

2. What Is Interpretation?

Introduction

“Interpretation” is a difficult concept to pin down. What’s it about? Who does it?

The mission of interpretation is strategic and inspirational. It is a combination of science, history, and art that aims to create memorable and meaningful experiences for visitors. Archeologists who interpret provide opportunities for people to explore ideas and meanings in natural and cultural resources and to arrive at their own conclusions about them.

Sometimes interpreters know they’ve hit the mark when visitors experience a transformative “aha!” moment, then show an increased interest and a deeper level of care for the resources. We want visitors to cultivate an ethic for stewardship to help us preserve and protect cultural resources. Interpretation helps archeologists get the word out that archeology is important and worthy of notice.



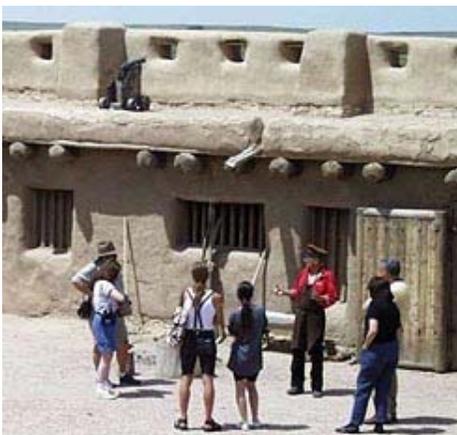
A park interpreter guides a group of students through Booker T. Washington National Monument. (NPS)

For Your Information

What do audiences who seek specific resources hope to find or experience? An interpreter said:

“They seek background, the history behind an object, event, or practice. They seek connections between interests and the bigger picture and issues. They want a chance to build and expand on what they know or their previous experience.”

What is Interpretation?



An interpreter at Bent's Old Fort NHP talks with the public. (NPS)

Interpretation involves a set of tools and techniques to facilitate opportunities for people to form relationships with archeological resources. It helps them to realize the relevance of these special resources to their own lives and to make intellectual and emotional connections with their meanings.

Interpretation has come a long way since the National Park Service began offering interpretive programs. Over the history of the NPS, interpreters have developed methods and skills to help visitors realize the meaning of natural and cultural resources and the importance of stewardship practices. Many different approaches have been developed and tried. Creative thinkers continue to inspire interpreters as the field becomes increasingly professionalized. A few of their influences are discussed below:

Use What You Know: Assess Your Knowledge (#1 of 10)

Before you begin:



- What is interpretation?
- What is your experience in interpreting archeology to the public?
- What do you hope to gain from this training course?

For Your Information

Why do you want to be an interpreter? Your colleague said:

“I love the story! The chase of the story, experiencing the story, knowing the story, and then having the story’s meanings change unexpectedly. Interpretation enriched my life. I’m willing to exchange my life energies with this profession to give others the opportunities to find, experience, create and recreate their own stories.”

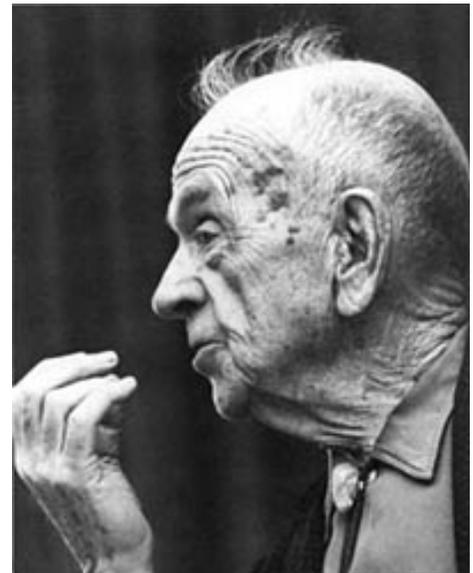
Freeman Tilden

Many interpreters in the NPS consider Freeman Tilden a “hero” who gave “soul” to the field of interpretation. In the early 1940s, this former author of fiction began to write about the national parks with the encouragement of Director Newton B. Drury. Several books were the result: *The National Parks: What They Mean to You and Me*, *The State Parks*, *Following the Frontier*, and *The Fifth Essence*.

