Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice
HIS 627/IAR627—Fall 2010
Tuesdays 3:30-6:20
MHRA 2209

Professor Benjamin Filene
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Credits: 3 hours
Prerequisites: none; open only to History and Interior Architecture graduate students pursuing concentrations in Museum Studies or Historic Preservation (required of Museum Studies concentrators).

Course Description
This seminar explores the relationship between history and public audiences, focusing on the theory and practice of telling stories through museums and historic sites. It introduces you to the tools that public historians use to interpret the past, explores key dilemmas in public interpretation and community collaboration, and examines contemporary models for how to reach audiences in ways that make history resonant and meaningful to them.

Student Learning Outcomes
Through a mix of classroom- and project-based work, you will gain a richer understanding of the role of history in public life and of how museums and historic sites interpret the past for—and with—public audiences. Successfully completing this course will build the skills that you will need to thrive in the workplace:

- **evaluating and analyzing primary and secondary sources** thoughtfully, with attention to argument and point of view
- **using a finely honed eye and ear to recognize rich stories**—in sound, image, object, or text—and their potential impact on diverse audiences
- **synthesizing multiple sources** and points of view into compelling, relevant, and historically sound public presentations
- **speaking** with passion, clarity, and respect
- **writing** clearly and persuasively
- **collaborating** with energy, sensitivity, and an awareness of how much you can learn from community members and your peers
- **experimenting** fearlessly to build your skills and find the best ways to reach audiences

Teaching Methods
This seminar depends on active and engaged discussions that allow you and your classmates, individually and collectively, to wrestle with what it means to become a practicing public historian. The classroom will be a setting for engagement with multiple voices—not only the professor’s but those of the students, community partners, and historical “informants” revealed
through a range of sources. You are expected to complete reading assignments before every class meeting and arrive ready to share personal opinions on the material. Class sessions will regularly involve informal full-group discussions, oral presentations, small-group conversations, and on-the-spot analyses of primary sources. As detailed below, class participation is a significant part of your grade. In addition, you will engage with the course content through formal and informal writing assignments that invite you to apply the approaches we are discussing to original material in your own voice.

The course’s core theoretical concepts you will try out in practice. This semester the class will complete a multifaceted project—tentatively titled “Look. Again. Elm St.”—that focuses on change and continuity in downtown Greensboro’s urban fabric and sense of place. Each student will choose a single Elm St. building represented in an historical photograph. Students will then gather historical and contemporary images, piece together public records, and conduct original oral interviews to uncover stories about the people who made their lives and livelihoods in and around this building over time. Each student will create a mini-exhibition that shares these stories with public audiences at a “First Friday” gallery tour in downtown Greensboro.

**Assignments, and Evaluation**

*You will be evaluated on*

**Class participation—15%:**
attending class, doing the reading assignments, writing thoughtful and on-time weekly responses to the readings and “reflection journal” entries (see below), speaking up in discussions, representing the class and the school professionally in the wider community, and helping to foster a sense of shared exploration within the classroom

*Weekly responses:* Each week, short, informal reactions to that week's readings (roughly a couple of paragraphs) will be due. These must be posted on our class’s Blackboard Discussion Board by 8:00 a.m. each Tuesday.

**Analytical Essay—20%:**
a close reading of a single object or image—*due October 5*

**Oral interview archival Package—10%:**
oral interviews, indexed transcriptions, and permission forms, delivered to community and institutional partners—*due October 26*

**Exhibition Review—25%:**
an analytical assessment of a public exhibition—*due November 16*

**Final Project—30%:**
a community-focused mini-exhibition, displayed to the public, and a “source book” documenting your research findings—*due December 7*

**Grading scale:**
A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; F=72 and below
If things go awry…
…it’s your responsibility to tell me—right away. If papers are late without direct, prior approval from me, I deduct ½ a letter grade per day—no exceptions.

If your project is dead-ending or peer collaboration imploding, I need to hear about it before it’s too late to resolve the issues.

