days at Lowe-Volk Park), among others. Although most non-Native-focused sites across America lack full-time Native interpretation, their decision to work with Native interpretation groups to supplement their programming is a commendable step and an encouraging sign.⁶ Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts is a notable exception, with the Wampanoag Homesite which opened with costumed third-person Native interpreters in March 2019.

These individuals and groups present the diversity of the past in order to counter stereotypes and misconceptions, engage contemporary audiences, and supplement insufficient collections that have hidden so many lives for so long from curators and audiences who believed that only objects and documents could tell meaningful stories about the past.

Jeremy Morris, who portrays eighteenth-century black men at Colonial Williamsburg, sums up the importance of his role thus:

Some people try to understand what it was like for people like Booker [an enslaved man], who had no standing in the world. They ask what it's like to listen to the rhetoric of the day, before the Revolutionary War, about freedom, justice and equality when you're on someone's inventory. When I say there were more free and enslaved blacks than whites in Williamsburg in the 1800s, it goes against what some people have been taught and can shake their foundation.⁷

Jeremy's statement that his very presence is a disruption of whitewashed perspectives on history is a powerful testament to the ability of individual interpreters to reassert the experiences of those left out or silenced in the record, even without traditional artifacts or material traces.

Creating an Impression

Both first- and third-person living history interpreters develop an "impression" to portray a historic experience. An impression can be first person/realistic (portraying Queen Elizabeth I and speaking as if she were queen), third person/realistic (Cheyney McKnight portraying Madame C.J. Walker, but speaking as herself), first person/fictional (Azie Dungey portraying Lizzie Mae, a fictitious enslaved maid at Mount Vernon, speaking as if she is Lizzie Mae), and third person/fictional (On the Army's Strength, Inc. interpreting anonymous Revolutionary War camp cooks, but speaking as themselves). Fictional impressions of either style are usually developed from composites of known figures (Lizzie Mae uses evidence from several enslaved maids) or just general characters relying on more disparate evidence (a camp cook's

impression may use information from many different sources about many different situations to form a generic cook character). Impressions can also shift between these as the situation calls for it, i.e., using first person/realistic as part of a performance then switching to third person/realistic to answer audience questions. Interpreters can have several main impressions in their repertoire that they employ as needed, and events and venues are often flexible about giving interpreters the authority to choose which impressions they wish to portray.

Whatever the impression style, the mission remains the same for living historians: to bring tangible elements of the past to life and to help visitors understand the past through a human lens. Few would argue that this is not a worthy goal for all types of museums. Many museums struggle to express the humanity behind rooms of art and antiques and glass cases full of medals and Minié balls: so why do more museums not explore the living history approach?

It could be argued that one reason for the hesitation stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the living history mission and a healthy fear of “getting it wrong,” especially when it comes to developing fictional characters. Living history closely adheres to Freeman Tilden’s classic six principles of interpretation, and the ethos of inclusive living history could be summed up in number four: the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.⁸ When Lizzie Mae speaks with visitors at Mount Vernon, her goal is not to instruct the audience on the exact specifications of the life of one enslaved woman at one historic house at one point in American history; rather, it is to prompt discussion and reflection on the army of enslaved people that supported the general’s comfortable life, and the millions of enslaved people who enabled our country’s birth and growth even while that country denied them basic rights.

This understanding of living history addresses an understandable fear held by those that traditionally rely on objects: that they cannot create a true story without documents or artifacts, and that they would create a character incorrectly or disrespectfully without the precise documents and artifacts that tell that individual’s story.⁹ This concern is even more urgent when the story they want to tell is that of a marginalized person or group. But we have to ask ourselves what is truly disrespectful: coming up with a character like Lizzie Mae because you do not have the complete story of any one maid, or letting visitors walk through the rooms of Mount Vernon not comprehending the work and constant presence of enslaved people at all?

As more sites strive to bring forward and humanize history’s forgotten actors, one approach to giving these people a voice seems almost too simple: give them a voice, even if it is not their exact voice, because we do not have their words, belongings, or photos to replicate it. Even if it is not their real name, because we have no way of knowing that. Developing a character and charging a living history interpreter with representing a forgotten voice is fraught with anxiety and pitfalls and should not be taken lightly, but it is worth the research and emotional labor to do it right. In the Digital Age, “not knowing” is no longer a valid excuse for avoiding an uncomfortable history. When artifacts are unavailable, the burden of research falls on sites and interpreters to learn as much as they can about past conditions and actors, and how to respectfully share their experiences. Reading primary sources and artifacts against the grain for alternative meanings, connecting with similar sites in the region to study

the broader historical landscape, and tapping into the vast knowledge base of serious living history interpreters are all strategies to learn more about those left out of official records and to move the field forward in terms of valuing and expressing their voices in spite of historical silencing.

