Interpretation

Guiding the Search for Meaning

- "What's It to You?"
- Constructing Meaning in Museums
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Scientists interpret data to determine cause and effect, and to understand the meaning of information or patterns. Historians interpret objects and events to accurately construct the past and to place them in a systematic and explained, chronological order. Artists interpret the range of human experiences, ideas, and emotions to articulate them and reveal their significance. And docents…?

Docents teach. If docents do the interpreting — explaining the meaning of their institutional collections — they miss a golden opportunity to teach visitors how to interpret — a skill that is both important and useful.

Museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens are, by definition, educational institutions. Docents are the teachers in these educational settings and visitors are the students. And, like all students, it is they (and not their teachers) who should be experiencing and practicing what they are to be learning.

When docents do the interpreting, visitors become passive. They allow docents to do the observing, analytical thinking, and constructing of meaning for them. The only thing visitors learn from this experience is a greater reliance upon those who are more knowledgeable than they are.

Since labels and text panels provide more information than most visitors could ever absorb and remember, why spend a lesson expanding upon them? Why not teach visitors a practical and readily transferable skill? In truth, it is easier to tell visitors information than it is to teach them how to observe, describe, analyze and, ultimately, interpret on their own. When you tell, you need not be concerned with motivation, discussion, direction, or mastery. All you have to do is repeat what you have learned or been told. If people are interested and comprehend, fine; if not, too bad. Simple!

However, should you wish to teach, you are concerned with transferring skills and you are accountable for your visitors’ comprehension. You are more interested in what they learn from your encounter together than in demonstrating what you have learned. And, in spite of the challenges inherent in teaching, you find that provoking visitors to make valid discoveries, to process information, and to gain understanding on their own creates a higher level of job satisfaction.

**Interpreting**

Interpreting is the search for meaning, relevance, and understanding. Frequently, interpreting involves answering such questions as, “What is the meaning of …?” or “Why?” Guiding visitors toward finding their own answers teaches them how to extract meaning, and transmits ownership of a skill that is useful in your institution and in all others.

**Teaching Interpretation**

The act of interpreting is the process of unraveling meaning. Interpreting involves saying something valid not already said by the given material or situation, and being able to substantiate the validity using evidence. According to this definition, therefore, interpreting is not a "free-for-all" where anyone’s interpretation is as good as another’s. Interpretation must have “validity” and be referenced back to its source to be substantiated. Unlike hypotheses, which are conjectures based on the possible, interpretations are based on the probable, and rely upon meaningful and confirmable observations that can be justified.

**If docents do the interpreting…**

**they miss a golden opportunity to teach visitors how to interpret — a skill that is both important and useful.**

Regardless of subject matter (whether art, history, or science) interpretation requires substantiation. The person interpreting should be able to reference his idea or concept, and back it up by demonstrating or highlighting the evidence that supports his claim. Requesting this type of verification is an exercise that reinforces careful observation, comprehension, and retention.

**Asking for Interpretaions**

Requests for interpretations often begin with a question or an activity. No matter how the inquiry is made, however, visitors should be challenged to observe, to develop meaning from their observations,
and to make direct reference back to the object or event so that everyone understands how they constructed their thoughts and how they arrived at their particular understandings.

For instance, you are examining modes of transportation during different periods in history. You explain that, today, an airplane can travel between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia in just 1/2 hour, but when folks traveled in horse-drawn coaches, like the one from 1815 in your collection, the trip took six days.

You ask your visitors to look closely at the coach. You ask them to describe it in detail. Then you ask the group, “What can you tell about travel in the early 1800’s from what you’ve seen of this coach?” That question invites visitors to do the interpreting themselves. They must construct meaning from the historic object in front of them.

Now, all that they’ve observed — the coach’s openness to the elements, its lack of privacy or bathrooms, the absence of any form of climate control, the hard seats, the roughness of its suspension, its limited luggage space — begins to have real significance. And, as visitors develop conclusions about making a six day journey under those conditions — a trip that today can be made in comfort during a lunch hour — they learn how to reconstruct the past from historic objects.

And, if you follow that discussion with another interpretive question such as “How would our lives be different if we still traveled in the same manner as they did back then?” the impact of their interpretation continues to grow. Answers might range from the obvious to the obscure, from “we would travel a lot less” to “trade and commerce would be severely limited by distance.”

Interpretation takes place in all disciplines. In a zoo or natural history institution, you might ask visitors to construct meaning from a body of information. “Now that you have seen some of the animals that live in tropical rainforests, what would be some essential ways to protect them?”

Or, you could have visitors determine what they can learn about a particular animal from its environment or from the way it is depicted in an environmental diorama.

Interpreting works of art can have a decidedly personal construct if you do not phrase your questions carefully. Simply asking visitors, “What does this piece mean to you,” can turn an academic discussion into a free-for-all of opinions. It is preferable to ask visitors what they believe the artist intended to convey in his/her work, and then have respondents justify their thoughts by showing, pointing out, or otherwise substantiating their interpretation with evidence found within the work itself.

What’s Good for the Visitor …

Learning how to search for, and verify, meaning is among the most important lessons a docent can teach visitors. In addition, it can be among the most rewarding and interesting activities for the docent who is doing the teaching.

The significance and implications of a collection expand as individual and collective layers of interpretation are revealed and discussed. Inevitably, visitors offer additional insights or new twists that “teach the teacher,” and that kind of return is both exciting and fun!

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Constructing Meaning in Museums

Conventional wisdom in 16th century Europe declared that gravity acted differently on different objects. Galileo Galilei climbed the steps of a tower in his hometown of Pisa, dropped two metal spheres of different sizes, and concluded that all objects are accelerated by gravity in the same way. Not content with conventional wisdom, Galileo constructed his own meaning based on his prior knowledge and his observations.

As I waited in the baggage claim area at the end of a recent trip, I listened to a young mother admonish her two-year-old son. “Don’t put your fingers there,” she warned as he let the belt move beneath his hand. “You’ll get them stuck and it will hurt.”

Like Galileo, this young man was also interested in constructing his own meaning. With an occasional glance in his mother’s direction, he continued to explore the moving belt with his fingers. He discovered that his fingers did, indeed, sometimes slip between the belt and the track on which it was running, but they didn’t get stuck. He also found that a suitcase might push his fingers too close to the curb. That did pinch a little, but he could avoid that by moving his fingers when a suitcase came too close. Also like Galileo, he ignored conventional wisdom and learned a lot about moving bodies and his mother’s “no.”