Tilden’s most influential book for the NPS was *Interpreting Our Heritage*, published in 1957. The book came as a reappraisal of the basic principles underlining the nature and history of interpretation programs in the NPS. In the process of writing it, Tilden led tours at Castillo de San Marcos National Monument and observed many programs elsewhere. The publication effectively gave form and substance to the profession of interpretation and was widely read within and beyond the NPS. It is still considered a classic discussion of interpretation.

Tilden based *Interpreting Our Heritage* on six principles:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is to some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.



Freeman Tilden. (NPS)

6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

Fun Fact

In 1940 NPS archeologist Dale King advised the custodians of the Southwestern National Monuments. Like others before and after, King urged interpreters to focus on significance:

Let us try to analyze our monuments in terms of their real meaning and importance. Let us attempt to stress those parts of their story which have some lasting value and significance. We can't expect John Q. Public to go away and remember forever that the compound wall is 219 feet, six inches long, or that the thumb print is to the right of the little door in Room No. 24. We can try to make the people of that vanished historic or prehistoric period live again in his mind. Give him some insight into their troubles and joys, show him that they were human, and underline their differences from us as well as their likenesses to us. In other words, build understanding, and, eventually, tolerance.

In "Scope and Function of the Interpretation Program of the Southwestern National Monuments," in Report of Meeting of Custodians, Southwestern National Monuments, Feb. 14-16, 1940, History Division, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

Case Study

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site

In 2002 over 29,647 people visited Charles Pinckney NHS. Twenty-eight acres of a 715-acre plantation called Snee Farm are preserved in the park. In its open spaces are exhibits describing the existing house, archeological excavations, agricultural history, and the ways neighboring water and wetlands contributed to the plantation. Consider the number of interpretive opportunities for visitors to learn about archeology, or for the interpretation of the site to be informed by archeological work!

Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service

Freeman Tilden's work responded to a changing sense of the purposes of national parks. The NPS and its partners identified education to be a primary purpose of the national parks and even set out preliminary terminology that persists in interpretive programs today, such as "parks as classrooms." Since then, national parks have tested a variety of interpretive methods but, of them all, personal interaction with the public has never fallen as a priority.

For over a decade the Ranger Careers program has testified to the significance of professional interpreters to the national parks. The Interpretive Development Program (IDP) aims to develop effective interpretation in NPS employees through training courses and standards. Conceived, reviewed, and refined by over 300 field interpreters, this program enables an employee and supervisor to tailor professional development efforts, increase efficiency, and demonstrate interpretation at a national standard. Grounded in "Ranger Careers," the IDP identifies essential "Benchmark Competencies" (knowledge, skills, and abilities) for every interpretive ranger in Ranger Careers positions. However, the program is widely applicable to anyone who does interpretive work or manages resources.

For Your Information

Interpretive Development Program: Professional Standards for Learning and Performance

This web site presents the Interpretive Development Program, designed to foster professionalism in interpretation in the National Park Service. This site provides you with immediate access to the latest curriculum, resources, contacts, FAQs and other information you need to develop your personalized training program for interpretive excellence.

Harpers Ferry Center

HFC designs and executes many of the exhibits, waysides, and other interpretive material for national parks. Examples on the site can inspire the creation of materials.

National Association for Interpretation

Visit the NAI web site to find out more about the profession of interpretation and efforts to develop it. The NAI is one professional organization for interpreters. Its mission is to inspire leadership and excellence, and to advance natural and cultural interpretation as a profession.

Interpretive Caricatures

The Division of Interpretation has created a set of common interpretive caricatures. Each captures elements of how some resource professionals approach the task. Consider as you read through them which elements relate to the various aspects of archeology, and keep them in the back of your mind as we go through the following sections. Remember that successful interpretation relies on aspects of all of them.

Interpredata

- Presents multiple points of fact
- Honestly presents the facts and nothing but the facts
- Provides great detail to the facts
- Believes the audience is interested only in information
- Encourages factual dialogue
- Allows the audience to maintain its own perspective - as long as it is factual

All successful interpretation is built on accurate and comprehensive information. Information by itself has little significance to the majority of visitors who don't understand a subject's broader meanings and context. **Interpredata** usually fails to help the audience make personal connections to the resource. It gets the information out to visitors, but so what?

