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HISTORY NEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



The Power of Possibility

Exhibition as Mitigation

Is It Time for Another Revolution?

ENSURING A VIBRANT FUTURE FOR HISTORY

THE **POWER** OF **Possibility**

Louisville, "The Possibility City," is the ideal setting for this year's AASLH conference. Read how momentum is building as we see opportunities instead of obstacles.



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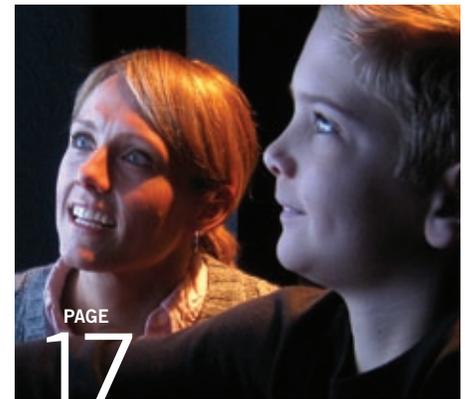
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HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

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Is It Time for

By Rick Beard

“Now is the time for the next great agenda of museum development in America...the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives.”¹

— HAROLD SKRAMSTAD
*Agenda for American Museums in the
Twenty-First Century*

The twentieth century ended on a high note for history museum leaders, who were reassured by the evidence in *The Presence of the Past* that their institutions were Americans' most trusted source of historical information. Still, the men and women at the helms of these institutions could be excused if they appeared somewhat uncertain about the future role their organizations were to play in the nation's cultural life. The explosive growth of the previous two decades had largely run its course, and many institutions now hunkered down to try to figure out how to get more people through their front doors. Questions of historical interpretation and content that had dominated professional conversations for many years were slowly making way for discussions focused on sharing authority and dramatically rethinking the entire museum experience. And all this transpired in the shadow of several unnerving challenges to the interpretive revolution in which so many had heavily invested.²

A Little Controversy Never Hurts, Right?

In April 1992, just in time for the annual conference of the American Association of Museums in Baltimore, the Maryland Historical Society opened *Mining the Museum*, a collaboration with the city's Contemporary Museum. Fred Wilson, a New York-based artist best known for his “mock museum” installations, was given free rein to “mine” the historical society's collections. Using manuscripts, prints, paintings, and objects, he created visually and intellectually jarring combinations of objects. While presented in traditional museum fashion, complete with interpretive labeling, Wilson's juxtaposed artifacts and images challenged visitors to view objects in contexts that

Another Revolution?

ran counter to widely accepted historical narratives. A Ku Klux Klan hood accessorized an early twentieth-century baby carriage, a section titled “Metalwork” displayed iron slave shackles next to several pieces of nineteenth-century silver, and in “Cabinetmaking, 1820-1960,” a whipping post accompanied a display of Victorian-era chairs.³

The public response to *Mining the Museum* was visceral. While some visitors responded positively to Wilson’s emotional and intellectual provocations, others were uncomprehending or outraged. “How can the person responsible for this be stopped or redirected?” asked one patron. Another characterized it as “the worst and most racist display I have ever seen in a museum!” Such controversy guarantees attention, and by the end of its run the exhibition had attracted more than 55,000 visitors, more than any other exhibition presented before or since at the Maryland Historical Society.⁴

For many history professionals, Wilson’s exhibit was (and remains) a watershed moment. In “Fred Wilson, PTSD, and Me: Reflections on the History Wars,” an insightful analysis written almost two decades later, exhibit developer Ken Yellis voiced the excitement that many had felt. “At the time [1992] it looked as if Wilson might help museums figure out ways of helping people fight about the past more productively and, more importantly, help make museums themselves both more self-reflexive and more transparent about the exhibition-making process.” But it was not to be so easy. A decade and a half later, Yellis concluded that “Americans’ historical disputation skills seem little enhanced. And museums, damaged by *Enola Gay* and other controversies, maintain an ambivalent relationship with *Mining the Museum*.”⁵

