Beyond Text Panels and Labels: Education and Public Programming in American Historical Societies

In 1982 Philadelphia celebrated the tercentenary of its founding by William Penn with an array of public programs including exhibitions, performances, history mobiles, lectures, and street fairs. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania contributed a six-month exhibition, entitled "Philadelphia Portrait 1682-1982," which surveyed but did not interpret the city's history.\(^1\) The funding for this exhibition included budget lines to establish two new departments—museum and education—charged with the responsibility for creating exhibitions and programs to serve a broad general public of all ages.\(^2\) This new dimension of institutional life signaled an important shift in the Society's interest and direction. After 158 years of functioning as a research library serving scholars and genealogists with only the occasional exhibition and lecture for members, the Society joined a national movement to make historical societies an integral part of the communities in which they existed. History, at the Historical Society, would be more than collection and conservation; thereafter, it also would mean exhibition and interpretation.

The Society's interest in a "public history" responded to a growing interest in popular social history in America. The social and political climate which broadened audiences for historical societies began most obviously in the 1960s, with African-Americans, white "ethnics," and women pushing for full participation in American life. These pressure groups recognized that legal changes were a necessary but not a sufficient condition for instituting societal changes in attitudes and perceptions about their members. The "action agenda" which these

groups developed in the 1960s and carried into the 1970s and 1980s had as a central tenet the need to make American history democratic, from the research phase through to its public expression in exhibitions, textbooks, and curricula. These groups recognized that a visible, interpreted history confers legitimacy and power. The call to make history democratic and inclusive addressed the hunger that groups left out of history had for their past and a sense of where they fit into the broader sweep of American history. The explosion of interest in history produced new museums, collections, interpretations, audiences, and funding sources for a field that often found itself talking to the people about the same topics.³

The intellectual underpinnings for the emerging new interpretations of American history rested on the generation of scholars receiving graduate training in the late 1960s through the 1970s in such areas as social and urban history, women's history, ethnic history, and American studies. Many among this body of young scholars viewed their historical work as an extension of their activism in social change and protest movements so much a part of this era. They brought to their scholarship and its public expression an enthusiasm for the power of history to change individual lives and society. They, and in some cases their mentors too, cultivated new audiences for history, and by encouraging women and minorities to enter graduate programs, they sought to redraw the profile of professional historians.⁴

The academic job crisis in the mid-1970s, which dried up the once large pool of college and university teaching positions, forced many of these newly minted M.A.s and Ph.D.s to seek other avenues of


employment. Many left the academy altogether, but others carved a niche for themselves by creating degree programs in the emerging field of public history. Some joined the staffs of independent, grant-supported public history agencies established in the mid to late 1970s (e.g., the Philadelphia Area Cultural Consortium, the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, and the Massachusetts History Workshop), which brought urban and social history to broad-based audiences in series of innovative programs. When funding sources for these agencies shrank in the early 1980s, some staff and consultants took their expertise from this public arena to established historical societies, history museums, and funding agencies, where they often specialized in education and public programming, and where they worked in concert with individuals trained in one of several graduate programs which specialized in material culture and its application in museum settings.


7 The pioneers in this field include the Winterthur-University of Delaware (1952) and Hagley Museum-University of Delaware (1954) programs, which emphasized connoisseurship. See Thomas J. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in Schlereth, ed., Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville, 1984), 31-32. The establishment of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History and Museum Studies in 1964 as an alternative to the Hagley and Winterthur programs signaled the beginning of a trend in museum studies that stressed the importance of interpretive skills along with curatorial and administrative abilities. See Walter Muir Whitehall, Independent Historical Societies: An Enquiry into Their Research and Publication Functions (Boston, 1962), 330-38; and phone interview, Sept. 21, 1989, with Candace Matelic, Professor and Director of Museum Studies at Cooperstown Graduate Program in Museum Studies. Other museum university partnerships soon emerged: the Shelburne Museum-University of Vermont (1965), Henry Ford Museum-University of Michigan (1967), and the Old Sturbridge Village-University of Connecticut (1970), which capped the decade. In the 1970s the establishment of the George Washington University Museum Studies Program (1976), the Bank Street College of Education (1975), and the John F. Kennedy University (1978) further augmented the potential pool of graduates for history museums, historic sites, and historical society education departments. Even though increasing numbers of trained professionals staff education depart-
The 1976 bicentennial celebration of American independence pumped large sums of money into historical exhibitions, programs, restorations, and research. Some of those programs lacked content and many were short even on accuracy, but the American public's enthusiasm for its history increased dramatically. This fact was not lost on forward-looking funders and institutions which saw the potential for developing more sophisticated history exhibitions and programming. Primary impetus for improving the quality of history exhibitions and programming came from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and its satellite state humanities councils, which, as a condition of support, required grantees to utilize scholars as consultants and speakers, to publicize programs widely, and to evaluate audience responses. Because the Endowment was and is often the only major funder for many history exhibitions, it has been in a position to push institutions to upgrade the scholarly content as well as the design, conservation practices, programming, and marketing for exhibitions. This trend also has forced institutions to look carefully at the qualifications of staff and consultants to determine if they have the academic or other degrees, experience, and skills necessary to meet the Endowment's professional standards. Institutions, it still is common to find people without specific training in history and museum work, especially in the smaller organizations with limited budgets. This conclusion comes from serving as a reviewer in 1989 for exhibition proposals submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which include resumes of key staff and descriptions of departmental structure. For further information about staffing patterns in historical societies, see Charles Phillips and Patricia Hogan, The Wages of History: The AASLH Employment Trends and Salary Survey (Nashville, 1984). 