Interpretainment

- Stereotypes multiple points of view for effect
- Arranges facts around a punch line
- Oversimplifies
- Comes from a perspective that the audience isn't truly interested in the meaning of the resource
- Allows dialogue only when it is shallow and contributes to the entertainment value of the show

- Does not care what the audience thinks, just how it reacts to the material

This perspective is satisfied with a pleasant visitor experience and values interpretation as entertaining. Certainly good interpretation engages attention and connects to audience interests, but **interpretainment** warps the concept. The result is a memorable personality or media presentation that fails to connect the audience to the resource itself. **Interpretainment** suggests ways to catch visitors, but it makes the delivery paramount to the meaning.

Interpreganda

- Ignores multiple points of view
- Dishonestly skews facts toward a forgone conclusion
- Oversimplifies facts
- Comes from a perspective that the audience is ignorant
- Communicates in one direction by discouraging dialogue
- Attempts to force the audience to see only one perspective

Audiences usually know when they are told how to think, and don't like it. **Interpreganda** is most effective for visitors that already share the stated point of view. An often well-intentioned and passionate insistence on a single perspective is manipulative, didactic, fails to provide broader relevance, and does not connect the audience to the resources. An **interpreganda** approach can actually drive a wedge between the visitor and the interpreter.

Interprecation

- Presents multiple points of view, but includes a correct answer
- Uses facts that support learning objectives
- Believes retention of information is most important
- Comes from the perspective that the audience needs to learn
- Encourages dialogue, but guides conversation toward what the audience should know
- Assumes that once the audience knows enough, they will agree

While education and interpretation are related and often overlap, they have significant differences. Educational goals are usually directed at the acquisition of knowledge and skill. Interpretation should support these goals and encourage partnerships with schools, elderhostels, and scout groups. These institutions have long-term influence over learning. Interpretation, however, is not measured by a test of knowledge at the program's end. Rather, it facilitates an opportunity for people to make their own connections to meaning.

Interpretation

- Presents multiple points of view
- Honestly presents information that leads the audience to personal revelation
- Isn't afraid of complexity
- Treats the audience as intelligent people
- Encourages dialogue
- Allows audiences to express and maintain their own perspectives

The profession of **interpretation** has an important and individual responsibility. Interpretation provokes the discovery of personal meaning, connection, and stewardship for resources. It allows for and stimulates a conversation about multiple meanings and points of view.

Try it Yourself

Do you recognize your style in the caricatures? What is it? How might you want to change it?

To get a feel for each of these caricatures so that you can better recognize and avoid them, pick one of your favorite interpretive products and see how you could recast it as **interpretedata**, **interpretainment**, **interpreganda**, or **interpretation**.

Use What You Know

Attend the same interpretive program at least twice so you can observe a different interpreter and a different audience each time for the same material.

Note the interpretive methods used. Identify any of the interpretive caricatures. Watch the faces and body language of the audience. How do they react to the various methods? Do some methods seem to evoke more engagement than others?

"So What?": Encouraging Stewardship

The National Park Service is charged with the management of some of our nation's most significant cultural resources. The goal of the interpretation of archeology is for visitors to develop an ethic for stewardship through finding personal meaning in the resources. This isn't necessarily as hard as it might seem: A recent poll by Harris Interactive suggests that the American public's curiosity about archeology lays the groundwork. The poll shows that people think archeology has educational value and informs modern life; they also agree that laws should protect archeological resources. Interpretation plays an important role in cultivating the public's curiosity and building a stewardship ethic.

We want visitors to move away from using the phrase "So what?" to express indifference for the resources. We want them to use "So what?" in another way, one that demonstrates critical thinking and personal involvement and dialogue in a subject. An ethic for understanding and protecting archeological resources comes from such connections.

Effective interpretation moves a visitor to realize the relevance and significance of resources in contemporary life and how he or she plays a role in protecting them. Archeologists can take the opportunity to encourage stewardship by the public as a way to spread the message of the importance of the field.



An archeologist talks about artifacts during teacher training at Fort Frederica. (SEAC)

For Your Information

Why do people value resources like nature centers, battlefields, reservoirs, or scenic wonders? Your colleagues said:

“These resources all have realness. They provide authentic experience and the sense of being there. People value them because they create context and perspective. They reframe aspects of an individual’s life.”

“They are special places that give us the chance to connect with things bigger than ourselves.”

“They provide signs and instructions for the future.”