Fred Wilson’s skewering of many of the interpretive pretensions of history museums, while provocative, posed no existential threat to the institutions themselves. The same could not be said for the aforementioned contretemps surrounding the National Air and Space Museum’s effort to mount *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*. Six years in the planning, the exhibition was to feature the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. But well before the exhibit was to go up on the museum’s walls, it ran into a buzz saw of criticism from veterans’ groups and politicians. Members of the United States Senate took the lead, unanimously deeming the draft exhibit script “revisionist and offensive to many World War II veterans.” The controversy played out over the course of

a year, during which neither side in the dispute established a firm hold on the moral high ground.⁶

The denouement came in late January 1995, when Secretary I. Michael Heyman of the Smithsonian Institution announced that *The Last Act* would be replaced by a much more modest exhibit. “We made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the end of the war,” he explained in an institutional *mea culpa*. “They [veterans] were not looking for analysis,” Heyman continued, “and...we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings...analysis would evoke.” Four months later, Martin Harwit, the director of the Air and Space Museum and a well-respected astronomer who had taught at Cornell, resigned.⁷

The shockwaves from the *Enola Gay* controversy rippled throughout the history museum world for years afterward, leading to what Ken Yellis characterized as “a case of professional Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” Had some museums, he wondered, “become conflict-averse” and were still others inclined “to avoid narrative altogether?” While the controversy had made museums more wary, he optimistically concluded that it had also taught history professionals that “grappling with difficult and contested subject matter need not in itself be fatally toxic,” so long as they were prepared for the possible consequences. He also predicted that museums were “showing a little more willingness to pick an occasional fight.”

The jury is still out on the latter prediction, and recent history museum efforts to tackle difficult topics have met with mixed success at best. For every *Slavery in New York*, the much-lauded exhibition at the New York Historical Society in 2005-2006, there is a *Hide/Seek: Difference and*

The shockwaves from the *Enola Gay* controversy rippled throughout the history museum world for years afterward, leading to what Ken Yellis characterized as “a case of professional Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

“History lessons are as open to argument as...all the other present-minded disciplines that shape our cultural values and set our civic agenda.”

— Cary Carson

Desire in American Portraiture, an exhibition in 2010 at the National Portrait Gallery that drew intense criticism from those offended by its use of religious symbols.⁸

Both *Mining the Museum* and *The Last Act* posed none-too-subtle challenges to one of the interpretive revolution’s primary tenets—that the authority to create new narratives of the past rested with the curators, historians, and other

experts employed by museums. In Baltimore Fred Wilson had basically suggested that standard interpretive approaches failed to force visitors (and professionals) to journey outside their historical comfort zones. Being asked to consider how the same cabinetry skills used to craft a nineteenth-century Victorian chair were also employed to create a whipping post discomfited all but the most obtuse visitor, while also establishing a standard for interpretive provocation that many history museums still strive to achieve.

The *Enola Gay* controversy posed a different, more fundamental challenge. How could historians at work in museums respond to an argument such as the one posed by Senator Dianne Feinstein, who during a Senate hearing on the exhibition deplored the changes in

history since her days as an undergraduate, when the subject was “essentially a recitation of fact, leaving the reader to draw their own analysis.” She went on to wonder “about the wisdom of presenting any interpretation” in a manner that made clear her disdain for what was for most professionals the primary goal of any exhibition project. While such a view might have been acceptable to history professionals thirty or forty years earlier, it was anathema to the generation weaned on the certainty that, in Cary Carson’s words, “history lessons are as open to argument as...all the other present-minded disciplines that shape our cultural values and set our civic agenda.”⁹

A New Revolution Brews

By the end of the 1990s, attention and energy within the history museum community began to shift, from focusing on interpretive content to enhancing the visitor experience and reexamining the balance of power between institutions and their audiences. To suggest a causal link between this shift in priorities and the *Enola Gay* controversy, however satisfying, would be inaccurate. History museums were not disavowing their now decades-old commitment to scholarly interpretation. Instead, their leaders were beginning to recognize that the energies that had driven the interpretive revolution of the 1980s and 1990s were dwindling. Furthermore, the revolution had been largely successful. Despite the occasional high-profile donnybrook like the *Enola Gay* controversy, the

intellectual authority of history museums, as Rosenzweig and Thelen reported, trumped that of all other purveyors of historical content.

