

Student Reference to Public History

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I. History of Public History

A. General History

Public History examines the place of historical consciousness in American life and asks how the ideas about history shape current beliefs and actions. It goes beyond the confines of academia and bridges the gap between scholarship and the public.

- Popular understanding of historical events affect how we behave in the present
- “History can be used to teach people that the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions that delimit contemporary literature are not timeless but products of human agency and historical choices.” (*Presenting the Past* xxiv)
- Importance of distinguishing between history (what happened)and memory (how people remember what happened)

There are three varieties of public history, each with their own focus and goal:

1. Historical messages embedded in commercial form
 - serves dominant interests and reinforces popular prejudices
 - history as commodity
2. Represented by professional public history movement (Applied History)
 - come from effort to professionalize the new field
3. People’s History
 - refers to attempts to encourage a “progressive, accessible, and frequently oppositional historical vision”
 - emphasis on process as well as content of history
 - use of new media and exploration of new topics

Perspectives on Public History Throughout American History

1. Antebellum Americans
 - Not particularly sentimental about saving old buildings, anti-historical inclinations
2. Mid 1800s
 - Memorialization of nation’s founders
 - July 1850- first historic house site (Washington’s headquarters in Newburg)

- 1859-Saving of Mount Vernon by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association
 - beginning of a long legacy of private women's groups helping preserve and present history to the public
3. Late 1800s
 Large surge of interest in preserving house for museum (from 20 houses in 1895 to 100 in 1920)
 House museums serve to 'Americanize' immigrants
 4. Early 1900s
 Businessmen bringing history to the masses (Ford and Rockefeller)
 1923- creation of first museum villages
 5. Mid 1900s
 State as guardian of public memory
 1933- national Parks Services to survey all 'historic' buildings
 redefinition of American history to include common people
 6. 1950s
 Post-War: meaning of 'historical' is narrowed to celebrate the 'American way of life'
 sentimental portrayal of past, no mention of slavery, profoundly ahistorical
 7. 1960s
 Critique of history museum as one dimensional, portraying a "false colonial past"
 Grassroots museums begin to form to protect local heritage and try to find a more comprehensive portrait of past
 8. 1970s
 Slavery 'discovered' at Williamsburg -slave culture was approached but not slave revolution
 Museums not interested in securing social change
 History confined to entertainment and nostalgia
 Term 'public history' is first coined
 9. 1980s to present
 1981- Committee on Public History was formed
 Organizing public history as independent from academia- creation of guidelines for ethical practices in, respectively, oral history, museums, and archives
 Realization of the ethical issues that come up with 'presenting' public history
 Public history has not provided a unified agenda

(taken from *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*)

B. Missing Narratives- How Public History Sites Are Presented

How history is presented at public history sites is less about facts and figures and more about stories. Engaging the public in these locations involves interpreting the past into narratives that tell the story of that location. That being said, there is sometimes a gap between the stories

being told and the stories being left out. This can lead to a one-sided version of the past, or one that has been polished to look a certain way. Currently there is a drive to move away from a metanarrative and towards the multiple narratives that a site can encompass. There are two main perspectives to how narratives are presented.

1. 'One Nation/One People' interpretation

Used to project American exceptionalism and nationalism, this perspective tends to present the past as unified, focusing on the narratives of the most powerful. There is an attempt to project shared ideals and values which usually goes along with a nostalgia for a simpler way of life. A fragmented past can be seen as controversial because it often questions national institutions and policies. An added complication is that many public history sites serve private interests where funders have a say on how stories are told.

2. From Shrine to Forum

Different from a unified view of history, there is a more personal and fragmented view of history that tends to be more inclusive of race, gender, and class. Sometimes this perspective is termed 'revisionist history' and is seen as controversial because of the social agenda behind it. The goal is to create a dialogue around the past - both the good and the bad, to help create a better future. The difficulty this perspective faces is that history is combined with memory and nostalgia, which are often not accurate or encompassing. Proponents of this view of public history emphasize that 'ignoring the complexity of the past fails to prepare Americans for future crises'

Some points to consider when attempting a more encompassing narrative:

- Accentuate connections between both the positive and negative aspects of American history
- Finds ways to present history in a more complex, less homogenized manner
- Focus on public understanding by reaching audiences through multiple paths/narratives

(taken from "Public History Wars")

C. Slave Narrative

As we have already discussed, the narratives that are present and missing in the public history site are important. Currently there is a move toward a more diverse set of narratives. For example, on a plantation site, it is interesting to have the narrative of the plantation owner as well as the slaves. A focus on the women or even the children would also bring more life to the site. You could also look through the lens of the objects present, or the means of production.