The relationship between resources, audience, and interpretation is key:

- Resources possess meanings and relevance, but they are complicated to interpret because individuals see different meanings in the same resources.
- Audiences seek something special about resources, something of particular value or resonance to them that is interesting, unique, or entertaining. While the interpreter’s primary goal is to provide accurate, balanced access to meanings and interpretation’s primary goal is to inspire audiences to care about the resources, audiences must be allowed to form their own passions and understandings aside from the interpreter.
- Interpretation, then, facilitates a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the resource. Audience interest and preservation go hand in hand: The public must care about a resource before people will value its preservation and, as a result, archeological resource preservation depends on the audience’s access to the meanings of the resources.

Case Study

Ancient Architects of the Mississippi

This web site interprets how universal concepts such as sustenance, social hierarchy and ceremony influenced how and why Native Americans molded the earthen mounds found in the Mississippi Delta. Today, the legacy of the moundbuilders is at risk. Most earthworks are worn down to unassuming shapes in the overgrowth along remote fields and tributaries. Many have been looted or damaged by farming and construction.

This website is part of an effort to preserve the legacy that survives along the banks of the lower Mississippi.

Interpretation connects the resource and the audience by presenting broadly relevant meaning. To attain this goal, “So what?” can be distilled into three steps within the interpretive process that are important for archeologists to understand and use successfully:

1. Define the relationship between resource, audience, and interpretation
2. Link tangible resources to intangible resources and meanings
3. Communicate universal concepts

Archeologists and interpreters should emphasize stewardship of archeological resources in any visitor exchange, from tours of archeological sites to exhibitions to discussions of ongoing fieldwork. Through effective preservation and protection, archeological resources can continue to convey their important history about people from the past to present and future generations of Americans.

Interpretive programs reach park visitors when they are still forming their opinions, value, and ethics. Long-term survival of park resources depends upon a stewardship ethic among the general population. The majority of threats to the resource are, by definition, caused by humans. Establishing a bond between visitors and the park can create a sense of shared ownership and lifelong commitment to park ethics.

Case Studies

Caring for Sites

Take a look at this site from the Archeology and Ethnography Program to learn about private and public site stewardship.

Stewardship: Archaeology as a Public Interest

Making Archaeology Teaching Relevant in the XXI Century (M.A.T.R.I.X.) posts this educational unit about archeology and stewardship among its teacher resources. It also includes several readings.

House Rules for Visiting Archeological Sites

At this web site find Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's creative solution to educating visitors about the proper treatment of archeological sites.

Archeology in the Daniel Boone National Forest

Daniel Boone National Forest considers archeological stewardship in its natural resources planning. The description of the program provides a forestry management perspective on cultural resources stewardship.

For Your Information

Telling the Stories: Planning Effective Interpretive Programs for Properties Listed in the National Register of Historic Places

This National Register Bulletin, rich with case studies, offers valuable information for individuals and institutions working to convey the meaning of historic places to the public.

Component for Module 101: Why We Do Interpretation: Meeting the NPS Mission

This component establishes the foundation for *Module 101: Fulfilling the NPS Mission: The Process of Interpretation*, by defining the interpreter as integral to the development of the profession. It provides a set of ground rules to establish a personal interpretive philosophy and articulate ways in which interpretation contributes to resource protection and stewardship.

Maria Ramos and David Duganne, Harris Interactive

2000 *Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Archeology*, Society for American Archeology

The Harris poll outlines public attitudes toward archeology. Check it out for useful insights into what the public thinks about the field. Consider how interpretive programs can respond to gaps in understanding.

Misconceptions About Interpretation

People may have misconceptions about what interpretation is and what interpreters do that keep them from trying it. Sometimes these misconceptions are based in different ways of approaching new information. Other times they come from a lack of dialogue about what interpreters aim to accomplish. Unfortunately, misconceptions about interpretation can keep archeologists from using it to explore the various ways of presenting their work and the significance of their park to the public.

Some of the misconceptions are:



One popular misconception is that archeologists seek fossils. (NPS)

- Interpreters don't produce anything.
- Interpretation is too unstructured and not based in facts.
- Interpretation is about acting a part or presenting a single point of view.
- Interpreters focus on face-to-face interaction with the public.
- Interpretation doesn't have a defined role in the National Park system.
- Interpretation isn't a "real" profession.