Moving Forward

As we ask ourselves how we can tell more inclusive, relevant, and truthful stories at sites of historical interpretation, we also must question the necessity of relying on inherently limiting collections to frame our narratives. In 2019, most sites incorporate intangible artifacts into their presentations, whether it's recordings of oral histories or music or interactives that bring digital elements to life, freeing these sites from only telling stories for which they have physical artifactual support. Living history can also transform absent or insufficient artifactual support from a tragic omission to an opportunity for discussion and reflection as we research the experiences of those who lived, worked, and died without a name in the same communities and places as the well-documented and materially-rich individuals who have dominated American interpretation for over two hundred years.

All types of sites can benefit from the model set by living history interpretation, which encourages deep primary source research to extrapolate knowledge and interpret the past beyond documents, and gives voices to everyday people in history. This sub-field also prides itself on a willingness to experiment and to be transparent with visitors about what is directly evidenced and what is an educated guess in their interpretation, mirroring contemporary questions of authenticity and authority in the museum field as a whole. Using the tenets of living history, we can broaden our understanding of how to build modern interpretive stories that challenge our colonial inheritance of lost names and forgotten stories. Historic sites and museums are constantly seeking ways to emphasize history's relevance, and to rectify the exclusive interpretation that has dominated the American historical narrative for centuries. By building platforms to showcase and amplify unheard voices as closely as we can approximate them through living history interpretation, we can make bold strides in the right direction.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the 2018 ALHFAM conference session participants and 2019 NCPH "Making Radical Repairs" working group that helped shape this research.

Notes

¹ Jay Anderson, *A Living History Reader, Volume One: Museums*, 3.

² Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance*, xii.

³ Martha B. Katz-Hyman, Cliff Jones, Susan J. McCabe, and Mary Seelhorst (eds.), *The Living History Anthology: Perspectives from the ALHFAM*, xvii.

⁴ George Washington's Mount Vernon, "Timeline of Interpretation of Slavery at Mount Vernon."

⁵ James Madison's Montpelier, "The National Summit on Teaching Slavery."

⁶ Plimoth Plantation, "Wampanoag Homesite."

⁷ Patricia R. Olsen, "Portraying 18th-Century Black Men in Colonial Williamsburg," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2018.

⁸ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957).

⁹ Many thanks to the “Many People, Many Pasts” session participants at ALHFAM 2018 in Oklahoma for their honest and candid discussions of struggling to interpret Native American stories at majority-white sites and black history at Cherokee institutions.

References

Anderson, Jay. *A Living History Reader, Volume One: Museums*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1991.

Dungey, Azie Mira. “Ask a Slave.” Accessed January 5, 2019. <http://www.askaslave.com/>.

George Washington’s Mount Vernon. “Timeline of Interpretation of Slavery at Mount Vernon.” Accessed January 6, 2019. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/>.

James Madison’s Montpelier, “The Mere Distinction of Colour.” Accessed January 5, 2019. <https://www.montpelier.org/resources/mere-distinction-of-colour>.

— “The National Summit on Teaching Slavery.” Accessed January 7, 2019. <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/tackling-difficult-history>

Katz-Hyman, Martha B., Cliff Jones, Susan J. McCabe, and Mary Seelhorst (eds.), *The Living History Anthology: Perspectives from the ALHFAM*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Magelssen, Scott. *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.

McGill, Joseph. “The Slave Dwelling Project.” Accessed January 7, 2019. <http://slavedwellingproject.org/>.

McKnight, Cheyney. “Not Your Momma’s History.” Accessed January 5, 2019. <http://www.notyourmommashistory.com/>.

Olsen, Patricia R. “Portraying 18th-Century Black Men in Colonial Williamsburg,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2018. Accessed January 9, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/08/business/portraying-18th-century-black-men-in-colonial-williamsburg.html>.

Plimoth Plantation, “Wampanoag Homesite.” Accessed January 10, 2019. <https://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/wampanoag-homesite>.

The Sons and Daughters of Ham. Accessed January 15, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1067873246570896/>.

Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.

United States Colored Troops Living History Association. Accessed January 8, 2019. <http://www.usctlha.com/>.