Both the 16th century Italian and the 20th century two-year-old were demonstrating a theory of learning called constructivism. It is a theory that is receiving much attention recently, but still, in public and private school classrooms, often takes a back-seat to behaviorist psychology. It could be argued that one of the best places to find constructivist philosophy in action are in the interpretative programs of museums, historic sites, botanical gardens, zoos, and nature centers.

Ernst Von Glasersfeld first named constructivism in 1990, basing it on the belief that students construct their own meaning and understanding dependent upon all their prior experience, and upon the prior knowledge and understanding they have already constructed from that experience. In other words, everyone creates (or constructs) his or her own reality. Behaviorists, on the other hand, rely heavily upon the teacher to transmit already established knowledge about the real world. The teacher becomes a conduit for knowledge that the student is expected to assimilate.

Behaviorists structure educational programs that help teachers interpret events and objects for their students. Educators who apply a constructivist philosophy to the development of learning programs, however, provide hands-on activities, conversations, and experiences over the long term to allow students to reinforce, adapt, or re-create their own meaning. Elizabeth Murphy (1977) created a synthesis of the characteristics of constructivist learning and teaching from recent educational literature. Examining museum educational initiatives in light of some of these characteristics makes it clear that constructivism and museum education have a natural affinity.

1. Multiple perspectives and representations of concepts and contents are presented and encouraged.

In an art museum, students examine several artists’ interpretation of a particular subject (a chair, a still life, a meadow, a portrait) and then create their own paintings or sculpture. They do not copy, but construct their own views.

Is visual art intended to be documentary or subjective? Students explore these concepts as they interpret the artist’s purpose in portraying any given subject. The docent serves as a facilitator, rather than a lecturer.

2. Goals and objectives are derived by the student or in negotiation with the teacher or system.

Before a school group comes to the museum, historic site, or science center, students work with their teacher to establish class and individual goals for the trip. Museum educators use these goals, rather than pre-established “tours,” to develop experiences and opportunities for the visitors.

3. Activities, opportunities, tools, and environments are provided to encourage self-analysis, self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-awareness.

An historic site or history museum allows children to “try on” the clothing, tools, furniture, games, and transportation of a by-gone era and in doing so helps them re-construct that time. They imagine how their lives would be different had they been born in a different time or under different circumstances. However, the museum educator is aware of the modern experiences and constructs the students bring to the game and encourages them to articulate the difference between re-created “reality” and actually “being there.”
4. Teachers serve in the role of guides, monitors, coaches, tutors, and facilitators.

With the class's goals clearly in mind, docents lead students through hands-on activities, ask open-ended questions, provide real objects for exploration, encourage group interaction, and help students validate what they discover. They are not "tellers," but seekers along with the students.

5. Learning situations, environments, skills, content, and tasks are relevant, realistic, authentic, and represent the natural complexities of the "real world."

Science/zoo/nature center educators offer multiple samples of the flora and fauna of a particular region so students can draw conclusions about geographic and climatic conditions in that region. In seeing how a zoo or botanical garden cultivates non-native organisms, students make assumptions about nature's adaptations. They discuss with the docent and with each other the implications of changes made to organisms living outside their natural habitat.

6. Primary sources of data are used in order to ensure authenticity and real-world complexity.

An historic house makes available to students reproduction copies of journal entries written by a family member. As portions of the journal are read aloud, students speculate as to the location in the house where each entry was written. Changes in our conception of family privacy are discussed as students compare their expectations of privacy with those of the journal writer.

Comparisons are made between the journal and other primary sources available to the museum — family letters, newspaper articles, diaries kept by other members of the family. After examining different primary source interpretations of single events, students interview their own friends and family members about more current events to see how age, experience, and other variables impact our perceptions.

7. Knowledge construction and not reproduction is emphasized.

In a science center, students look at a DNA model and create chains of paper cut-outs representing the four different bases in DNA — adenine, guanine, thymine, and cytosine — to form unique "species." They examine the unique characteristics of plants and/or animals represented in the center, and then they combine characteristics to create new organisms. Their knowledge becomes the basis for informed discussion about cloning and other genetic engineering controversies.

8. The learner's previous knowledge constructions, beliefs, and attitudes are considered in the knowledge construction process.

Before a class arrives at the museum, classroom teachers and museum educators exchange information about needs and possibilities. The museum staff is aware of students' developmental stages, of course, but also takes into consideration individual differences. Information about learning requirements, textual material used in the classroom, and students' knowledge become part of the process in planning museum experiences.

9. Problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills and deep understanding are emphasized.

What is beauty? This classic philosophical question is one of many complex concepts explored with the anthropological collection.

Continued on next page.
of an art museum. As students examine utilitarian and ritual objects of other cultures (as well as their own), they explore the very definition of "art." Teenagers, especially, have much to contribute to discussions of the pressures different societies place on their members to conform to pre-defined ideas of masculine and feminine roles and societal concepts of beauty.

10. Exploration is a favored approach in order to encourage students to seek knowledge independently and to manage the pursuit of their goals.

After gathering data in a colonial cemetery, part of an historic site, individual students compile information into graphic form and begin to draw conclusions about the lives of those members of the community who are buried there. What was the average life span? Were there multiple deaths in a single year; was a single "season" more deadly than another? Was there a marked difference in the age at death of males and females?

The search for answers to the questions raised by this initial exploration is continued in the primary source collection of the historic site, again with individual data collection combined with information from the whole class.

11. Knowledge complexity is reflected in an emphasis on conceptual interrelatedness and interdisciplinary learning.

Students in a high school geometry class come to the art museum to examine the symmetry of the Renaissance paintings and the use of geometric shapes in African art. They visit the quilt collection of a history museum to study traditional designs, and they learn from a journal that, although quilts were "quilted" by a community, their designs were by individual artists. Back in the classroom, they create their own miniature quilts, and combine history, art, literature, and math.