Slave narrative has been a very popular topic of debate in Public History. Many current Public Historians feels that the story of slavery on historic sites has been romanticized and

domesticated. To be fair, any discourse on slavery is a great improvement on sites, where up to the 70s only focused on the plantation owners, presidents etc. it has not been an easy topic to deal with in public sites where there must be a balance between the tough emotions this topic brings up and the importance slavery has on understanding this country: “ The critical question is not simply how people remember their past but how they deal and ultimately learn from the ‘tough stuff’ of their history and how they apply the lessons learned to the challenges of their present and their future” (Horton xiii)

There is currently not a consensus over the best way to present the slave narrative. There are several reasons for this:

- Sensitivity about the topic
Because this is a topic that can still be very sensitive, there is some apprehension over how and to what extent slavery should be depicted in public history sites. Many fear the public are not comfortable with learning about the harshness that surrounds the topic, especially when they are so close to the actual location of slave cabins for instance. One thing is to learn about it in the safety of a classroom, another is to be standing in the cabin where dozens of slaves were housed, for instance.
- Political agenda (patriarch v. slave owner)
Some public history sites are run or funded by groups of people who have a vested interest in how the history of that particular site is represented. Often there is a hesitance to include slavery in the narrative of say, a president’s home, in keeping with the more traditional view of sites as shrines.
- Misrepresentation
Up until very recent history slave narrative, if any at all, has been confined to romanticized stories of house servants and mammies. There is often the perfunctory mention of a single slave story or the brief admittance that slavery was a big part of plantation life. Sometimes, despite best intentions of including the slave narrative, what is presented to the public is still misguided.

(Taken from *Slavery And Public History : The Tough Stuff Of American Memory*)

D. History of Public Houses

House museums are important to public history as they help shape the popular understanding of history and historically significant people. These sites maintain several purposes. As museums, they take on the responsibility of preserving the buildings and restoring them to a historically accurate state. These are also public history sites that use furniture displays and narrative to reach their public audience. They do this in the hopes of instilling a sense of the domestic life of a historical figure while infusing that narrative with the ideologies of the person for inspirational effect. One of the more important things to understand about house museums is the system of underlying politics at work that affects these museums and how they present

history. This process of choosing what narratives to present and which ones to leave silent is best illustrated by looking at two of the most prominent house museums in the United States.

1. Mount Vernon

The historic home of George Washington is an example of the early house museum movement. The early years of this movement came from a need to unite a slowly fragmenting American Republic in the days preceding the Civil War. This had a clear impact on the founding of Mount Vernon and the narrative it chose to present in the beginning. Mount Vernon found its message through the voices of antebellum women and their organizations who saw it as their purpose to restore the site and use it as an example for the nation, which was itself a deteriorating “house” that needed fixing. They gathered under the umbrella organization of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) and created for themselves a history that best suited their purpose. While the MVLA was comprised of a contentious partnership between women’s organizations from the North and South, they presented a public face of unity as a group rising above political conflict. However, the battle for an agreeable narrative between these two ideologically different groups was only settled by excluding the issues that created conflict, which in this case would be the topic of slavery. Therefore, the MVLA in fact reinforced “the tendency of Northerners to ignore the historical reality of slavery at Mount Vernon” (*Domesticating History* 27). They did this to alleviate political debate and further their narrative of Washington as a sacred symbol of American virtue. As the founding of Mount Vernon encompassed the years both before and after the Civil War, the MVLA’s purpose was entirely involved in Washington as a unifying figure for the country and had no interest in presenting Mount Vernon as a historically accurate plantation. Professional interest in house museums as accurate representations of history would come later with sites like Monticello.

2. Monticello

Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia plantation is a major example of the evolution of the house museum movement especially as it moved toward the more professional environment it has become today. In the years following World War I, the idea of house museums, especially those linked to the founding fathers, as a unifying force for Americans deepened. The nation turned inwards and found new significance in the defining elements of American culture. Turning Monticello into a “shrine” similar to Mount Vernon became the next project for many women’s groups. However, the expanding state powers of the Progressive Era government had already taken over much of the ground covered by these groups, so they found their activities far from fruitful. In fact, Monticello, once entered into the political sphere through the women’s groups, quickly became a tool for fractured a Democratic Party. Just as an idealized Washington was used in an attempt to unify the states, Jeffersonian principles were used as a rallying point for the Democratic Party with a focus on civil liberties. Although Monticello was

used as a political symbol in its earliest days as a Public History site where Jefferson was mainly idealized as a philosopher, it quickly evolved into one of the first professional house museums. This shift came about with the appointment of trained academic historians into the house museum sector. Before, house museums were shrines furnished for emotional effect to represent the domestic life of historical figures. By the mid-1920s, the view on house museums was changing to one of historical accuracy and “objective historical research” (*Domesticating History* 124). This view of house museums continues today at Monticello with an even sharper focus on being as inclusive as possible in regards to the history being researched and the narratives being shared.