Interpretation is important to archeologists because it tells people why our work is important to them. Decisions about how to interpret a site or an object influences exhibit presentations, public programs, cultural resources preservation, natural resources conservation, and more. Frequently, parks change as the interpretation of their themes evolves in response to public needs and interests. Interpretation, as a concept and as a practice, truly serves park management.

For Your Information

Interpreters are increasingly professionalized in the NPS and have the products to prove it. Consider the number of submissions of interpretive material to satisfy certification coursework in the [Submission Reports](#) to the Interpretive Division training programs.

Try it Yourself

Talk to the interpreters at your park to find out what they do. What methods can you use to exchange ideas, information, and advice to help each other out?

Sound familiar?

Archeologists are no strangers to misconceptions about their profession. In popular culture, archeologists are romantic characters who travel to exotic lands in search of mysterious artifacts. If you have done public archeology or interpretation before, you can probably list several questions visitors ask repeatedly that betray a lack of knowledge about the field. Archeologists who conduct interpretive programs can replace the public's misconceptions about their work with accurate information about what they do. Archeologists' interpretations can go far in imparting information about method, intent, significance, and meaning.

Fun Fact

Fossils? Gold? Treasure? Dinosaurs? Aren't these what archeologists look for? This site explores some of the most popular [Archaeological Myths](#).

Creative responses to the misconceptions about archeology is an effective way for interpreters and archeologists to share information with the public to alleviate confusion that may lead visitors to misunderstand, or even abuse, archeological resources. In turn, greater understanding of archeological resources ideally provides a means for the public to appreciate and care for them.

For Your Information

Archeologists should know what it's like to be misperceived as professionals. Consider what the [1999 survey by Harris Interactive](#) tells us about public conceptions of archeologists' work:

- When asked what the public thinks when they hear the word archeology, 10% mentioned digging dinosaurs or dinosaur bones, while only 1% mentioned digging associated with Native peoples or Native societies.
- When asked what archeologists study, 92% of the people agreed that they study fossils (which they do not study), 85% agreed that they study dinosaurs (which they do not study) and 77% agreed they study shipwrecks (which they do study).
- Very few respondents mentioned underwater (1%) and Indian remains/ burial grounds (1%) as places where archeologists study the past.
- When asked, "What are some of the most important archeological sites ever found?" no respondents named North American sites. The majority mentioned Egyptian sites, dinosaur sites, Biblical and Roman sites, and Latin American Aztec, Mayan and Inca sites.

Try it Yourself

What are some of the misconceptions you hear about archeology from the public? From management? The community? Others?

List the questions you most commonly hear about archeology from the public. How can you best inform the visitor about what is really important to know about archeology in your park?

Why Does the NPS Interpret Archeology?



Archeologists at Mesa Verde used interpretive talks even in the 1950s to encourage public curiosity in archeology. The understanding of stewardship practices has since improved. (HFC)

The stewardship of America's archeological heritage is a well-established policy and function of the federal government. Interagency cooperation and partnerships are fundamental to this mission. Archeological resources—sites, collections, and records—are unique and fragile. We must use them wisely and protect them for future generations. NPS archeologists also interpret their work so that it gets out of academic or professional circles and into a larger public debate about the meaning of the past.

For Your Information

At Work Nationwide

The Archeology and Ethnography program provides archeologists with guidance in many areas.

- Federal Archeology Program
- Site Discovery and Evaluation
- Preventing Looting and Vandalism
- Caring for Collections
- Site Conservation
- Enhancing Public Outreach
- Preserving a Submerged Legacy

Fun Fact

Archeology is happening all over the nation! [Research and Interpretation in the National Parks](#) links to web sites describing NPS archeology and ethnography projects.

Through programs that preserve, protect, conserve, and educate the public regarding archeological resources the National Park Service preserves over 63,000 archeological sites, as well as huge archeological collections from scientific investigations of those sites. Interpreting archeological resources helps meet this part of the NPS mission by:

- Perpetuating and representing the archeological heritage of the nation uniquely reflected in national park units.
- Ensuring the natural, cultural, and recreational heritage reflected in the national park units is available and accessible to everyone.
- Providing visitor experiences that strengthen the recognition, understanding, enjoyment, and preservation of the nation's archeological resources.
- Creating the opportunity for audiences to ascribe meanings to archeological resources, leading to concern for the protection of those resources. Such revelation is the seed of archeological resource stewardship.