12. Collaborative and cooperative learning are favored in order to expose the learner to alternative viewpoints.

With maps in hand, small groups of students explore the physical layout of a zoo, noticing which animals are enclosed together and how predator and prey are separated. A zoo docent explains the rationale used for creating the zoo as it is. When, later, the individuals in each small group work together to develop their own zoo plan, they must find answers to other questions. How much space does a particular type of animal require? What kinds of food does each animal eat, and how will the food be delivered? Should the animals be arranged by type or by geographic habitat? Solutions to these problems will be shared with other groups, and the zoo displays their final projects.

13. Assessment is authentic and interwoven with teaching.

"Pay attention; there's going to be a test later" is a phrase you'll never hear at a museum, historic site, zoo, or botanical garden. When a student reconstructs a wooden bucket, he has successfully constructed meaning about the bucket and the people who once made it. When students at a zoo encourage other visitors to observe the "Don't Feed the Animals" signs, and explain that the animals' nutrition is carefully monitored by the zoo staff, they have successfully constructed meaning about the zoo's purpose. When, at the completion of an art museum visit, a student says, "I liked the Matisse collage best because I can make one," a personal connection has been made and an appreciation of the fundamental purpose of art has been constructed.

In reality, of course, educational programs are combinations of the best of many learning theories. Developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget help us understand that all humans pass through stages of development during which they exhibit certain strengths and limitations. Behaviorists, such as Ivan Pavlov, encourage educators to offer instruction in small, concrete, progressively sequenced tasks with frequent reinforcement. Cognitive learning theories, such as those propounded by Robert Gagne, explain the connection between good teaching techniques and the way in which the brain processes information and, consequently, emphasize sensory learning.

Traditional classrooms, with their prescribed curricula and state-established educational objectives, still largely operate from the standpoint of the transmission of socially-agreed upon knowledge. Museums, as repositories of concrete evidence of the fluidity of what society "knows" to be "true," are ideal for constructivist learning. By using their student visitors' knowledge as the basis for the content and objectives of their educational programs, museums become the best places for students to construct reality.


Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
Two New Museums on our Horizon

The cultural landscape of the United States has been enriched by the recent addition of two new museums.

△ Museum of African American History - Detroit, Michigan
This is the world’s largest cultural institution devoted to Black heritage in America. Through a combination of videos, photographic time lines, and a recreation of a slave ship, Black history is traced from its African roots through slavery, civil rights and urban struggles, to a broad range of achievements.

△ The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum - Santa Fe, New Mexico
Georgia O'Keeffe loved and painted images of the Southwest throughout much of her adult life. Housed in a traditional, adobe-style building, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum presents more than 80 of her works.

Submit an Article!

Publish and share your teaching ideas and techniques. Consider addressing one of the following themes:

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To receive writer’s guidelines send a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
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Advice from a Sage Interpreter

There seems to be a scarcity of good, useful texts that help educators teach the skill of interpretation to visitors. However, one resource written back in 1957, remains a definitive resource. It is entitled Interpreting Our Heritage, and was written by Freeman Tilden, a Park Service employee.

Mr. Tilden offers sage advice in the form of succinct principles that are applicable to all disciplines and settings. They include:

△ The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

△ Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships, rather than simply to communicate factual information.

△ Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information.

△ 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.

△ Interpretation addressed to children 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.

The Docent Educator Spring 1998
"Been there, done that," is all too often the reason teachers say they don't schedule school field trips to historic house museums. If you've seen it, why go back? The perception that such visits merely involve a walk-through of the whole house may be at the root of the problem many house museums have not only in attracting school groups in the first place but in promoting repeat visits. This article examines practices related to school tours based on a nationwide survey of historic house museums and describes alternatives to the traditional whole-house tour.

Method

A questionnaire was distributed to seventy-five house museums that had paid staff and offered school programs. Follow-up telephone calls were made to those institutions that did not respond to the survey, resulting in some data being obtained orally. A total of 44 institutions, nearly 58 percent, in all regions of the country, including rural, small town, and large urban areas, eventually responded.

Findings

Only sixteen of the responding institutions indicated they offer no alternatives to whole-house school tours. While some of the responding documentary historic houses affirmed having other than whole-house tours, most of those claiming alternatives are in their interpretative approach representative house museums. However, the percentage of alternative tours offered by these museums is a small number of the total school tours provided in a single year. The vast majority report that most of their requests for school visits are for whole-house tours.

Requests for alternative tours range from a high of about eighty percent at the Baltimore City Life Museums to a low of five percent in smaller houses. On average, museums offering alternatives to whole-house tours report 20 - 25 percent of their total yearly tours are non-traditional in form or content. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of requests for school tours reported by these institutions come in the spring of the year.

The survey data indicate that alternative tours are led by paid and volunteer staff. Self-guided tours constitute a very small percentage of the total. Only eight institutions specifically stated that special alternative tour training is given to volunteer interpreters.

As might be expected, the reported reaction of volunteers to doing something other than a whole-house tour was mixed. While most indicated positive reactions from docents, one summed up the negative reactions of others in saying, "The docents are generally resistant to change." Another noted that volunteers who are uncomfortable with children tend to prefer giving traditional tours. And one respondent mentioned what may be a more common problem - the tendency of docents to slip back into the traditional mode in the course of an alternative tour.
Content and Form of Alternative Tours

Although the survey found a wide range of programs being offered by house museums as alternatives to the traditional walk-through-the-whole-house tour, the content and format differences fall into three categories; focused/thematic tours, outreach programs, and true alternatives to seeing the whole house.

\* Focused/Thematic Tours

For many house museums, alternatives to whole-house tours in fact mean a focused approach to going through the whole place. Typical of these is the McFadden-Ward House (Texas) third grade, "Etiquette & Social Customs: 1890-1910" tour, which stresses calling customs, domestic duties, etc. related to the various rooms of the house.

Zeroing in on Frank Lloyd Wright's use of art glass, art pottery, furniture, and lighting fixtures is one approach taken in tours of Illinois's Dana-Thomas House. At Clayton, the Pittsburgh home of Henry Clay Frick, tour themes include "Growing Up at Clayton," dealing with the daily lives of the Frick children, "Marvels of Victorian Technology at Clayton," and "Flowers, Fruit, and Ferns," that focuses on the plants the family used to decorate their home, and includes a scavenger hunt in the greenhouse.