Michael G. Kammen, A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture (New York, 1987), points out that the American public pays attention to its history on a cyclical basis coinciding with the anniversaries of events of national importance, such as independence from England and the ratification of the Constitution. At these times, money and public interest peak, as happened in 1976 and 1987.

See Division of General Programs, Humanities Projects in Museums and Historical Organizations: Guidelines and Applications Instructions (Washington, 1977-89); and the annual reports of the National Endowment for the Humanities, from 1976 to 1988, for indication of the expectations of the NEH and the types of history projects it has funded.

tutions seeking more funding, increased visibility, and a larger constituency have wrenched themselves from behind closed doors, hired full-time professional staff, and created education/public programming departments. Many historical societies, preferring the more quiet antiquarian approach to curatorship, have resisted the changes, yet pressure from funders has increased steadily since the mid-1970s, forcing many institutions to create or expand—as well as to make more broad-based and professional—their education effort.

This process sometimes has created internal dissension. Curators and archivists accustomed to small, quiet groups of well-educated adults typically view the education department as a source of trouble. It brings in large, noisy classes of young people who want to touch objects; it attracts non-traditional museum-going adults who often do not respond enthusiastically to in-depth examinations of obscure eighteenth-century artists or judges. Many archivists shudder at the thought that they will be inundated with unusual requests following education department programs. But the division between the curatorial and education departments is expressed most clearly, and most often, in the conceptualization and planning of exhibitions. Typically, education department staff play no role in the planning process even though they are expected to interpret the finished product to the public. This fragmented approach has meant that exhibitions very often have reflected the idiosyncratic interests of curators, directors, and board members with little or no thought given to whether a particular theme has appeal beyond a very small circle of people. Amid a changing institutional culture in recent years, progressive organizations have fostered policies to ensure that all public functions (collecting, exhibition, education and public programming, publications, and services) work together toward a common goal. Making this happen in reality has been a slow and uneven process in most historical societies.

To interpret their collections to the public, historical societies traditionally have offered some structured formats, usually tours or

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lectures.\textsuperscript{12} For the most part, these programs focused on the historical experience of the white male elite, highlighting the ways in which white elite values and accomplishments have shaped American life. Only passing reference was given to the roles of women and minority groups or to the unresolved conflicts and tenacious contradictions riddling American history. Many programs placed a strong emphasis on connoisseurship and the culture of materialism. In one form or the other, these interpretive efforts began most clearly in the 1920s (earlier in some institutions) and became increasingly visible parts of institutional life in the 1950s and early 1960s.\textsuperscript{13} Oversight for these programs often came from a corps of loyal volunteers or from a staff member assigned the task as an extra responsibility. In most historical societies, the education component was an after-thought not taken too seriously by other staff or board members. Rarely did any institution have a formal education department with a paid staff. The large state-supported historical societies of Ohio, Illinois, and Minnesota, with their strong commitment to the educational mission of the institution reflected in budget lines for staff and programming, were the exceptions. In the East the New York State Historical Association (established in 1899 and located in Cooperstown) devoted a larger share of resources to museum exhibitions and interpretation than any other independent historical society. Among the larger private societies, the Maryland Historical Society has demonstrated a strong commitment to education since 1939, when it began children's tours and radio shows. In the 1950s the Missouri Historical Society began a children's tour program supported by funds from a local department store, which established the basis for the Society's now large education department, and in the 1960s the Chicago Historical Society agreed to let a local radio personality develop a series of history programs for children,


out of which the Society’s formal education department evolved in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{14} These early education programs almost exclusively served elementary school children who were taking “field” trips—for on-site historical lectures consisting primarily of the study of crafts. Despite many limitations, such programs both established a tradition for museum education in historical societies and cultivated a new generation for history. The current, expanded education departments have built on that foundation.

