Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice
HIS 627/IAR627—Fall 2011
Wednesdays 3:30-6:20
MHRA 2210

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 that focuses on the Terra Cotta community in Greensboro, an African American village built to house workers of a local factory. Working with the director of the Terra Cotta Museum, each student will choose a single Terra Cotta family and draw on public records, images, and original oral interviews to piece together stories about the people who made their lives and livelihoods in this neighborhood over time. Each student will contribute to a mini-exhibition that shares these stories with public audiences at the museum.

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, duplicate cds, and permission forms, delivered to community and institutional partners—due October 26

Exhibition Review—25%:
an analytical assessment of a public exhibition—due November 9

Final Project—30%:
a community-focused mini-exhibition, displayed to the public, a written narrative of the family’s history that you are profiling, and a “source book” documenting your research findings—due December 9

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.

LATENESS POLICY:
If a paper or project is turned in late, I will deduct 1/2 a letter grade per day (e.g., A to A) unless you and I have previously agreed upon an extension in advance or unless a dean’s excuse is provided.

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:
Read about the National Council on Public History’s debate about “What Is Public History” (including Cathy Stanton’s summary) at the NCPH website: http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history

Read some of the actual Listserv postings about “What Is Public History” from May, June, and July 2007, archived here: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Public.

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


Explore the Terra Cotta Foundation’s website: http://terracottaheritagefoundation.org/about.html


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?
Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (2000): Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and Afterthoughts (everything except Chapters 2-3).


Meeker, Mary Jane Boren. “The Boren Family’s Industrial Enterprises.” In Enterprising Spirit: The Borens of Guilford County, North Carolina: 92-96. [BF will hand out]

--Meet with Dennis Waddell, Director of Terra Cotta Museum
Saturday, September 4—Extra class session: Terra Cotta Day Festival, 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

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


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

READING THE EVIDENCE

September 14: Objects


Chafe, William. Civilities and Civil Rights: 71-152.

Optional:

Schwarzer, Marjorie. “The Collection.” In Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of

[In class: writing exercise]

September 21: 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

September 28: Oral History


Introduction and Chapters 1-4, 8, and Appendix 1


No Blackboard postings this week
Assignment: Complete certification at http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/menu_soc.html
PRINT OUT and turn in certification of completion.

October 5: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 2: Seeing Place
--CLASS MEETS ON ELM ST.


No Blackboard postings this week
Assignment: Walk Elm Street with “live eyes” and identify a story hidden in the built environment to share with your classmates.

Artifact/image essays due

TELLING THE STORY
October 12: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power


Oral History Interview Completed

October 19: Exhibiting History


**October 26: Learning in the Museum**


Optional:


Oral Interview Archival Package due

**November 2: 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 9: Exhibit Design
McLean, Kathy. Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions: 92-114; 115-149.


Available online at http://www.brucemaudesign.com/#112942.
(For a psychedelic version, check this out: http://www.ludosabato.com/mau/.)

No Blackboard postings this week

Exhibition Reviews due

November 16: Digital History


Huffington, Ariana. “Museums 2.0: What Happens When Great Art Meets New Media?”
**Assignment:** Identify a web-based project that takes an interesting approach to linking users/visitors and history. Write a paragraph about it and post it to Blackboard (instead of a regular posting).

*In class: Review first drafts of final projects*

**November 23: No class (Thanksgiving break)**  
[Receive revision suggestions from BF for family histories]

**November 30: Visitors as Co-Creators**  


*In class: Review revised drafts of final projects*

**December 9—Extra class session:** Final presentations/Celebration,  
Terra Cotta Heritage Center, 6:00-8:00 p.m.