At Minnesota's James J. Hill House, the "Riddle Tour" poses a number of riddles to students, each of which is solved by exploring a specific area of the house. Once "solved," the riddle's meaning is examined within the context of the domestic life of the Hill family. Focus tours given at the Chrysler Museum's historic houses (Adam Thoroughgood, Myers, and Willoughby-Baylor) include those devoted to home and family life, 17th and 18th century science, and fiber arts.

To acquaint students with the intellectual life of one of nineteenth-century America's most literary families, a "Journal-Writing Tour" is offered at Orchard House, the home of the Alcotts. Using daily records kept by family members, the tour centers around reading diary excerpts with periodic pauses for students to write or draw their own thoughts and impressions.

School programs, sometimes referred to as "lessons" as distinct from "tours," involve activities carried on either in the historic structure itself or in another space on-site. Such thematic offerings are the most common form of alternatives to whole-house school tours. Often in a workshop format, virtually all of these programs involve either hands-on experiences with artifacts and/or reproductions. Some include a project component in which students make something. Most are longer than the traditional one-hour house tour, though shorter periods are common at lower grade levels (typically 1 1/2 hours). And many also include going through the whole house at some point in the visit.

At Norfolk's Thoroughgood House, Meyers House, and Willoughby-Baylor House such hands-on programs include, "Bread and Butter," "Candle Dipping," "Herbal Dying," "Sachets and Nosegays," "Calligraphy," and "Plastering." All of the school programs at these historic houses are keyed to the state's learning goals. However, only a few house museums report such formal curricular coordination.

The Woodrow Wilson House (Washington, DC) offers elementary school students the program "At Home with the Wilsons," that incorporates primary source documents and role-playing activities that help children explore the lives of those who lived and worked in the house, including the cook and butler. High school programs include "Wilson and Progressive Reform" and "The League of Nations." A similar "events-in-the-life-of" approach is taken in several of the thematic programs provided at the President Benjamin Harrison House in Indianapolis. All of these programs include a partial tour of the house. Harrison's role as territorial governor is the subject of "Native Americans of Indiana," while "The Civil War" centers on Harrison as commander of a Union regiment and involves students in role-playing the lives of Civil War soldiers. In a like vein, the Blount Mansion in Knoxville, Tennessee, has students explore the mansion's role as frontier capitol and the career of Governor William Blount, who was instrumental in moving the territory to statehood.

Living history characters are used in the Orchard House's "A Visit with the Alcotts" program, where staff members take part in parlor "entertainments" and conversations typical of the Alcotts and their friends. "In the Spirit of Improvement: The Alcotts as Social Activists," teachers select three of the seven reform movements in which the Alcotts were active to introduce students to the social issues and intellectual climate of the mid-nineteenth century. Students experience through role-playing what it was like to be educated

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Re-Interpreting the Whole-House School Tour


The Francis Land House in Virginia illustrates how a small house museum copes with its tight logistical constraints. Rather than giving traditional tours, a room is used as a “learning lab.” In “Plantation People,” fifth graders use reproductions in role-playing activities in the dining room to re-enact the Francis Land family, local artisans, and Land family slaves. Third grade students in “On Our Own: Plantation Life” explore life on a self-sufficient plantation by playing Colonial period games, watching a craft demonstration, and making a horn book.

In New Orleans’ French Quarter, the Hermann-Grima House offers second graders a “trunk tour” that includes a mid-nineteenth-century cooking demonstration in the house kitchen, a visit to the stable, and presentation of items children of the period would take with them on a trip. The McAllister House Museum in Colorado Springs has a similar trunk component to its house tour, which involves students examining domestic tools and other artifacts in the carriage house adjacent to the McAllister home.

Off-site alternatives to whole-house tours include Norfolk’s Myers House “Sail into History” program involving a tour of the house and sailing on the American Rover, a reproduction nineteenth-century schooner where students explore not only history but aspects of marine biology and ecology as well. One of the Chrysler Museum’s historic house school programs is a three-hour trolley tour taking students to three Norfolk historic sites, where they do hands-on activities and have a living history experience with an eighteenth century free Black laundress.

- Outreach Programs
  A few of the responding institutions counted outreach programs as alternatives to whole-school tours. Some supply outreach kits of documents and artifacts for classroom use that differ from their pre- and post-visit materials. Others, such as the Chrysler Museum’s Historic Houses and the Francis Land House send interpreters to the schools to do programs on fiber arts, historical costumes, documents, historical archaeology, crafts, and daily life. The McFaddin-Ward House offers two “student enrichment” programs involving classroom visits by museum volunteers (a third grade “Etiquette and Social Customs 1890 - 1910” and an eleventh grade “Literature and the Decorative Arts – The American Renaissance”). Orchard House offers teachers “A Visit from Louisa May Alcott,” a classroom program with an actress/historian who recreates the author of Little Women by combining stage drama with living history.

- True Alternatives to Seeing the Whole House
  While many house museums offer a variety of experiences to school groups, most of them seem to use formats that include touring the whole house at some point during the field trip. Students may see the house from a particular slant or different focus or perspective, but they still see the whole place in the process.

  Students in a graduate course in museum education at Northern Illinois University worked with the staff of the Ellwood House Museum (DeKalb, Illinois) and groups of teachers at three local middle/junior high schools in developing two alternatives to whole-house tours.

  The first of these alternatives, “Under One Roof,” designed for fifth grade, was limited to the private spaces of the house, specifically the bedrooms of the parents, their daughter, the governess, and the cook. The second, “An Air of Refinement: The Social Customs and Decorative Arts of a Wealthy American Family, 1879 - 1912,” a seventh grade tour, focuses on the public spaces of the house (main hallway, dining-room, parlor, living room, ballroom) and deals with decorative arts, social customs (calling and etiquette), and entertaining, and culminates with students planning an evening of entertainment as it might have been when the Ellwoods lived in the house. In both cases, issues of class, gender, and ethnicity are addressed in the printed manuals and in-house activities. Extensive pre- and post- and in-house learning materials and activities were developed and pilot tested. Docents were given special training by one of the graduate students who had contributed to the project and was subsequently hired as the site’s educator.

