

Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice

HIS 627/IAR627—Spring 2009

Tuesdays 3:30-6:20

MHRA 3209

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 best 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 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 a variety of institutional partners (the Greensboro Historical Museum, Revolution Mill Studios, UNCG's university archives, and others) class-members will work together to create a series of interrelated components:

- a community mapping program;
- a series of oral interviews with former mill village residents (nine of the interviews will be videotaped in collaboration with the Greensboro Bicentennial Commission);
- a neighborhood van tour, presented as part of a public program;
- a podcast version of this tour;
- a printed brochure for self-guided neighborhood tours; and
- 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 (see below), speaking up in discussions, representing the class and the school professionally in the wider community, pitching in on the group project, 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 #1—20%:

a close reading of a single object or image—*due February 24*

Exhibition Review—25%:

an analytical assessment of an exhibition of your choice—*due March 31*

Final Project—30%:

a neighborhood van tour, public program, podcast, and self-guided tour—*unveiled May 9* (or 16?)

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.

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 20: Introductions—Histories, Stories, Publics

--In class activity: public documents as evidence; public documents as stories

January 27: Histories, Stories, Publics

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.

Brattain, Michelle. "The Pursuits of Post-Exceptionalism: Race, Gender, Class, and Politics in the New Southern Labor History." In *Labor in the Modern South*, Glenn T. Eskew, ed. (2001): 2-46.

Optional

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

READING THE EVIDENCE

February 3: Oral History—GUESTS: Chuck Bolton and Cat McDowell

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.

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.

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

EXTRA CLASS MEETING

February 4, 4:00-5:30 p.m.: GUEST SPEAKER

David Carr, UNC-Chapel Hill

Read (from April 28 on syllabus):

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

Review from HIS/IAR 626 readings:

Carr, David. "In the Context of the Possible." In *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (2003): 37-54.

----- "Museums and Public Trust." In *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (2003): 109-131.

February 10: 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.

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.

TELLING THE STORY

February 17: 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.

Thelen, David. "Individual Experience and Big Picture History." *History News* 55 (winter 2000): 10-13.

Schwartzter, Marjorie. "Introduction." In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (2006): 1-27.

[In class: writing exercise]

February 24: Exhibiting History

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

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.

Luke, Timothy. "Memorializing Mass Murder: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum." In *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (2002): 37-64.

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.

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

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

Artifact/image essays due

March 3: 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 10—no class (spring break)

March 17: 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 24: 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]

March 26 or 27?: Meeting with Project Advisors

March 31: In So Many Words: Exhibit Text and Walking Tours

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.

Levy, Barbara Abramoff, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd, and Susan Porter Schreiber. *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites* (2001): 2-6, 23-25, 43-44, 116.

Exhibition review due

April 7: In-class work session

April 14: 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 21: Historic Sites: Living History

Gable, Eric and Richard Handler, “Colonialist Anthropology at Colonial Williamsburg.” *Museum Anthropology* 17 (October 1993): 26-31.

Cary Carson. “Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists’ First Contact with History Museums.” *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 137-150.

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?” Paper delivered at conference: New Audiences for Old Houses: Building a Future with the Past, Boston University (September 28, 2007): 25 pp.

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

April 28: Digital History

Mihm, Stephen. “Everyone’s a Historian Now.” *Boston Globe* (May 25, 2008): 4 pp.

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

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>

Websites to explore:

- *The Lost Museum* (Center for History and New Media):
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/the-lost-museum/>
- *Raid on Deerfield: The Many Stories of 1704*:
<http://www.1704.deerfield.history.museum/>
- *City of Memory*:
<http://www.cityofmemory.org/map/index.php>

- Omeka (“Showcase”):
<http://omeka.org/showcase/>

May 5: Meet offsite for practice run-throughs of neighborhood tours—

Levy, Barbara Abramoff, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd, and Susan Porter Schreiber. *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites* (2001): 105, 108, 144-146.

May 9 or May 16 (afternoon):

- **public program and neighborhood tours presented**
- **archival packages due to institutional and community partners**