

Museum and Historic Site Interpretation Seminar
(History 662)

“The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.”
-- Carl Becker

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Office Hours: MW 2-4 and by appt.

Fall 2005
Herter 340
T 2:30-5:00

Course objectives: Students in this course will use their research and writing skills to develop exhibits, tours and public programming for area museums and historic sites. During the first half of the semester, seminar discussion will explore issues involved with the interpretation of objects and landscapes. During the remainder of the semester, students will devote most of their energies to field projects undertaken in teams for a nearby institution.

Books are available at the Jeffrey Amherst College Bookstore and on Reserve.:

Batinski, *Pastkeepers in a Small Place*
Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*
Foote, *Shadowed Ground*
Levy, *Great Tours*
Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History: The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum*
Rosenzweig, *Digital History*
Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*
Serrell, *Paying Attention*

Scheduled Writings: A series of short reviews of museum and historic site experiences, and a final paper, 10-15 pp, reflecting on lessons learned in team project in the context of museum and historic site literature.

Self-Scheduled Writings: At your convenience but before no later than the class meeting *prior to* the Thanksgiving break, you must select 2 titles from the list below—all on RESERVE in the library, to review (ca. 800 words).

Salmen, ed., *Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums* (AAM, 1998)
Ingram, ed., *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Non-Profit Boards* (Boardsource, 2003)
Genoways and Ireland, *Museum Administration: An Introduction* (Altamira, 2003)
Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Duke, 1997)
Malaro, *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy* (Smithsonian, 1994)
Sullivan and Edwards, eds., *Stewards of the Sacred* (AAM, 2004)
Archibald, *The New Town Square : museums and communities in transition* (Altamira, 2004),
Falk and Dierking, *Learning from museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA : AltaMira Press, c2000.)

Other Assignments: Your other major obligation will be the completion, as a member of a team of the Field Service Projects below. The purpose of these projects is to build skills in the collective execution of a successful project, to the satisfaction of a real client. Early in the semester you will rank your preferences concerning the three possibilities described below; I will use these to guide final assignments.

Also, please note that throughout the semester you are asked to take yourself on several self-guided field trips to local museums; in most cases, you are also asked to write about the experience. Please plan these visits well in advance; museums' hours vary, you may need to reserve places on tours, etc. Don't assume a museum's schedule will conform to yours.

Team Projects

- 1) Amherst College: The Bunker: During the Cold War, one of the Soviet Union's primary targets would have been Amherst, Mass. The Russians had nuclear missiles aimed at the town not because they were Williams grads, but because a bunker built into the side of Bare Mountain in 1957 on the side of

the Holyoke Range housed a backup command center for the Strategic Air Command in Omaha. If the central base at Omaha had been destroyed, control of nuclear war would have switched to the Amherst facility. That dark history remains visible in the rusted warning signs at the bunker's gates, the massive concrete and lead walls and ceilings built into the mountainside, and the now-vacant control room with signs that say "Senior Battle Staff Only." The Bunker served as a secure communications center for the SAC until 1971 when the Federal Reserve purchased it for records storage. Amherst College purchased the facility in 1989 and converted it to an archival facility (being 5-20 feet underground, the Bunker's temperature does not change with the seasons making it an ideal location for storing temperature-sensitive material).

Today, the bunker is a functioning storage facility for Amherst College. However, there is regular interest in the history of site, in tours given annually to alumni of the college during reunion weekend, for example, and other interested groups. Students assigned to this project will draft and design an exhibit on panels that could be easily mounted and dismantled in the lobby of the current building, the college library, etc. While many relevant documents are readily available in the AC Special Collections and Archives (Frost Library), some travel to the Corps of Engineers in Boston may be necessary. Some oral history may prove useful as well.

Required Readings:

DOING COLD WAR HISTORY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

<http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/guide/guidehome.html>

Hopkins, J. C, *The development of Strategic Air Command, 1946-1986* : (the fortieth anniversary history), [Omaha, Neb.] : Office of the Historian, Headquarters Strategic Air Command, Offutt Air Force Base, [1986]

William Hyland, *The Cold War: Fifty Years of Conflict* (New York: Times Books, 1991)

Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1992* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993)

Thomas G. Paterson, *On Every Front: The Making and Unmaking of the Cold War* (New York: Norton, 1992).

- 2) Historic Northampton. The Parsons House: The Parsons house was built in 1719 by Nathaniel Parsons, grandson of Joseph and Mary Parsons, who laid out the original home lot in 1654. The house is one of three historic houses located on the grounds of Historic Northampton. Stylistically, it belongs to Massachusetts' First Period of domestic architecture, which lasted considerably longer in the Connecticut Valley than it did at Massachusetts Bay. Extensively surveyed and documented by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1992, it has, at Historic New England's recommendation, been interpreted as an "archeological exhibit" around the theme of the evolution of New England domestic architecture rather than a furnished exhibit interpreted around a specific date. The challenge of this approach is that it relies heavily upon the visitor's imagination and on the interpretive skills of the docent.