  By limiting the parts of the house students see during their visit, these two Ellwood House tours represent true alternatives to whole-house tours. All activities, which are artifact-centered and issue-oriented, take place in the mansion’s rooms, not in orientation areas or other spaces. Docents function as facilitators, not guides in the traditional sense. Inquiry learning using study sheets and questioning strategies focusing on artifacts analysis and interpretation, not dispensing information, is the pedagogical approach taken.
Observations and Recommendations

By their very nature, historic house museums encounter challenges not faced by other types of museums. In the first place, the physical integrity and security of the structure itself and its collections are at greater risk from visitors. The logistical difficulties involved in juggling bus loads of visitors as they move within the confined spaces of a historic house raises both security and logistical problems. Lacking the ability to “change” that other museum have by mounting temporary exhibitions, reinstallations, or rotating the permanent collection, and adding high-tech interactive devices in the galleries, among other things, house museums must find alternative ways to increase repeat visits by school groups, particularly those in their local area that may have become jaded with the experience of whole-house tours over the years.

One way to do this is through thematic/focused field trips, that make the point that the past and its material remains can be studied from more than one perspective or point of view. While many house museums are presenting such tours of the whole house, too many do not adequately differentiate the experience as sharply as they might. Using the same activities, artifacts, or teaching methods at various grade levels and “adapting” them to the appropriate developmental level, as their brochures say they do, is not enough. Using different artifacts, tour formats, teaching strategies, and in particular different rooms are ways of really making tours distinctive and encouraging repeat visits both at the same and different grade levels.

At higher grade levels, an issue-oriented approach might be taken, particularly where the house documents differences in class/status, gender, race/ethnicity. There is evidence that some house museums no longer limit their interpretation to the lives of rich or middle-class white folks. It is encouraging that places like the Baltimore City Life Museum, the Francis Land House, Ellwood House, the Chrysler Museum’s Historic Houses, and Dom Robotnika (the Worker’s Home Museum run by the Northern Indiana Center for History) have begun to address issues of social diversity in their tours, some of which directly challenge the consensus history that has been perpetuated far too long by house museums.

A day in the life of the servants of a house could be the focus of a tour. The house as it reflects the lives of women who lived there and the contemporary attitudes on a range of social and personal issues (i.e. - women, minorities, labor, immigration) might be other topical approaches to tours that could concentrate on a limited number of rooms or involve more in-depth study of selected artifacts and documents rather than touring the whole house.

Time-of-Day and Season-of-the-Year tours are yet other options. In these a tour would focus on those rooms most heavily in use at a particular time of day - for example the kitchen and the dining room at meal time - and the role of various members of the household at those times. Seasonal routines played a more significant part in peoples lives, particularly those living in small towns and rural areas, prior to the twentieth century than they do today. Tours like these would provide opportunities to interpret those artifacts (cleaning and cooking technology for instance), some of which would not normally be on regular public view. “A Death in the Family” tour offered in Winter, for example, would give students the chance to learn about mourning customs of the past and see the house in a very different light. A “Spring Wedding” tour would present the house and the activities of its residents in yet another way. Offering topical tours on these ritual occasions and on seasonal chores or routines only in the season in which they took place might help to alleviate the annual May inundation of school children by spreading school field trips more evenly over the whole year.

In addition to spreading the school visits out over the year, alternatives to whole-house tours would have pedagogical advantages in that more in-depth learning would be possible, and the sensory overload occasioned by the traditional “walk and gawk” house tour lessened. Instead of merely looking at artifacts in terms of their materials, technology, possible artistic qualities, and initial intended use, limiting the number of rooms on a tour and giving it a thematic focus would provide more time to explore the social significance of artifacts, their implications for the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions of the society that produced them and how their meanings have changed over time.

The advantages of alternatives to whole-house school tours both to historic house museums and to schools far outweigh the problems involved in developing them. As current practices in house museums reported in this study document, a good start has been made through alternative tour formats and methods in fundamentally changing what millions of school children experience when they take field trips to historic houses. Interpreting a house from different perspective can do much to change teachers’ perception that they’ve been there and done that.

By limiting the parts of the house students see during their visit, these two Ellwood House tours represent true alternatives to whole-house tours.

Terry Zeller, Ph.D., is professor of Art and Museum Studies at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL.
The “Why” Question:
Meeting the Challenge

by Mary Elizabeth Crary

Things were going well on my morning student tour through the galleries of Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California. Happily, there was no press from the group behind. My fifth graders were gathered around the 13th Century sandstone sculpture of Buddha, sheltered by the Serpent King, Muchilinda. The children had discovered the multi-headed snake, hovering over the serene-looking Buddha, and were “why” question. From Eric’s steady gaze and tapping foot I surmised that he wanted a quick and to-the-core answer. Docents must seize the minute, much less the day.

A why question implies the need for an explanation or interpretation, including what Webster refers to as the “expressed conception of a work of art.” Questions of what, where, how, and when (although their answers may also reflect interpretive categories) are more bounded and direct. The answer to “why” — e.g., why has the artist selected a particular form or style — presents challenges of decoding causes of human behavior such as concepts and motives. Interpretation lies at the core of any docent’s job when representing a museum or institution. For instance, in its stated mission, Pacific Asia Museum “preserves, presents and interprets to the public the arts and cultures of the Pacific Islands and Asia in order to promote increased understanding and appreciation of all culture.”

Interpretation, then, is a high order request, and implies a responsibility toward our visitors, our institution, and the people it represents. In search of some docent guidelines to help us in this task, I discuss three points from the field of anthropology that I find useful. The first is the emphasis on close descriptions for making interpretations; second, is an awareness of the tentative nature of our knowledge according to the model of science; and third, is the benefit of including the humanistic viewpoint in our interpretations.

I draw chiefly on the work of Clifford Geertz who referred to his field of social anthropology as “an interpretive science in search of meaning.” Geertz, an ethnographer (one who observes contemporary societies) focused on the ongoing and complex subtleties of people’s behavior and the public meanings that surface in daily life. The production of human-made objects (some of which we now consider art although that label may not have been applied at the time the object was made) would be included in his survey of behavior. For those of us caught up in art and its interpretation, we need, first, to describe the object under study.

The Power of Description

The children’s scrutiny of the Buddha with Muchilinda sculpture introduces our first point. Geertz states that his work of interpretive science grows out of the “delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions.” Applied to the

When students ask questions, they are not only involved, they are eager to find meaning.
photo: Paul Little, Pacific Asia Museum

captured up in my recap of the legend about him. This prompted a curious student named Eric to ask, “Why does Muchilinda have seven heads?” There it was, the all important
interpretation of art, this concept leads to an emphasis on close description, which is also recognized by the art historians. We need to be firmly grounded. This means focusing on what is there, and what the artist created for us to see. Only then can we venture into broader interpretations.

