

Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice

HIS 627/IAR627—Spring 2009

Tuesdays 3:30-6:20

MHRA 3207

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, our 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.

All of the course's theoretical concepts you will try out in practice. The centerpiece of our work this semester will be a multifaceted public interpretive project focusing on Greensboro's Cone Mill Villages. In collaboration with community members and institutional partners, class-members will work together to create a series of interrelated components:

- a series of oral interviews with former mill village residents
- a multifaceted online exhibit
- a series of public programs that solicit public contributions to the website
- a printed brochure that invites public participation in the website
- archives-ready versions of the oral interviews, partial transcripts, images, and other materials gathered during the research process

Each of these components will be student-researched, student-designed, and student-fabricated with community informants, community collaborators, and community audiences.

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.

Reflection journals: As a service learning-designated course, collaboration with community members is at the heart of this seminar. This work can be challenging, requiring you to quickly build relationships with people outside the university while, in this case, also working collaboratively with your classmates. A Student Reflection Leader, an alumna from last year's HIS/IAR627 course, has been enlisted to offer advice and to serve as a sounding board as the class works toward a productive and enjoyable experience with service-learning and civic engagement.

Three times during the semester, you will be asked to write short reflections (approximately two pages double-spaced) about your hopes, concerns, and suggestions for the work process unfolding for the community-based final project. The first two of these “reflection journal” entries will help shape informal in-class discussions to be led by the Reflection Leader; the third will offer an opportunity to reflect on the service-learning experience and to offer advice for next year’s class.

due, via email, by 8:00 a.m.:

- *Thursday, February 11*
- *Thursday, April 1*
- *Thursday, May 6*

Analytical Essay—20%:

a close reading of a single object or image—*due February 23*

Exhibition Review—25%:

an analytical assessment of an exhibition of your choice—*due April 6*

Final Project—30%:

oral interviews; public programs, and online interpretive exhibit: *completed May 4*

Archival Package—10%:

oral interviews, transcriptions, images, and other materials gathered during project development—complete, clearly organized, technologically accessible, duplicated and delivered to both community and institutional partners—*due May 4*

Grading scale:

A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76

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

Falk, John H. and Lynn D. Dierking. *The Museum Experience*, 1992.

Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2003.

Schwartz, Marjorie. *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, 2006.

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 1996.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 1995.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

SETTING THE STAGE

January 19: Introductions—Histories, Stories, Publics;

[tour of White Oak Factory]

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

January 26: Histories, Stories, Publics (cont.)

Cronon, William. “Why the Past Matters.” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84 (autumn 2000): 3-13. [*BF will distribute*]

Corbett, Katharine T. and Howard S. (Dick) Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” *The Public Historian* 28 (winter 2006): 15-38.

Archibald, Robert. “Common Ground.” In *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (1999): 87-108.

Weil, Stephen E. “From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum.” In Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (2002): 28-52.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, et. al. “Afterword.” In *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, 2000: 364-383.

Minchin, Timothy J. “‘Color Means Something’: Black Pioneers, White Resistance, and Interracial Unionism in the Southern Textile Industry, 1957-1980.” *Labor History* 39 (May 1998): 109-133.

Optional:

Filene, Benjamin. “Searching for Florence.” *Minnesota History* 57 (fall 2000): 130-139.

[*Monday, February 1: UNCG March to International Museum of Civil Rights grand opening, gather 11:30 a.m. (optional)*]

READING THE EVIDENCE

February 2: Oral History—GUEST: Chuck Bolton

Portelli, Alessandro. “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event.” In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (1991): 1-26.

Davidson, James West and Mark Hamilton Lytle. “The View from the Bottom Rail: Oral History and the Freedmen’s Point of View.” In *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (2005 [fifth edition]): 177-209.

Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (2003).
Introduction and Chapters 1-4, 8, and Appendix 1

Read two transcripts of 2009 mill village interviews [*BF will distribute*]

Due February 9: complete certification at

http://www.irb.cornell.edu/training/menu_soc.html

PRINT OUT certification of completion and turn in

February 9: Objects and Images

Prown, Jules David. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" (1982). In *Material Life in America, 1600-1680*, Robert Blair St. George, ed. (1988): 17-37.

Hebdige, Dick. "Subculture and Style." In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (2002 [1979]): 1-19.

Corrin, Lisa G. "Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves." In *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, Lisa G. Corrin, ed. (1994): 1-22.

Davidson, James West and Mark Hamilton Lytle. "The Mirror with a Memory: Photographic Evidence and the Urban Scene." In *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (2005 [fifth edition]): 210-233.

Schwartz, Marjorie. "The Collection." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (2006): 69-119.

Reflection Journal entry due Thursday, February 11

TELLING THE STORY

February 16: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995): xvii-xix, 1-30, 108-153.

Wallace, Mike. "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," In *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (1996): 133-157.

Kingsolver, Barbara. "The Spaces Between." In *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (1996 [1995]): 146-157.

Lowen, James W. "In What Ways Were We Warped?" In *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*: 1-11.