In order to facilitate interpretation, the museum seeks to reintroduce some objects into the space. The student project would add another layer to the theme of the evolution of domestic life, illustrating change over generations. The challenge would be to do so without obscuring the architectural theme by full-scale dated furnishing. One approach would be to use an existing exhibit case to tell the stories of successive families who lived there. Another could use a few selected furnishings along with graphics to suggest changing domestic styles and uses. Students working on this project will develop a creative solution to the need to introduce tangible objects into the Parsons house in a way that enhances interpretation in ways that do not conflict with the architectural story already in place.

Readings:

Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725*
(Harvard University Press, 1979)

Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America* (Random House, 1993)

Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*
(Smithsonian, 1999)

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (Knopf, 2001)

Gregory Clancy and John Leeke, Report on Building Archeology at the Nathaniel Parsons House, Northampton, Massachusetts (SPNEA, 1992) available at Historic Northampton

3) Du Bois Homesite: W.E.B. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868 and died in Accra, Ghana in 1963. His life is a remarkable story of arguably the most important U.S. scholar/activist of the 20th century. The Du Bois homesite--a 5-acre plot about 2 miles outside of downtown Great Barrington--is set aside to commemorate his life as a National Historic Landmark whose custodian is the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Today the Homesite is a woodlot with an abundance of poison ivy, the house having been torn down in 1954. People have been working since the 1960s to develop an appropriate commemoration for Du Bois in this town of his birthplace, and all have been surrounded by controversy. Recent efforts include conducting archaeology at the Homesite, placing signage around town at Du Bois landmarks, developing a written geography of Du Bois locations in the town, and dedicating a mural and a garden to Du Bois.

The class project involves learning more about Du Bois's life and times, and then developing programming appropriate for the Homesite, and possibly other locations in Great Barrington. One possible outcome would be a script about the Homesite that an interpreter might deliver to visitors during appropriate times. (Note all the ambiguity surrounding that word--appropriate--that you will need to plumb in this project.) Other locales might also lend themselves to interpretive programming, as well, something for you to discover. Working on the project requires tact and diplomacy, as you will be entering into a fluid and complex set of social relations with some people seeking to bring about a commemoration of Du Bois, others opposed, and others ambivalent. This situation will make your job easier, because there are allies in the know, and harder, because this preexisting social situation is complex and multifaceted. This complexity makes this project real, as this is what you encounter in doing any historic site interpretation.

Readings: Du Bois has a phenomenal bibliography; the UMass W.E.B. Du Bois Library has the Du Bois papers. You will need to engage some of these resources to do this project....though it is hard to anticipate in advance all that you will need to look at. So, for a start:

On Du Bois & the homesite:

Drew, Bernard A.

2002 Fifty Sites in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Associated with the Civil Rights Activist W.E.B. Du Bois. Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Great Barrington Land Conservancy and Great Barrington Historical Society.

Du Bois, W. E. B.

1928 The House of the Black Burghardts. *The Crisis* 35 (4):133-134.

1968 The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the last Decade of It First Century. N.Y., N.Y.: International Publishers.

Lester, Julius, ed.

1971 The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois. Vol. 1. Edited with an Introduction by Julius Lester. New York, New York: Vintage Books.

Lewis, David Levering

1993 W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919. New York, New York: Holt.

2000 W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963. New York, New York: Henry Holt.

On the interpretation of archaeological sites:

Interpretation for Archeologists: A Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/lforA/index.htm>

John H. Jameson, Jr *The reconstructed past : reconstructions in the public interpretation of archaeology and history* (Walnut Creek, CA : AltaMira Press, c2003.)

Schedule of Topics and Readings:

Sept 13: Introduction: What does "Interpretation" Mean?

Reading:

John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Back to the Basics: Who Is Researching and Interpreting for Whom?" *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1994): 1004-1010. (ONLINE J-STOR)

Spencer Crew, "Who Owns History? History in the Museum," *The History Teacher* Vol 30 No. 1 (1996): 83-88 (ONLINE J-STOR))

Silverman, Lois, "Personalizing the Past: A Review of Literature with Implications for Historical Interpretation," *Journal of Interpretation Research* (Winter 1997): 1-11 (COURSEPACK).

Sept 20: Interpreting Objects and Landscapes, I: Historic House Museums

FIELD TRIP: HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON. Meet at 2:30 in Northampton.

Reading:

Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*

Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* (1974)
(COURSEPACK)

Susan Shoelwer, exhibition review, "The Rankins of Cherry Hill," *Journal of American History* 2003 90(1): 163-173 (ONLINE J-STOR)

Self-guided field trip: The Porter-Phelps-Huntington House in Hadley **REVIEW DUE**

Sept 27:

Interpreting Objects and Landscapes, II: Interpreting Archaeological Resources

FIELD TRIP: W.E.B. DUBOIS HOMESITE. We will carpool. Details TBA.

Readings:

Robert Paynter, Susan Hautaniemi, and Nancy Muller, "The Landscapes of the W. E. B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite: An Agenda for an Archaeology of the Color Line," in S. Gregory and R. Sanjek, eds, *Race..* (New Brunswick, Rutgers, 1994), 285-318. (COURSEPACK)

Archeology for Interpreters: A Guide to Knowledge of the Resource
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/AFORI/index.htm>

ALSO: If you haven't already read it, please try to at least skim Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk*. A full-text on-line version can be found on Bartleby.com, and likely elsewhere. Used editions are easily had as well, and there are some good critical and centennial editions just out.