As docents, we can first help our students to be keen observers and develop a vocabulary that allows them to talk about the art they see. Begin by allowing children to tell you what they see (you’ll marvel at their direct clarity) and then suggest some other ways of seeing. Introduce different categories, such as texture, proportions and scale, and uses of space. The good observer is someone who wants and knows how to see more.

Given a situation where they can compare and contrast different forms, students can often make their own discoveries. For instance, in a gallery that displays regional images of the Buddha we can point out the features that distinguish certain styles. Some images of Theravadin Buddhism of Thailand (beginning the 9th to the 14th Centuries) have a simplicity and stylization of traits that makes them appear unreal. Facial features (e.g., a nose like a parrot’s beak) follow closely the historical scripture from an earlier form of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhist images from Cambodia of a similar time period, on the other hand, have realistic proportions, and the impression of breathing forms with natural, masculine-looking features. These show the influence of a region whose rulers adapted a Buddha image to reflect their god/king ideology. By pointing out distinctive styles, we lay the groundwork for students to identify images whose features show variation from the style. We are then in a position to suggest why there is variation, perhaps the influence of migrating and competing groups. Through keen observation and description we can refine our interpretations.

Of course, we have to be aware that our descriptions themselves can be interpretations and may reflect our need to see things a certain way and thereby confirm our preconceived categories. Geertz pointed out the blurred line between description and explanation.

This brings us to the second point in our job of making interpretations. We need to pay attention to Geertz’s inclusion of the word science in the definition of his work.

A Lesson from Science

Most social scientists look upon science as a method by which to pursue knowledge. They state theories and present hypotheses with the understanding that these constructs need to be continually tested with the available data for their usefulness and adequacy. A reading of Geertz’s work on contemporary societies reveals the search for meaning as an ongoing and often illusive process. Seeking neither laws nor rules of behavior, he was interested in stating his observations in an inspectable form so that others could review his work.

Geertz’s understanding of the tentative nature of our knowledge about people is important when we address Eric’s “why” question about the Buddha Sheltered by Muchilinda. When we presume to speak the mind of a stranger, in this case a Thai or possibly a Khmer artist of the 13th century, we need to remember that we can at best make educated guesses. The art piece, after all, was the artist’s expressed interpretation (also an informed guess) about what was going on at the time. Docents in turn try to make interpretations of the artist’s projection of what needed to be said. Admittedly, we stand on uncertain ground.

Archaeologists (anthropologists who study prehistoric finds) are aware of the difficulty in trying to assign meaning to objects from ancient cultures. Louis Binford’s work on expanding the field of archaeology from observation and description to explanation brought with it the need for precise methods and rigorous testing. Only by stating hypotheses

Continued on next page.
The “Why” Question: Meeting the Challenge

Continued from previous page.

...in a form that allows them to be tested can the archaeologist make interpretations about material finds. Even then, the interpretations are tentative and remain subject to revision with the introduction of other sets of data.

The search backward through time for the complexity of the human mind brings with it some practical ways for docents to honor the scientific model. It is important that we present our ideas in a way that others are able to follow and to critique our line of reasoning. For some listeners we will have to keep the names of specific sources in mind. (Here, it is helpful that the institution have an updated research library or internet access to resources.) It is also important that we avoid presenting our information in a dogmatic manner. In fact, we can bring up conflicting interpretations or point out the gaps in our knowledge that may inspire a budding scientist to imagine his own contribution to the knowledge search. Ideally, the explanation will stimulate a dialogue that captures passive onlookers and allows them to enter previously unimagined worlds.

For Eric and his question of “why the seven heads? we need to tailor the discussion to the age, attention span, and availability of time. It may go as follows: “Scholars aren’t sure what this artist was expressing when he sculpted the Buddha with Muchilinda figure 700 years ago. Based on what they have studied about that time and place they can offer us some suggestions. One group thinks the artist may have based his image on scripture that he had learned. The seven heads may have expressed the mighty power of Muchilinda. Or, the artist may have wanted many heads to suggest the movement of a living thing and capture the awe of those who came to view the sculpture in a temple. Keep in mind, in that time there were no movies with special effects that children see today. Another scholar thinks that as Buddhism spread in Southeast Asian countries it took different forms and the many heads may have stood for those diverse ways. Perhaps you have another idea?” Unburdened by academic debate, a young girl wondered if maybe the artist had modeled it in clay first and decided to use seven heads because they “made a nice shape.” Indeed, the simplest answer may be quite reasonable. Children begin to learn that the answer to “why” questions may involve several lines of reasoning.

On the Humanistic Viewpoint

My third suggestion for docents who make interpretations comes from anthropologists who are humanistically inclined. Geertz’s work in Southeast Asia convinced him of the need for an interpretive approach to understanding the arts, languages, and performances of people in that area. He understood that these forms expressed a broad spectrum of social life, including its economy, politics, and rituals. The arts, performances and languages were a reflection of what was important to people. This awareness, when used cautiously, can enrich our presentations of art in the galleries.

We are fortunate at Pacific Asia Museum to have a fine collection of Southeast Asian ceramics. The research on these wares is relatively recent. We find in our galleries examples of objects that are described in a growing collection of art books on the subject. Of particular interest, especially to children, are the 11th and 13th Century ceramics of the Khmer Empire.

Exhibiting a distinctive appearance from other Southeast Asian wares, the Khmer pots, glazed in rich chocolate brown or greenish-buff color have a variety of whimsical, gourdlike shapes. Some have human or animal appendages giving a primitive look sparked with wry humor. They were apparently made at kilns near outlying satellite temples as the Khmer Empire expanded.

Generally shunned by the elites at the capital of Angkor, they were used and traded by the common people of the region.

The pots have fed scholars like Virginia Dusslemeier to theorize on their humanistic function in that society. Using a variety of data from archaeological sources and ethnographic analogies to similar humanistic uses of ceramics, she projects their sacred properties and their ability to ward off harmful influences. For instance, she notes earlier examples of potsherds being used as covers in burials. She also mentions extant cultures who believe that as pots become transformed by fire from clay to durable ceramic they assume symbolic power.