Success had come in large part because the history museum community had privileged the input of its own professionals, academic scholars, and funders such as the National Endowment for the Humanities. Listening to consumers and potential consumers was generally not part of the equation. As Harold Skramstad argued in his seminal 1999 essay, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” traditional museum practice “assumes that the museum is teacher and the audience is learner and that the museum cannot allow its audiences to play a role in defining its programs.”¹⁰

But this was about to change, for more and more Americans had come to expect their leisure activities to “engage them in a way that is vivid, distinctive, and out of

The Self-Directed

While preparing the Connecticut Historical Society’s new strategic plan in 2014, the staff and board held community meetings across the state. We were trying to understand how Connecticutans define history, why it is valuable, and their preferred ways to participate in it.

Most we spoke with—those passionate about the discipline and those who see it as a nice distraction—found relevance in history when it revolved around personal and local content. Personal and local history helped them to define themselves by explaining their sense of loyalty and identity, unusual quirks, and strongly held values. The search for these answers provided many a sense of purpose, and the tool they most often used to address it was narrative. Based on these observations, the CHS decided upon an approach to history whereby we would help visitors tell their own stories, and help connect those stories to the larger Connecticut narrative.

With this direction in mind, the organization began a few new programs to test this approach. In March 2015 we launched affinity groups aimed at people who have niche interests in decorative arts and textiles. Joining the affinity groups is free, but membership requires volunteer time to both design and staff programs. A CHS staff member assists as a facilitator and guide. The decorative arts group curated an exhibition, while the textile (or “fashion”) affinity group is organizing a history-inspired fashion show. We will follow both the exhibit and fashion with additional programs.

The people drawn to these groups aren’t just interested in admiring beautiful and rare objects. Most have personal

the ordinary.” This was especially true of children “brought up in a world of interactive media, which sets up new expectations of active participation.” At the core of Skramstad’s new agenda was his belief that American museums should now focus on helping to create a new world in which people of all ages could “reach in” to museums through experiences that offer personal value and meaning while also broadening their perceptions of the world.¹¹

Skramstad’s inclusion of “experience” in his formulation acknowledged an idea—the “experience economy”—popularized by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore. In a much discussed 1998 article, they argued that contemporary consumers sought more than just the provision of goods and services. They wanted an experience that drew on all five senses to enhance any activity with which they were engaging, be it shopping, traveling, or visiting a museum. In a subsequent article the two refined their ideas, arguing that

a “new consumer sensibility” had engendered the need for a museum to create the perception that it offered an “authentic” experience for each visitor. To accomplish this, a museum had to be true to itself and be what it said it was to others or, in the words of a Shaker motto: “Be what you seem to be, and seem to be what you really are.”¹²

A Dutch museologist expanded on Pine and Gilmore’s argument on behalf of authenticity. To customize an experience, he suggested, a museum must first understand its customers’ physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual aspirations

A “new consumer sensibility” had engendered the need for a museum to create the perception that it offered an “authentic” experience for each visitor.

Nature of Interpretation

By Jody Blankenship

history with the objects they study. A particular type of clock may have been crafted in the neighborhood where the person grew up, or they had a grandmother who worked in the textile mills where a fabric was woven. Deep study of these collections allows the audiences to explore their own histories. But their personal interests also lead them to research many things: differences in stitching methods or in cabinet-making, why one style was of preference, or where craftspeople learned their trade. From there, they can examine how those trends reflect immigration patterns in a community, for example, or how the blending of cultures improved construction techniques.

The next example of this approach is our spring 2015 exhibition, *Connecticut: 50 Objects/50 Stories*. The idea for this exhibit came directly from these strategic planning community meetings. At most meetings we found people had a very different perspective on Connecticut’s history and culture, one they understood mostly through personal experience and local identity. To help people share their own stories, and to connect them with the story of Connecticut, the CHS challenged the public and local historical organizations to submit stories as represented by photographs of real objects that they believe define Connecticut. We collect and display submissions in an online gallery. From the submissions, a committee of scholars, peers, and community members will choose fifty of these object-based stories for a physical exhibit that will run from May to October 2015 at the CHS headquarters.