Wedgwood, Tamasin. "History in Two Dimensions or Three? Working Class Responses to History." In *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 15 (July 2009): 277-297.

Schwartz, Marjorie. "Introduction." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of*

Museums in America (2006): 1-27.

[Discussion with Student Reflection Leader]

[In class: writing exercise]

February 23: Exhibiting History

Luke, Timothy. "Politics at the Exhibition: Aesthetics, History, and Nationality in the Culture Wars." In *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (2002): 1-4.

Clifford, James. "Museums as Contact Zones." In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997): 188-219.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (2005 [1993]): v-xi; 1-67.

Engelhardt, Tom and Edward T. Linenthal. "History Under Siege." In *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (1996): 1-7.

Simon, Nina. "Relativism, Multiculturalism, and Myth: New Stories about Modern Museums." *Museum 2.0*, museumtwo.blogspot.com (June 10, 2008): 3 pp.

Schwartzter, Marjorie. "The Exhibition." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (2006): 121-169.

Artifact/image essays due

March 2: Digital History

McLean, Kathy. "Surviving in Two-Way Traffic." In *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions* (2007), Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock, eds.: 8-13.

Richardson, Jim. "A Communications Revolution: Co-Producing the Museum" [text of keynote address], December 7, 2009: 14 pp. **[BF will send .pdf]**

Carr, David. "A Place Not a Place." In *A Place Not a Place: Reflection and Possibility in Museums and Libraries* (2006): 125-133.

Simon, Nina. "What Is Museum 2.0?" *audio* presentation:
<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2006/12/what-is-museum-20.html>

Interview transcriptions due

March 2: Learning in the Museum

Falk, John H. and Lynn D. Dierking. *The Museum Experience* (1992):
Introduction (1-7); Chapters 5-7 (67-114); 123-125; Chapters 9-10 (129-150).

Hein, George. "The Constructivist Museum." *GEM News* [Group for Education in

Museums] 1995: 6 pp.

Ansbacher, Ted. "What Are We Learning? Outcomes of the Museum Experience." *The Informal Learning Review* 53 (March-April 2002): 1, 4-7.

Optional:

Russell, Bob. "Experience-Based Learning Theories." *The Informal Learning Review* (1999): 6 pp.

[March 7-8: North Carolina Museums Council conference, Raleigh (optional)]

March 9—no class (spring break)

March 16: Exhibit Evaluation—Class meets at Greensboro Historical Museum

Serrell, Beverly. *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (2006): 3-6, 17-29, 41-46, 52-60, 91-109.

Chambers, Marlene. "Critiquing Exhibition Criticism." *Museum News* (September/October 1999): 31-37, 65.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 68-80, 163-166.

Assignment: Fill out Serrell's framework for Greensboro Historical Museum's *Welcome to the Gate City*

[March 18: Judging for Piedmont Regional of NC History Day, UNCG, 9:00-1:00 (optional)]

March 23: Exhibit Design

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 92-102; 115-149.

Wagner, Sherry Kafka. "Telling Time: The Process of Communicating History Interpretation in Exhibits and Sites." New York Council for the Humanities conference paper (1984): 9 pp.

Braden, Donna, Ellen Rosenthal, and Daniel Spock. "What the Heck is Experience Design?" *Exhibitionist* 24 (fall 2005): 14-20.

Bruce Mau Design. "An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth" (1998): 6 pp.
[BF will distribute]

Handout: "The Process: What You Can Expect" **[BF will distribute]**

March 30: In So Many Words: Exhibit Text

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996): ix-xv; 1-49; 65-100; 112-114, 125-130.

McLean, Kathy. *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*: 103-114.

Reflection Journal entry due Thursday, April 1**April 6: In-class work session**

[Discussion with Student Reflection Leader]

Exhibition review due**April 13: Historic Sites: Historic Houses**

Moe, Richard. "Are There Too Many House Museums?" *Forum Journal* 16 (spring 2002): 4-11.

Reid, Debra A. "Making Gender Matter: Interpreting Male and Female Roles in Historic House Museums." In Jessica Foy, *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (2002): 81-110.

Durel, John and Anita Nowery Durel. "A Golden Age for Historic Properties." *History News* 62 (summer 2007): 7-15.

Sevcenko, Liz. "Forward." *Public Historian* 30 (spring 2008): 9-15.

April 20: Historic Sites: Living History

Handler, Richard and Eric Gable. "The Bottom Line." In *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (1997): 220-235.

Stanton, Cathy. "Performing the Postindustrial: The Limits of Radical History in Lowell, MA." *Radical History Review* 98 (spring 2007): 81-96.

Carson, Cary. "The End of History Museums: What is Plan B?" *Public Historian* 30 (November 2008): 9-27.

Optional:

Thompson, Ginger. "Reaping What Was Sown on the Old Plantation." *New York Times* (June 22, 2000): 17 pp.

April 27: Work session**May 4 (?) [Extra class meeting]—Public Program/Celebration**

Archival packages due to institutional and community partners and to BF

Thursday, May 6: Final Reflection Journal entry due