As docents, we are privileged to use information to help involve our visitors with the lives of ancient strangers. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these interpretations are creative acts of imagination. Supporting data has been amassed because of a strong conviction in the possibility that this was how the wares were used. For our own interpretations and when using the interpretations of others, we need to apply criteria of evaluation. Thus, we need to question the closeness of the analogy to the situation under
discussion and whether the interpreter (including oneself) has the experience and scope on the subject to give comment.

When done well, we can incorporate scholars' work on humanistic data in our own lessons. We can excite our visitors without misleading them. We can present an array of possibilities of the wares were used without assigning specific causality. Part of the docent's job is to transmit to students the scholars' creative acts of imagination including the belief in their possibilities. Alternatively, we risk sharing only part of the story. As Dofflemyer states, we risk omitting "evidence of the existence of criteria that might differ dramatically from ours."

That is, we may evaluate the ceramics solely on their technological proficiency (e.g., the temperature range of their kilns and the quality of glazing) and miss the cultural or religious implications.

We owe it our visitors to update our information as new ideas come along. Much of this new data is concerned with the humanistic explanations of how the ceramics were used in the society. It is an attempt to record the humanistic viewpoint of past lives and to suggest what might be said by a piece of art.

Targeting the Future

Although I have presented my points in the context of Southeast Asian objects of art, it is hoped that they will be useful for a range of docent situations. We need, first, to base our interpretations on what the artist has provided for us to see; second, to present information not as static facts but as a developing system of analysis; and third, to be open to new dimensions of what the material objects may have meant to the people who made and used them. These three points form guidelines as we attempt to interpret art to the public.

Perhaps our most important job is to capture the imagination of a new generation of appreciators. After all, they are the potential lifelines of our museums and educational institutions. To all our students, and certainly those curious ones who ask the "why" questions, we owe the best answers we can find.

Mary Elizabeth Crary is a cultural anthropologist, and serves as a docent at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California.

References:


It Works for Me ...

Sharing successful techniques, thoughts, and ideas.

As we move into the 21st Century, interpreters have the obligation of carrying audiences beyond the level of simple awareness. We must communicate the message that this earthly environment nourishes the very bodies we live in and sustains our spirits. We must develop environmental respect and practice what we preach.

Parks are slices of the natural world. And in the natural world there is danger. Visitors to parks should know what a park is and isn't before they commit themselves to spending their vacation or a weekend there. They should know if it's going to be rough and primitive — and if they want the rough and primitive, fine. Interpreters have an obligation to inform people honestly. It would be wrong to plane down all the rough spots, shoot all the touchy animals, fence off all the cliffs, and offer visitors a park experience akin to the comfort of their own living room.

As interpreters, we should forever be mindful of the words of Mark Twain: "To do good works is noble. To teach others to do good works is nobler, and not trouble."

Janson L. Cox, Superintendent Charles Towne Landing-1670 State Park Charleston, South Carolina
Lessons from the Homefront

Interpreting World War II

Between 1989 and 1995, museum educators throughout the United States created interpretive programs for exhibits marking the fiftieth anniversary of World War II. Lessons learned from these educational initiatives can be applied as new programs and exhibits are developed on this important part of history.

There is public support for interpretive programs that examine all aspects of WWII-related history. Museum educators should develop programs that focus not only on the military and diplomatic implications of the war, but the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects as well. Interpretive programs on aspects of popular culture such as movies and music, can be used to initiate public discussion of a wide variety of issues. A lecture on the wartime housing shortage, for example, was used to launch audience discussion of racial segregation and other complex economic and social issues at the Museum of the Cape Fear in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Interest in WWII-related history is not confined to the generation of men and women who served in the armed forces or lived on the homefront. Support for interpretive programs related to WWII cuts across generational, social class, racial, gender, and ethnic lines or distinctions. There is a demand for interpretive programs and exhibits that consider the war's impact on families and communities — the average Americans, including enlisted men and women, industrial and agricultural workers, African-Americans, American Indians, immigrants, adolescents, and children.

A symposium co-sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History and the North Carolina Literary Society laid to rest the myth that the only people interested in the experiences of minority groups are other members of those groups. The entire audience listened with great interest as African-American veterans described their desire to be treated without regard for color, and how they responded to racism.

*Museum educators must avoid over-simplification in interpretive programs on WWII.* Three North Carolina institutions, the Onslow County Museum, the Museum of the Cape Fear, and the Bellamy Mansion Museum of History and Design Arts, developed exhibits that were valuable educational tools because they weighed both the positive and negative aspects of life on the homefront. Each exhibit showed how, although the war brought unprecedented economic growth and political influence to North Carolina's cities and towns, the war boom resulted in complicated economic and social problems that defied quick or easy solutions.

Interpretive programs should help visitors relate the war to their every day lives. The Bellamy Mansion Museum's exhibit, "A Journey Through Chaos: World War II Invades Wilmington," showed how the federal government responded to local wartime needs by financing the construction of housing, schools, medical facilities, shopping centers, and recreation centers. Wartime infrastructure improvements helped create the economic foundation for the dramatic postwar growth of North Carolina.

Interpretive programs on WWII should involve persons who served in the armed forces or lived on the homefront. Veterans of the WWII battlefront and homefront should be consulted in the early stages of program or exhibit planning. They can offer suggestions on program topics, approach or method, and the location of documentary and photographic sources of historical evidence. "World War II in Beaumont: Remembering the Homefront," a panel discussion co-sponsored by the McFaddin-Ward House and the Tyrell Historical Library in Beaumont, Texas, involved fourteen persons who lived on the WWII homefront. Dozens of other people were, however, consulted in the process of conceptualizing the program, identifying and tracking down panelists, and publicizing the program.

Veterans organizations, religious groups, senior citizens and retiree organizations, and nursing homes can offer museum educators assistance in locating persons who served in the armed forces during the war or worked in defense industry. All WWII veterans and workers are not, however, suitable candidates for participation in interpretive museum...
programs. Museum educators must discreetly screen potential program participants in order to identify those most likely to effectively communicate with the public. They should meet with each participant before the program to explain its format and educational objectives. Educators should provide examples of the kinds of insights and experiences the public is likely to derive the greatest benefit from while at the same time being careful not to color or influence the participant's perceptions or interpretations. Beaumont panelists who worked in war industries such as shipbuilding, were, for example, encouraged to go beyond a simple description of their job responsibilities and discuss the physical and mental demands of their work, working conditions, and the nature of their relationship with their co-workers and employer.