CONNECTICUT
50 OBJECTS
50 STORIES

Rather than attempting to define Connecticut through a single narrative, this exhibit begins a conversation with participants about who we are, how we see ourselves and our communities, and what we aspire to become. So far we have received a wide range of stories and objects from the traditional Charter Oak legend and a leaf of tobacco used to make Connecticut shade leaf cigar wrappers, to the United Textile Workers of America union charter and a same-sex marriage certificate from 2008.

As the CHS transforms into an organization that helps people to discover and share their story (stories often shared and repeated in communities across the state) we are able to construct a wonderfully diverse, complex, and rich history that, rather than explaining where we came from, begins a discussion about where we wish to go.

As Rick Beard noted in this article, “The next great revolution in interpretation has already begun, as museums, in partnership with their audiences, move to craft transformative experiences that engage visitors of all ages. Success will rely upon the history community’s ability to fuse the new technology and social media with its greatest assets—real objects, places, stories, lives, and ideas.” This is the future of historical interpretation at the Connecticut Historical Society and should be, I believe, for the field as a whole.



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“Museum professionals will need to supplement command of historical content with expertise at interpreting, facilitating, engaging, listening, and learning with their visitors.”

— Benjamin Filene

and “determine what aspirational possibilities exist” within the museum’s purview. Only then can the institution add specific elements to the experience to help guide visitors to a “transformative end.”¹³

Determining an institution’s “aspirational possibilities” and acting on them to reach “a transformative end” is considerably different, and for many quite a bit more daunting,

than crafting an interpretive history exhibition shaped by rigorous scholarship and reliant on museum collections. Artifacts and content become means, not ends, and rather than an all-knowing content expert, the museum curator, historian, or educator becomes a facilitator. As Benjamin Filene wrote in these pages, “our usual ‘collect, preserve, and interpret’ missions are not enough to encompass this work.” It requires a new relationship between the professional and the visitor, one in which the two are on an equal footing.¹⁴

Many museum professionals are uncomfortable with the idea of letting go of their authority, arguing “that to focus on experience rather than on content is to pander to the audience and to attenuate the subtlety and nuance of what is being communicated.” Setting aside the question of the degree to which a

history museum can effectively convey nuance and subtlety, let alone communicate large amounts of information, the argument for maintaining the traditional balance of power between museums and their audiences smacks of a defensiveness that is largely generational.¹⁵

In the past ten years, many of those responsible for steering the interpretive revolution of the 1980s and 1990s have retired. Their younger replacements are men and women who have embraced the recommendations of reports such as *Excellence and Equity*, which stressed the centrality of education in museums, the need for inclusivity, and the central importance of forceful leadership to assuring that museums fulfilled their potential for public service.¹⁶

This next generation of leadership also appears willing, even eager, to share authority with the public and to embrace “public curation,” a process that invites “audiences to become active participants, shaping content and offering interpretations.” They recognize that “letting go” requires more, not less, involvement from museum professionals. “What the museum lets go of are not skills and knowledge,” argues Benjamin Filene, “but the assumption that the museum has the last word on historical interpretation.” To do this successfully requires a broader range of skills than in the past. “Museum professionals,” he continues, “will need to supplement command of historical content with expertise at interpreting, facilitating, engaging, listening, and learning with their visitors.”¹⁷

“Radical trust,” another term for this process of “letting go” of authority by museum professionals, has become popular in recent years. The Internet, social media, and the many other new ways Americans have to share opinions have made them increasingly insistent that museums listen to and include them as full participants in telling their stories. An institution’s commitment to radical trust, however, does not mean that the public has unfettered access to the levers of interpretation and program development. Jim Gardner, a senior executive at the National Archives, has correctly cautioned his colleagues in museums to avoid “blurring of the line between knowledge and opinion in a Web 2.0 world,” noting that “we need to resist the current impulse to welcome (and thereby validate) any and all opinions. ... Our challenge,” he continues, “is negotiating a role that both builds on who we are and what our strengths are and also engages and challenges the public in new ways, whether in the virtual or the real world.”¹⁸

It is too early to tell if the history museum community is ready for radical trust as an operating principle. We are just now emerging from an economic downturn that has too often waylaid plans to revise existing interpretive exhibitions or launch ambitious new projects, and in many instances has instilled a reactive rather than proactive mindset among many museum leaders and governance boards.