Oct 4: Interpreting Objects and Landscapes, III: Interpreting Loss

FIELD TRIP: THE BUNKER. Meet at 2:30 at the site.

Readings:

Keith R. Allen and Christian F. Ostermann, "Interpreting the Physical Legacy of the Cold War: A Conference Report," *Perspectives*

<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2004/0409/0409not1.cfm>

Cold War History Project

http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.home

Cold War Museum (www.coldwar.com)

Oct 11:

The Institutional Setting, I: Overcoming Undertow

FIELD TRIP: HISTORIC DEERFIELD. Meet at 2:30 at the Historic Deerfield.

Reading:

Batinski, *Pastkeepers in a Small Place*

Lanning and Miller, "Common Parlors," *Gender and History* (COURSEPACK)

Historic Deerfield Long Range Plans, 1984, 1991 and "For the 21st Century" **RESERVE**

(these documents will form the basis of our discussion; please read carefully, and formulate questions/comments/observations in advance)

Oct 18: The Institutional Setting, II: Cultures of Interpretation

Reading:

Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*

Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums" *Public Historian* 1998 20 (3):11-51 (COURSEPACK)

Carson, "Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists First Contact with History Museums," *Journal of American History* 81:1 (1994), 137-50 (COURSEPACK)

John D. Krugler, "Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America" *WMQ* (COURSEPACK)

Oct 25: Sites with Hard Issues to Face

Reading:

Foote, *Shadowed Ground*

Robert Weyeneth, "History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret," *Public Historian* (1994): 51-73. (COURSEPACK)

Self-guided field Trip: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association **REVIEW DUE**

Nov 1: The Institutional Setting, III: Community Hopes, Hamstrings

Reading:

Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History: The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum* (2005)

Nov 2: : **NOTE ALTERNATE MEETING DATE:** Nuts and Bolts I: Planning Successful Exhibits
FIELD TRIP – The Pequot Museum, with exhibition designers Michael Hanke and Ann Wills Marshall

Reading:

Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*

Vukelich, "Time Language for Interpreting History Collections to Children," *Museum Studies Journal* (Fall 1984): 43-50.

Self-Guided field trip before this date: Historic Deerfield's Flynt Center **REVIEW DUE**

Nov 8: NO CLASS, IN VIEW OF NOV 2 FIELD TRIP

Nov 15: Nuts and Bolts II: Planning for Successful Interpretation

FIELD TRIP: THE EMILY DICKINSON MUSEUM. Meet at the EDM at 2:30
HOST: CINDY DICKINSON

Reading:

Barbara Levy, et al, *Great Tours!*

Marianne Curling, "How to Write a Furnishing Plan," AASLH

Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian, 1977) Introduction (COURSEPACK).

Falk, J.H., Moussouri, T., & Coulson., D., "The effect of visitors' agendas on museum learning," *Curator*, (1998) 41, 2, 107-120. (COURSEPACK).

NOTE: PRIOR TO THIS DATE, AND PREFERABLY IN OCTOBER (since their schedule goes down to just Wednesdays and Saturdays in November) YOU MUST TAKE A TOUR OF THE EDM ON YOUR OWN.

Nov 22: Nuts and Bolts III: The Importance of Evaluation

FIELD TRIP: OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

Reading: Serrell, *Paying Attention*

McManus, P.M., "Memories as indicators of the impact of museum visits," *Museum management and curatorship*, 12 (1993) 367-380 (HANDOUT)

Sandifer, C. , "Time-based behaviors at an interactive science museum: exploring the differences between weekend/weekend and family/nonfamily visitors," *Science Education*, 81(6) (1997): 689-701 (HANDOUT)

Thanksgiving Break

Nov 29: Virtual Interpretation

Reading:

Rosenzweig, *Digital History* (Penn Press, 2005)

Jacob Nielsen, Alertboxes:

"Are Users Stupid?" <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20010204.html>

"End of Web Design" <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000723.html>

"Why Web Users Scan Instead of Read" <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/whyscanning.html>

Larry Gales, "Web Page Design Inspired by Edward Tufte"

<http://staff.washington.edu/larryg/Classes/Rinflux/zz-influx.html>

Self-Guided Field Trip to one of these virtual museums **COMPARATIVE REVIEW DUE:**

The Lost Museum: <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/>

The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory: <http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/index.html>

Do History: <http://www.dohistory.org>

National Postal Museum: <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/>

Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People: <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/blackloyalists/>

Many Stories of 1704: <http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/>

Dec 6: No Class – prepare presentation of Group Projects

Dec 9: **CLASS CONFERENCE: Presentation of Group Projects**

Dec 13: LAST CLASS. Lessons from the field of museum and historic site interpretation.

Assignment: Everyone in the class should come with a list of "10 best practices" on interpretation, with enough copies to distribute.

FINAL PAPERS DUE