Junior Rangers in training learn from archeological displays at Indiana Dunes. (MWAC)

For Your Information

The Public Interpretation Initiative

This article outlines the purposes and direction of the Public Interpretation Initiative, a public outreach program initiated and coordinated by the NPS Southeast Archeological Center.

For Your Information

National Strategy for the Federal Archeology Program

The Secretary of the Interior has identified areas of special emphasis for federal agencies with archeological programs:

Preserve and Protect Archeological Sites in Place

- Identify, evaluate, and document sites
- Increase our understanding of the past and improve preservation through well-designed research
- Assess and document threats to sites and monitor their condition
- Prevent or slow deterioration of sites by stabilization and other means
- Fight looting with public awareness programs and effective legal strategies among archeologists, law enforcement officers, and public prosecutors

Conserve Archeological Collections and Records

- Locate collections and records, assess their condition, and conserve appropriately
- Identify actions needed to ensure long-term care of and access to collections and records
- Undertake, facilitate, and promote research using collections and records to better understand the past

Utilize and Share Archeological Research Results

- Synthesize research results, particularly gray literature, to advance scientific knowledge, further preservation, and better inform the public
- Facilitate use of archeological databases by managers and researchers
- Develop data standards to better share research results

Increase Public Education and Participation in Archeology

- Establish education programs as a regular agency function
- Interpret archeological research for the public in a way that is accurate and understandable
- Consider the views of diverse cultural groups when interpreting the past
- The National Strategy for the Federal Archeology Program reinforces the NPS commitment to preserve and interpret American archeological resources. Work done in each park by managers, interpreters, and archeologists ensure that these resources will be protected and appreciated by visitors

Case Study

Hopewell Culture National Historical Park

Visitors should plan on a 1½ to 2 hour visit of the park's visitor center to watch the award-winning 17-minute video "Legacy of the Mound Builders", examine the museum exhibits, and walk the interpretive trails. Interpretive trails approximately 1.5 miles in length feature descriptive signs, audio stations, and self-guiding brochures. Special events featuring Native American and archeological themes are featured throughout the year.

Use What You Know

Choose two of the case studies listed in this section. Explore the web sites for each one.

Write a brief paragraph about where you see evidence for the encouragement of public stewardship.

Could you propose language to strengthen the stewardship message?

Use What You Know: Assess Your Knowledge (#2 of 10)

Write answers to these questions:



- What is interpretation?
- Why does the NPS interpret archeology?
- What are the goals for interpretation?

Now add “at your site” to the end of each question and re-answer them. In what ways does or doesn’t your park meet the definitions and purposes for interpretation?

References

Bob Roney and David Larsen kindly lent the terms and definitions of “Interpredata,” “Interpreganda,” “Interpredata,” and “Interpreccation.”

Portions of this chapter were adapted from:

Ellick, Carol J.

2000 Against the Clock: Introducing Archaeology in Time-Limited Situations. In *The Archaeology Education Handbook: Sharing the Past with Kids*, pp. 183-191. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Ham, Sam H.

1992 *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, North American Press, Golden, CO.

Interpretive Development Program: Professional Standards for Learning and Performance.

Larsen, David L.

2003 *Meaningful Interpretation: How to Connect Hearts and Minds to Places, Objects, and Other Resources*. Eastern National Parks Association.

Little, Barbara J.

1998 Considering the Context of Historical Archaeology for Museum Interpretation. In *The Public Historian*, Vol. 20, No. 4 pp. 111-117. Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History.

Mackintosh, Barry

1986 *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective*

National Park Service

1997 *Cultural Resources Management Guide, Release No. 5*. National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

National Park Service

2002 The Interpretive Process Model

NPS Training Manager for Interpretation, Education, and Cooperating Associations (editor)

1998 *Module 101: Fulfilling the NPS Mission: The Process of Interpretation*. National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

Ramos, Maria and Davis Duganne

2000 *Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Archaeology*. Harris Interactive for the Society for American Archaeology, Washington, D.C.

Robinson, George

1990 Biographical Vignettes: Freeman Tilden, In *National Park Service, the First 75 Years*, Eastern National Park & Monument Association.

Tilden, Freeman

1957 *Interpreting Our Heritage*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.