As frustrating as this has been for many in the profession, it may ultimately prove to be a blessing, for it has almost certainly kept institutions from investing tens of thousands of dollars in technologies that soon became outmoded. The almost surreal proliferation of tablets, smartphones, and other personal electronic devices daily redefines how people connect with one another, access information, share it with others, and save it for future reference. Technology that ten years ago would have been all but impossible to incorporate into an exhibition or educational experience in a museum because of the cost involved is now accessible to nearly everyone entering the institution’s front door or visiting its website.

The next great revolution in interpretation has already begun, as museums, in partnership with their audiences, move to craft transformative experiences that engage visitor of all ages. Success will rely upon the history community’s ability to fuse the new technology and social media with its greatest assets—real objects, places, stories, lives, and ideas. As one seasoned museum educator wrote recently in these pages, “History museums seem more eager to innovate than ever before. And as many traditional history museums downsize due to dwindling attendance, experimenting with...experience-driven learning may be a matter of survival.”¹⁹ ●



Rick Beard, currently an independent historian and author, is a past member of the AASLH Council and formerly served in senior management positions at the Hudson River Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, the Atlanta History Center, the New York Historical Society, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. He can be reached at रिक@mindspring.com. This is the third in a series of essays commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of AASLH.

¹ Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Cambridge: MIT Press for American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 1999): 128.

² See Rick Beard, "It's About the Story! A Revolution in Interpreting the Past," *History News* 70, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 25.

³ *Mining the Museum*, the after-the-fact catalog of the exhibition authored by Fred Wilson and edited by Lisa Corrin, has become a collector's item. On April 7, 2015, an interested purchaser would have had to pay from \$234 (used) to \$300 (new) for a copy on Amazon.com.

⁴ Maryland Historical Society Library, "Return of the Whipping Post: Mining the Museum," October 10, 2013, <http://on.aaslh.org/MdHistSocWilson>.

⁵ Ken Yellis, "Fred Wilson, PTSD, and Me: Reflections on the History Wars," *Curator* 52, no. 4 (October 2009): 335.

⁶ Kristin Ann Hass, *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 162.

⁷ There are several accounts that detail and analyze the Enola Gay controversy. Among the most useful is *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, edited by Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, and published by Holt Paperbacks in August 1996. The quotes and other information here are taken from David Thelen, "History after the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 1029-1035. This issue also has a number of other articles on the subject, some of which are also included in *History Wars*.

⁸ Yellis, 334, 335.

⁹ Thelen, "History after the Enola Gay Controversy," 1034; Cary Carson, "Front and Center: Local History Comes of Age," *Local History, National Heritage: Reflections on the History of the AASLH* (Nashville: AASLH, 1991), 91.

¹⁰ Skramstad, 126.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹² B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Welcome to the Experience

Economy," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1998, <http://on.aaslh.org/HBRExpEconomy>. See also: Andrea K. Jones, "Towards the Experience History Museum: All Hands On Deck," *History News* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 18-22; B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums & Authenticity," *Museum News* (May/June 2007): 76, 79.

¹³ Peter van Mensch, "Museums and Experience. Towards a New Model of Explanation," *ABRA* (Revista de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica, 2006), 34-36.

¹⁴ Benjamin Filene, "Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World," *History News* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 12.

¹⁵ Skramstad, 122.

¹⁶ *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums. A Report from the American Association of Museums, 1992* (Washington: Alliance of American Museums, 1992, 1998, 2008): 5. Although now almost a quarter-century old, this report remains a useful guide to the public claims on our museums.

¹⁷ Filene, 8-9, 12.

¹⁸ Tim Grove, "History Bytes: Grappling with the Concept of Radical Trust," *History News* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 4-5.

¹⁹ Jones, 22.

Success will rely upon the history community's ability to fuse the new technology and social media with its greatest assets—real objects, places, stories, lives, and ideas.



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