In the 1980s, increased pressure from funders, the availability of trained professionals, and heightened public expectations for diverse museum programming have combined to reshape historical society education departments. In spite of persistent patterns of inadequate funding and staffing levels, many education departments have creatively overcome these limitations and gained central places for their programs in institutional and community life. Indeed, the funding constraints, more than any single factor, have spurred historical societies to express—in both display and dialogue—an interest in social diversity. Diverse public programming enables a historical society to keep its name before the public, fulfill its commitment to interpretation, cultivate new members, produce non-restricted income, and qualify for funds designated exclusively for agencies offering public services.\textsuperscript{15}

Those in the forefront of historical society museum education segment their audiences by planning programs and publications that appeal to a variety of age and interest groups. Many departments have moved towards programming that is exclusively exhibit-driven, while others structure offerings that relate to exhibitions as well as to other facets of institutional life. The programs include everything


\textsuperscript{15} Based on a series of telephone interviews conducted in August and September, 1989, with directors of education at the following institutions: Chicago Historical Society, Historical Society of Delaware, Historical Society of Washington, D.C., Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Maryland Historical Society, Missouri Historical Society, New-York Historical Society, and the Valentine Museum. The programming of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania also is included in this list.
from scholarly lectures and film series to bus and walking tours, as well as research methods workshops, dramatic interpretations and reenactments, conferences, and history camps. However, adult tours and museum lessons for school groups continue to be the mainstay for most departments in terms of numbers and income. Increasingly, education departments have close relationships with area schools working with teachers and administrators to shape history curricula, provide
in-service teacher training, evaluate textbooks, and work on History Day projects.

A number of departments collaborate with local colleges and universities on jointly sponsored credit and non-credit courses. Many offer history-on-the-go programs in schools, as well as traveling history trunks filled with study collections of objects and documents from a defined time period. Other departments have launched publications programs, which include student-authored historic walking tours, workbooks, journals, document sets, filmstrips and slide shows, and video productions. Some have created exhibitions researched and assembled by high school students working on summer projects. Many departments utilize high school and college students to assist with the research and writing of their publications, giving young people a rare opportunity to work on a project that will be published. Internships give young people a chance to hone their teaching abilities working with school groups.

Probably the most visible manifestation of the new emphasis on education in historical societies has appeared in the character of museum exhibitions. Exhibitions are the most public expression of a historical society's artifact and document collections. But the meaning to be attached to those collections is not so clear, and amid the changing nature of the historical profession and the current demand for "history from the bottom up," the task of interpreting collections has become complicated by both subject matter and the many voices in the historical society, and in the public audience, wanting to be heard.

Because many museum professionals and funders have internalized an academic approach to exhibitions, they have, in their zeal to modernize their shows by exploring difficult social and urban themes, placed a strong emphasis on script and conveying the right messages. In so doing, they often use the collections as no more than illustrative materials. This practice has produced numerous exhibits which are no more than books-on-the-wall and have very limited public appeal. The social science, quantitative methodologies used in recent urban and social history research and the resulting complex, layered interpretations are difficult to present in exhibition format. Moreover, much of this research has examined the historical experience of women and minorities, conflict, and the lack of a linear progression toward a better life for all in urban areas. Presenting these persistent, un-
Costumed presenter gives a living history program, complementing a small exhibit at HSP. The program included audience participation using artifacts, photographs, and authentic clothing, along with storytelling to teach Plains Indian culture.

resolved contradictions in an exhibition enhances the interests of the academic consultants but can frighten funders and the general public. Careful planning and imaginative presentation can help resolve the potential tension between the academic interested in social complexity and the public more used to linear and one-dimensional (white, male, and elite) historical stories.¹⁶