LATE PAPERS:
No extensions on papers or projects will be granted without a dean's excuse. If a paper or project is late without an extension, I will deduct 1/2 a letter grade per day (e.g., A to A-).

Academic Integrity Policy
All students have a responsibility to uphold the standards of “Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, and Responsibility” detailed in the Academic Integrity Policy. Instances of cheating, plagiarism, misuse of academic resources, falsification of information, and facilitating of academic dishonesty are treated with utmost seriousness by the history department and dealt with severely by the University administration. The full policy appears in the Student Calendar/Handbook and at academicintegrity.uncg.edu. Per university policy, you will be asked to sign a copy of the Academic Integrity Pledge for each major assignment in this class.

Special Needs
If you require accommodations for special learning needs, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Disability Services, located within the Elliot University Center (334-5770)—and please let me know!

Books to Buy
CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

SETTING THE STAGE
August 24—Introductions—Histories, Stories, Publics;

*Before first class:*


*Assignment:* Come to class with two comments that interested you.


Guillory, Ferrel and Andrew Holton. “We Ain’t What We Used to Be.” *Durham Herald-Sun* (January 4, 2009): F1, F3. [BF will hand out]

August 31: Whose History? Who’s History?
---*GUEST*: Linda Evans (Community Historian, Greensboro Historical Museum)


September 7: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 1: Hearing Stories?
---*GUEST*: Lynda Kellam, Data Services & Government Information Librarian, UNCG


*[In class activity: evidence as stories; stories as evidence]*

**September 14: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 2: Seeing Place**

--CLASS MEETS ON ELM ST.


**Optional:**


*Assignment:* Walk Elm Street with “live eyes” and identify a story hidden in the built environment to share with your classmates.

**READING THE EVIDENCE**

**September 21: Objects**


Conn, Steven. “Do Museums Still Need Objects?” In *Do Museums Still Need...*

National Register of Historic Places Nomination (ca. 1984). [BF will hand out]

Take audio walking tour of downtown Greensboro (focusing on Elm St. locations)

Optional:

[In class: writing exercise]

September 28: Images


Silvia, Paul J. “A Brief Foray into Style.” In How to Write a Lot (2007): 59-76.

Assignment: After reading the above, find a photograph that interests you and bring it to class along with some ideas about how to “read” the image. You could try the library at around call # TR650, where books on photographic history are located.

5:00 p.m.—Meet with Arthur Erickson, Genealogy Librarian, at Greensboro Public Library

For final project: historical image selected (from Greensboro Historical Museum?) and to some names located (via city directories) associated with your building

October 5: Oral History


**No Blackboard Posting**

**Assignment:** Complete certification at 
[http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/menu_soc.html](http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/menu_soc.html)

*PRINT OUT and turn in* certification of completion.

**Artifact/image essays due**

October 12: No class (fall break)

**TELLING THE STORY**

**October 19: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power**


**Oral History Interview Completed**

**October 26: Exhibiting History**


Schwarzer, Marjorie. “The Exhibition.” In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of*
November 2: Learning in the Museum


Optional:

November 9: Exhibit Evaluation—Class meets at Greensboro Historical Museum

*No Blackboard postings this week*


Assignment: After completing the above reading, fill out Serrell’s framework (pp.42-45) for Greensboro Historical Museum’s *Voices of a City*

November 16: Exhibit Design


(For a psychedelic version, check this out: [http://www.ludosabato.com/mau/](http://www.ludosabato.com/mau/))

Exhibition Reviews Due
November 23: In So Many Words: Exhibit Text


Read 3 (or more) of the 128-word short stories at http://www.storybytes.com/view-length/0128-words/index-0128.html

In class: Review drafts of final projects

November 30: Visitors as Co-Creators


Friday evening, December 3: Final projects due
—publicly displayed at First Friday, Greensboro (tentative)

December 7: Final projects due, including exhibits and 3-ring “source books.”
(No class session)