

Case Statement: “Stepping Back from Education”  
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Not knowing exactly what was desired in the exchange between the members of this working group, I have opted to raise some issues and concerns relating to interpretive philosophy and reflect on the present state of interpretation in historic sites and places.

In the call for proposals for this working group, a quote from David Glassberg suggests that there is “an enormous distance exists between historians and the public. How true! Often though, especially for visitors to historic parks and sites, the bridge between the historian and the public is the historical site interpreter. These individuals routinely bring history to the public often through their oral presentations. Their goal -- striving to connect the public with the physical aspects of historic place. This is a distinctive role, one that can be easily contrasted with what our historian cousins in academia do – that being bringing history to the public through classroom teaching, through penning scholarly monographs, and, in some cases, through writing popular history.

Recent travels to national park units, state/provincial/municipal and private historical sites both in the United States and Canada suggest to me that there is an equally large gap between historic site interpreters and the various publics they serve. In their quest to “educate” the public, I’ve sadly come to the conclusion that even experienced historic site interpreters are neglecting the basic time-proven principles that insure effective heritage site interpretation. More often than not, the visitor is being talked at or talked to. The interpreter talks the visitor listens, and consequently the visitor experience is largely passive. Visitors simply are not getting the quality interpretive experience they deserve.

I think the problem stems from a number of relatively recent developments within the interpretive and historical professions. First, there has been a trend for interpreters to include more tangential interpretive messages some of which I gather imposed by managerial higher-ups. I’ve even heard donation appeals in their walks and talks, and as a result the primary interpretive message is not receiving the appropriate attention. At other historical sites interpreters are peppering their talks with more historical content resulting in information overload. Similarly, the propensity toward giving visitors more information has found its way into more complex (and longer) messages in museum labels and exhibitry. More content though does not necessarily translate into quality interpretation.

Second, there seems to be a greater emphasis on “learning outcomes” in interpretive presentations delivered in the field. I gather there is a greater expectation by interpretive managers that the visitors should leave the site “better educated” as a result of their historical site visit. Education though is not the end but a means to the end.

My concern has grown over this last year when I was pulling together the just published commemorative (also revised and expanded) edition of Freeman Tilden’s classic INTERPRETING OUR HERITAGE (University of North Carolina Press, 2008). In this latest edition (the 4<sup>th</sup>), readers will find five not readily available essays that Tilden wrote after penning his classic work that is so well known to all of us. In several of these essays I was struck by the evolution of Tilden’s thinking about the nature of education and interpretation itself, and on what he thought the latter ideally to do and be.

For example, in “The Constructive Aspect of Inaction” Tilden states that “if not-being is a state of being, then it follows that not doing is a state of doing.” He then discusses this revelation as it relates to park interpretation and gleefully concludes that interpreters (and I might add visitors too) are “protected by your [the interpreter’s] inaction.” Simply put, Tilden was saying the ideal interpretive experience does not mean visitors always need to be educated or interpreted at, and yet this is exactly what it seems to be going on at our historic sites.

As simply stated on the National Park Service “Interpretation and Education” web page (<<http://www.nps.gov/learn/>>) interpretation is supposed to be the process of providing each visitor with “an opportunity to personally connect with a place.” Education then is and should be merely a means to an end. Tilden’s collective interpretive works certainly reinforce this notion. Have we forgotten Tilden’s adage, “the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation”? Tilden reminds us that within the holy trinity of interpretation (the visitor, the resource, and the interpreter) it often falls to the interpreter to facilitate visitor “discovery.” The interpreter’s task is to strive to help the visitor discover their *own* revelations in such a way that makes a visit to a special heritage place personally meaningful.

So what has all this to do with historians and more specifically with public historians and their role and function in heritage interpretation? Well a lot. Several observations: First, for those of us who consider ourselves to be “public historians” we need to recognize the limits of our education and training. All of us are *not* trained heritage site interpreters and consequently, if we are called upon to assist in historic site and museum settings we should be wary of imposing our notions of what makes for quality interpretation unless we know something of the interpreter’s art. Granted, reading the works of Freeman Tilden, Enos Mills other interpretive masters as well as becoming familiar with other “how to” interpretive manuals books by museum curators and education specialists can help bridge the gap. But gaining an armchair perspective is no substitution in one’s education for actually gaining practical experience by delivering personal services interpretation at a heritage site.

Second, when public historians and our academy based historian cousins are called upon as consultants to craft interpretive text for exhibits or to write or review scripts for films and videos targeted to visitors at historic sites, we need to be conscious of the basic rules of quality interpretation. Tilden’s famous “six principles: (i.e. “information as such is not interpretation”) is a good place to start as failure to heed Tilden’s interpretive warnings is a recipe for a dull dull museum or historic site experience.

Third, we need to be cognizant that what the historian/interpreter does -- i.e. bringing history to the public most often through personal services interpretation -- is a unique craft and an art in itself and that in the practice of interpretation, “education” is *not* the primary objective but only one aspect of an interpretive experience.

Perhaps it is time for all of us to step back from so much emphasis on “education” and re-examine Tilden’s wisdom and consider renewing our commitment to the basic principles of effective heritage interpretation. Granted there have been developments and innovations in interpretation over the last five decades but the basic truths advanced in Tilden’s work remains the foundation upon which quality interpretation rests.