The place of social history is not even settled in historical instruction generally. How and where to introduce social history in the curriculum has occasioned vigorous debate among history teachers. For a recent appraisal of the issues, see Peter N. Stearns, “Teaching Social History: An Update,” Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association 27 (Oct. 1989), 16-20.
During the three-year planning process for the Historical Society’s permanent exhibition, “Finding Philadelphia’s Past,” the planning team, which included the head of the education department, tried to create a long-term exhibit with broad public appeal reflecting the best scholarship. Although no one argued that the exhibit should not be based on solid scholarship, the team debated the pros and cons of a story-line with heavy emphasis on the negative aspects of Philadelphia’s history which the new scholarship has stressed. The historians pushed for history with its warts in full view, while the museum curators insisted that the exhibit present items of beauty as well as of curiosity. Representatives from the education and public relations departments lobbied for including items and ideas with established broad public appeal as a way to build audiences. As the compromises regarding story-line and objects were worked out over a period of three years, the team members also confronted the diverging opinions regarding the level of complexity for text panels and label copy. Those people who worked most directly with the public fought for short, catchy copy in large type which easily could be read by a school child (grade 4-9) or a senior citizen, two of the largest groups for history museum visitation. Discussions with the designers about presentation style revealed some of the same divisions along department lines, with education and public relations arguing for interactive elements such as video and audio stations as well as evocative background sounds. Although not totally opposed to such elements, the museum curators voiced concern over who would maintain these systems and whether their presence would clutter the show’s flow. The designers generally favored the inclusion of interactive elements, provided they could be woven gracefully into the overall design. In one area the exhibition team was unanimous: it was committed to innovative programming to enhance the exhibition’s appeal.

The weight of the Historical Society’s institutional history, which has made it the traditional repository for the papers and artifacts of Philadelphia’s elites, posed an intriguing challenge to an exhibition team wanting an inclusive and democratic history that did not avoid conflict and contradiction. But neither did the team want to cast aside

17 Whitehall, Independent Historical Societies, 113-20.
the many spectacular examples of the decorative arts, the fine paintings, and important national treasures that the public likes to see on display. The curators combed the collections for items to balance the exhibition in terms of class, gender, and race, but they often came up short because of the class, gender, and race conditioning of past collectors. To supply this absence, audio stations, video components, and selected label copy "interpret" artifacts and documents from the viewpoints of outsiders and thus serve to balance the story-line.

Part of the balance occurs with the program, "Partners with the Past," a series of live interpretive performances by professional actors in the exhibition. Visitors who attend a "Partners" performance are greeted by an imaginary protagonist, Mr. Peter Manning Hopkins, a generic, late nineteenth-century patrician supposedly associated with the Society and its founders. Hopkins will explain why the Historical Society was founded and why the collectors chose to collect what they did. He invites visitors to consider the merits of a particular document or object using his social location as the basis for the interpretation. As Hopkins speaks, a costumed "Partner" interrupts him and begins to describe alternative ways of thinking about the item. Twenty "Partners"—representing women, minorities, and the working classes—speak to experiences absent or buried in the evidence the elites like Hopkins left behind. The dialogue between Hopkins and the "Partners" allows visitors to learn more about the diversity of historical experience and, we hope, to understand the multiplicity of forces that shape historical fact and interpretation. At the conclusion of the formal dialogue, visitors are invited to question Hopkins and the "Partners" about the Philadelphia of their day before they move on to another gallery.

The affirmation for life-long learning and learning-by-doing underlies all the programming for "Finding Philadelphia's Past," which has as its central tenet the belief that history is a dynamic process of discovery and rediscovery open to all who seek to know and understand the meaning of the past. Programs targeted primarily for adults include traditional formats such as lectures by noted historians exploring large themes and less formal lunch-time talks examining collecting and exhibit planning issues. The Historical Society offers training workshops on deciphering old script and spelling styles as well as how best to work with various collections. Performances of dance and music and craft demonstrations related to the exhibition
and accompanied by educational interpretation, presented on a regular basis, will have special appeal to family groups with children. Periodically, history-and-memory symposia using the remembrances of participants in various aspects of the city's post-World War II history are held to develop a greater appreciation that everyone is part of history, to alert scholars to the research potential of the recent past, to gather more primary data on that period, and to encourage the public to save personal records and artifacts documenting the contemporary period.

The Historical Society's 1981 decision to develop a well-rounded education and public programming department as a means to fulfill its mission of interpretation put it in the forefront of independent research libraries and the traditional East-coast historical societies. Its successes with that initiative, along with pressure from funders and community expectations, have encouraged others to establish education departments. The enlarged educational mission received further impetus in 1986 with the decision to mount an interpreted permanent exhibition. The designation of significant funds, staff time, and space to the project underscores the Historical Society's commitment to an increasingly public role as a center for history education at all levels. Finally, a strong educational program reaffirms Julian P. Boyd's 1939 statement of policy which asserted that the Historical Society of Pennsylvania had formally abandoned the warehouse theory of custodianship, substituting a trusteeship to be justified in terms of increased accessibility and usefulness and a pledge to present and interpret an inclusive, democratic history to enrich and enlighten individual and collective life.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania  Cynthia Jeffress Little

For example, the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond is, as of fall 1989, hiring a full-time education director to establish a department.