(Taken from *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums*)

II. Suggestions for Future Projects

These suggestions are specifically related to the Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation but the ideas can be incorporated in any local public history site. The main concern is to look at how the site can be improved and what you can do to help. Talking to the site director is the starting point to coming up with a project for your internship.

A. Slave Narrative and Other Narratives

There are many ways that Hofwyl can expand its narratives to be more inclusive. Any improvement on the narratives will make the visit to Hofwyl richer and more detailed. Here are some suggestions for future work in this area:

- More comprehensive tour of site
The main tour of this site is currently focused on the main house. There are, however, many other interesting buildings that can be explored through a more comprehensive tour.
- Specific slavery tour
This could encompass more of the site, including the overview of the marsh that was once the rice plantation. Much of the information on slavery at Hofwyl is located in the museum and could be incorporated into a tour.
- Tour focused on the bridge from plantation to dairy farm
Surviving after slavery was hard both for the freed slaves and for the plantation owners. At Hofwyl, planting rice became extremely expensive and the family suffered great economic challenges. These hardships lead the Dent family to have to change the plantation into a dairy farm, which was successful for many years. This is a fascinating part of the history of the site that could be further explored.

B. Public History in the Digital World

The digital world is becoming ever more important in the Public History sphere as it gives Public History sites the opportunity to reach an even wider audience. Since internet enabled devices have become ubiquitous, combining elements of digital history with public history allows historians to reach people wherever they are with the most accurate and up-to-date research. Also, these new formats for public history open up the conversation allowing for scholars to interact more easily and often directly to a public audience. Therefore, digital resources can aid public history sites in making sure the popular conception of history is as accurate and detailed as possible. Digital resources can provide:

- transparency in the way historical preservation is done at a public history site
- a place for historians and other professionals to share their research
- a resource for sharing oral history and documentary projects
- more in-depth history than a public history site can offer through its tours and museums
- a resource for a site to stay in contact with and engage the public directly
- a resource for further educational programs
- a promotional source

(Taken from "Beyond the ivory tower: doing public history in the digital age")

With this in mind, Hofwyl's web presence is very small. They do not have their own website and what little is available on National Parks Service website does not give this historic site justice. Therefore, increasing Hofwyl's digital and web presence could greatly improve visibility and visitation. If this is something that could be of interest, here are some places to start:

- Creation of a website for the site
The website could be a powerful tool to interact more with the public and to make the history of this site more accessible. Digitizing parts of the museum and gathering the information given on the tours would be valuable as a start.
- Work on improving Facebook page
The Friends of Hofwyl operate the Facebook page but could certainly use help with coming up with blurbs to post and other ways to constantly remind the public of this local site.

C. Work with Children

There is precious little scholarship on presenting history to children, which makes this an area that needs to be explored. Coming up with a set of activities geared towards children at public history sites is important because going to historic sites is often a family outing. Making history

accessible to kids outside of the classroom can also be a way to engage children in thinking about the past. At Hofwyl there is very little geared towards kids so this was a big part of my internship.

- Tour designed specifically for kids
During my internship, I created the beginnings of a tour designed specifically for kids. All the activities have been enclosed and can be used to create a more structured tour for children.
- Child's perspective on Hofwyl
What did the children at Hofwyl do for fun? What kind of chores did they help out with? These are some of the topics that could be looked into to create a children's perspective of the site. This could be incorporated into the house tour or done separately with a groups of children
- Update packet for school tours
Hofwyl has a packet geared towards a student site visit. It needs to be updated and made to line up with the Common Core to make it attractive for school tours.

D. Other Ideas

- Creation of a documentary
- There are opportunities for many different kinds of documentaries focusing on different eras at Hofwyl or even the sites place within the community today.
- Virtual tour app
- The creation of an application for smart phones etc. could add to the depth of history Hofwyl is able to present to guests. It could even focus on a specific aspect of Hofwyl's history that would otherwise be difficult to share.
- Creation of an audio tour
- With limited resources, a secondary tour at Hofwyl may be out of the question, but a recorded tour could offer a cost effective way to share a tour with a larger scope that incorporates the property outside of the house.
- Additional events to gain visibility
-Find further unique ways to utilize the site outside of or ancillary to its historical purpose to gain a larger public awareness.
- Exhibit on the History of Hofwyl as a Historic Site
-Use existing materials to create an exhibit on how Hofwyl became a Public History site and how it has progressed as a site from the founding years to the present.

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