Museums and Historic Sites Interpretation
(Hist 662)
UMass Amherst – Department of History
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Office Hours Wednesday 1-4 and by appointment

Objective
The aim of this course is to introduce students to some of the many intangible issues surrounding museum and historic site interpretation. We will also be addressing some of these challenges through on-the-ground and digital collaborations with museums and other non-profits in Massachusetts and beyond. Seminar discussion will explore readings, including both theoretical and practical works. Writing assignments will be both practical (writing exhibit labels, digital history websites) and theoretical (analyzing meaning-making in museum exhibits and at historic sites). Students will expand their insights and develop their skills by undertaking a set of "field service" projects for community partners.

Readings
Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926
Gail Anderson, Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift
Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum (available for free online, also available in paperback)
Whisnant, Miller, Nash, and Thelen, Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service (available for free online)
Paul A. Shackel: New Philadelphia: An Archaeology of Race in the Heartland

Additional Readings on Reserve or Available in Library
Donnelly, Interpreting Historic House Museums
La Follette, Negotiating Culture
Serrell, Exhibit Labels
Serrell, Paying Attention
Serrell, Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence
Meringolo, Museums, Monuments, and National Parks
Crane, Museums and Memory
Stanton, The Lowell Experiment
Karp and Lavine, Exhibiting Cultures

Potential Academic Journals to Explore, Read, and Cite -
The Public Historian
Museum Anthropology
Visitor Studies (e-journal)
Curator
Museums & Society (e-journal)
Museums & Social Issues
Journal of American History
Collections: A Journal for Museums and Archives Professionals
Journal of Museum Education
Journal of the History of Collections
Museum (formerly Museum News)
Museum Management and Curatorship (formerly Museum Management)
Heritage & Society
The Journal of Interpretive Research

Other Assignments: You will complete, as a member of a team, one 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. Students should be a part of two (2) out of the three (3) listed projects.

Also, please note that throughout the semester you are asked to take yourself on some self-guided field trips; 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.

Evaluation: both your participation in class and your written work will be evaluated and factor into your final grade. The short papers together will constitute roughly a third of your final grade for the course, your oral participation another third, and your final paper another third. But please remember that grades are only meant to be rough indicators of your overall skill set, and not ends in and of themselves. Your focus (and mine) should be on the identification of both strengths and weaknesses in your abilities as an historian, with the aim to cultivate the former and address the latter.
**Writing Assignments**

You will write, following approval from the instructor, three (3) analytic reviews for this class. All three should clearly connect to museums or historic sites and their interpretation to the public. The first will be on a major monograph in public history. The second should focus on a recently published digital history resource. The third and final review should focus on a museum or historic site in the Pioneer Valley. Reviews should be 4-6 pages, double-spaced. Alternatively, the instructor will consider appropriate reviews written in the required length and style of a designated journal in mind for future submission.

**Field Service Projects**

*Smithsonian Institution – National Museum of American History*

This project involves collaborating with Smithsonian staff to create public web content related to museum collections. More specifically, as next year represents the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 collections at the museum connected to disability will be emphasized. Katherine Ott, Curator, Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, will be our lead collaborator on this project.

Students will be expected to write at least one carefully crafted blog post of approximately 500-700 words on an object connected to disability from the Smithsonian’s collections. Students are expected to peer-review each other’s work, preparing it for review by Smithsonian staff. Blog posts, suggested social media connections, and any other relevant documents will be submitted to the museum for review. This upcoming summer, blog posts are scheduled for publication on the Smithsonian Institution’s website, a tremendous addition to your portfolio.

*Amherst Goodwin Memorial AME Zion Church*

This represents the continuation of an ongoing project to provide interpretive resources for the Goodwin Memorial AME Zion Church in Amherst, Massachusetts. Our goal this semester will be to continue to expand the website while further brainstorming ideas for more robust visitor experiences connected to the church.

As a side project, we will create and gradually expand a Wikipedia entry for the church, writing it throughout the course of the semester and connecting it to the available resources now online.

*Boston Old South Meeting House*

Create a new interpretive plan for the Old South Meeting House in Boston, Massachusetts. Participation in this project will require field service trips to Boston to engage with administrators who run the space. Built in 1729, the space originally served as a Puritan meeting house. For a time, the site was Boston’s largest building and it served as an important and central gathering place for meetings of all kinds in addition to religious worship. The significance of the meetinghouse grew in the fever of the American Revolution, most notably when on December 16, 1773 a meeting to debate a newly imposed tax on tea resulted in protests known as the Boston Tea Party.

An interpretive plan is the preliminary step in the process of designing an exhibit space. A well-written interpretive plan considers how best to utilize existing space in light of the needs of audiences and visitors. Following Freeman Tilden’s principles of interpretation – the aim of this project is to further consider how best to create a meaningful visitor experience by relating content to their lives and provoking emotional reaction. The
resulting product, copies of your final report plus any relevant materials organized as appendices will be of use to future plans for interpretation, exhibit design, educational programs, and visitor experiences at the Old South Meeting House.

**UMass Academic Honesty Policy**

"Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst."

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty."

"Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct."

"Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. The procedures outlined below are intended to provide an efficient and orderly process by which action may be taken if it appears that academic dishonesty has occurred and by which students may appeal such actions."

"Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent."

http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/downloads/AcademicHonestyPolicy.pdf

**UMass Disability Statement**

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to making reasonable, effective and appropriate accommodations to meet the needs of students with disabilities and help create a barrier-free campus. If you are in need of accommodation for a documented disability, register with Disability Services to have an accommodation letter sent to your faculty. It is your responsibility to initiate these services and to communicate with faculty ahead of time to manage accommodations in a timely manner. For more information, consult the Disability Services website at [http://www.umass.edu/disability](http://www.umass.edu/disability) and [http://www.umass.edu/disability/students.html](http://www.umass.edu/disability/students.html)

**Schedule of Topics and Readings**

**Tuesday 1/20** – Course Introduction, Go Over Syllabus, Submit Preferences for Field Service Projects, Address Questions

**Tuesday 1/27** – Interpretive Planning for Museums and Historic Sites

The Gloom of the Museum (1917) by John Cotton Dana in Anderson

What Is a Museum? (1942) by Theodore Low in Anderson

California State Parks – Interpretive Planning Workbook –

**Tuesday 2/3** – Museums and US Intellectual History
Steven Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926

Explore: National Park Service Interpretive Development Program - http://idp.eppley.org/

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1/3 DUE**

**Tuesday 2/10** – History and the Public


Christine Baron, “One if by Land! Two if by River! Or, What if Everything You Thought You Knew Were Wrong?” *The History Teacher* 43 (August 2010): 607-615. (a brief account of the difficulties encountered when historians and educators attempted to reinterpret the Old North Church, Boston) J-STOR

“Hey, That’s Mine”: Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums in Anderson

**Tuesday 2/17** – No Class, Monday Class Schedule following President’s Day

**Tuesday 2/24** – Museums, Historic Sites, and “The Public”

Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums (1983), by Marilyn G. Hood in Anderson

The Visitor's Bill of Rights (2000) by Judy Rand in Anderson

Can Museums Be All Things to All People? Missions, Goals, and Marketing's Role (2000) by Neil Kotler and Phillip Kotler in Anderson

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2/3 DUE**

**Tuesday 3/3** – Museums in Transition
Stephen E. Weil, "From Being about Something to being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus* (Summer 1999),109-129.229-258. JSTOR

An Agenda for Museums in the Twenty First Century (1999) by Harold Skamstad in Anderson

**Tuesday 3/10** – National Park Service
Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service
Available online at http://oah.org/programs/nps/imperiled_promise.html
This is also book-length: again, budget adequate time.

Changing Practices of Interpretation (1997) by Lisa C. Roberts

Tuesday 3/17 – No Class, Spring Break

Tuesday 3/24 – Thinking About Landscape and “Difficult” Issues in History
New Philadelphia: An Archaeology of Race in the Heartland by Paul A. Shackel

Try to browse 2-3 town studies, of your choosing.
Freedom’s Way Landscape Inventory: Massachusetts Heritage Landscape Inventory Program

Blackstone River Valley Heritage Landscape Inventory
http://www.nps.gov/blac/parkmgmt/heritage-landscape-inventory.htm

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #3/3 DUE

Tuesday 3/31 Memory, Nostalgia, and Public History

Museums in the Age of Deconstruction (1992) by Michael Ames in Anderson

Tuesday 4/7 Museums 2.0 – Museums and Audience Participation
Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum
Available for free online here - http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/


Is There Method in Our Madness? Improvisation in the Practice of Museum Education (1999) by Mary Ellen Munley

Tuesday 4/14 (Note: The annual meeting for the National Council on Public History - NCPH – will be taking place in Nashville, TN between April 15-18, 2015. Graduate students in this course are encouraged to attend. If you are unable to attend, please visit the NCPH website, read the program, and follow the Twitter hashtag #ncph2015 to familiarize yourself with the debates and conversations happening at the conference.)

Tuesday 4/21 – The Future of Museums and Historic Sites Interpretation - (also, debriefing from NCPH conference to discuss our impressions of the field, examples of cutting edge work, and potential opportunities)

Daniel Penrice, “Can This Museum Be Saved?”
http://www.common-place.org/vol-03/no-01/penrice/index.shtml
Deft Deliberations (1991) by Dan L. Monroe and Walter Echo-Hawk in Anderson

Deaccessioning: The American Perspective (1991) by Marie C. Malaro

*Please search online for a recent example of deaccessioning. Some recent examples include the Philadelphia History Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, and the Field Museum of Natural History. Be ready to share with the group what you learned about how the museum approached the situation and how the public, media, or professional organizations responded.*

**Tuesday 4/28 - The Future of Museums and Historic Sites Interpretation – Best Practices and Takeaways – Everyone in class should come up with a list of 10 “Best Practices” for Public History and Interpretation at Museums and Historic Sites. Bring enough copies to distribute.**

The Well Managed Museum (1989) by Stephen E. Weil and Earl F. Cheit in Anderson


Persistent Paradoxes (1997) by Robert Janes in Anderson

**Final Materials Due - Final Projects and Final Papers Deadline TBA**