**Museum educators should conclude interpretive programs on WWII by commenting on the extent to which the learning goals identified at the outset of the program were realized.** They should summarize the questions or issues that were raised, and the range of opinions expressed. Museum educators may wish to discuss how the program suggested directions for future educational initiatives.

Interpretive programs should also conclude with suggestions for further study of WWII history. A traditional bibliography should be supplemented with a listing of museums and historic sites, films and videos, addresses of sites on the World Wide Web, and other upcoming events and programs pertaining to World War II.

Programs can be concluded with a set of specific suggestions as to how audience members can further the documentation and interpretation of WWII history. For instance, a WWII coastal artillery re-enactment program held at Fort Fisher [North Carolina] State Historic Site closed with a brief discussion of how the museum planned to give increased attention to the collection, conservation, and interpretation of artifacts and archival material pertaining not only to WWII, but the entire twentieth century. This appeal was made after research brought to light the fact that while many museums visitors recognize the nostalgic value of a shipyard employee's identification badge, or a USO dance program, or a letter written from "somewhere in the South Pacific," they often overlook their historical value.

**Museum educators should evaluate the effectiveness of WWII interpretive programs.** Written surveys and exit interviews are among the means that can be used to determine whether a program or exhibit successfully conveyed its message or messages. It should, however, be noted that interpretive programs encourage visitation, donation, volunteerism, and institutional loyalty and support long after they are over. As a result, museum educators and administrators need to utilize many different measures or yardsticks for assessing a program's success.

In summary, even through the fiftieth anniversary of WWII has passed, museums will continue to offer interpretive programs on this subject. There is an on-going need for public education about America's last total war and its impact on the nation as a whole, as well as its regions, states and territories, and local communities.

Planning and implementation of interpretive programs on WWII should be geared for audiences who have little or no knowledge of the causes of the war, the major military engagements, the economic, political, and social implications at home and abroad, the personalities involved, and — if the current generation of university students are any guide — even the outcome of the war. As the generation of men and women who lived through WWII passes away, the need for "front-end" research that identifies exactly what visitors know and do not know about WWII, can no longer be ignored.

The entire audience listened with great interest as African-American veterans described their desire to be treated without regard for color, and how they responded to racism.

Kristin M. Szyboian joined the faculty of Western Michigan University in 1996. She served as Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Public History Program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington from 1989 to 1996, and as Associate Historian for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission from 1987 to 1989. Szyboian received a Ph.D. in History from Carnegie Mellon University. She has served as consultant and board member at numerous museums and historic sites.
Building Blocks of History

How does a historic site interpret a past that is still very much the subject of study and research? At Riverside, the Farnsley-Moremen Landing in Louisville, Kentucky, we chose to invite some of our youngest visitors to participate in that process. And, we developed a couple of simple activities to round out their experience.

Riverside opened to the public in October, 1993. Its centerpiece is a recently-restored farm house built circa 1837 on a beautiful stretch of the Ohio River. The museum was organized to interpret historic farm life on the river. However, all of the outbuildings, such as the barn, smoke house, wash house, ice house, and detached kitchen, were lost years ago to benign neglect. The staff continues research into documentary sources and oral histories while extensive archaeology is being conducted to learn more about the outbuildings and life on the farm. Long-range plans call for the eventual reconstruction of the outbuildings.

As excited as we were about the research in progress, our staff and volunteer guides faced difficult questions as we tried to help elementary students find meaning in the incomplete farm site. How could we help children understand that this was a farm if only the house survives? How could children gain an understanding of what archaeology is? How could they appreciate the valuable role artifacts, documents, and photographs play in interpreting the past? In response to these questions, we developed a full-day field trip called “The Building Blocks of History” with help from archaeologist Jay Stottman of the Kentucky Archaeological Survey.

Before students start digging at the site of a long-lost outbuilding, we want them to get a sense of the big picture. A brief question and answer period led by an archaeologist gives the children an opportunity to learn what archaeologists do. The archaeologist also asks the children to think about how the particular site was chosen for excavation. With the right guidance, students frequently offer the sources of information that were indeed used to locate the site: maps, photographs, old documents, and family stories.

We want participants to come away with an idea of the methods used in archaeology. Their guides explain that they are not digging with random abandon. Students are able to see that careful attention to the level and context of the artifacts often reveals important information about the artifact’s age and use. Although each “Building Blocks” participant gets to take a trowel in hand and dig, they also screen and wash artifacts. If time permits, they work with an archaeologist to do a preliminary sort of the artifacts recovered. Before they leave the site, students learn that the artifacts they found will be analyzed and the findings written up in a report. We also stress that the artifacts found will wind up in our museum and not in a private individual’s hands.

Like all visitors to Riverside, participants in “Building Blocks

photo: courtesy of Riverside, the Farnsley-Moremen Landing.
tour the historic Farnsley-Moremen House. Tour guides in the house ask children open-ended questions to help them make connections to the missing elements of the farm. For example, they ask, "Why do you think the kitchen was a separate building?" In addition, guides point out family furnishings, documents, and photographs on the tour. They encourage students to share ideas about what these artifacts may reveal about the lives of the people who called Riverside home. This reinforces the notion that what we know about the past is based on how we interpret what has survived into the present.

Finally, participants in "Building Blocks" get their hands and bodies moving once more by working clay into small quick-drying bricks that are taken home at the end of the day. The children learn about an important artifact left behind by Gabriel Farnsley, the builder of the farm house. Farnsley etched his name into the wet clay of a brick before it was fired. The brick with Farnsley's signature was discovered in the cornice of the house during restoration.

We encourage each student to etch his/her own name — or a message onto their bricks. Their guides ask them what someone who might find their brick in the future could learn through that artifact. Students are also asked to think about how our knowledge of the past builds through the addition of information, just as our house was built brick by brick.

"Building Blocks" is giving Riverside a chance to involve students in research critical to interpreting the history of the farm. Participants come away with a better understanding of the process of interpreting the past — and a better understanding of the history of the site. Also important, we are building an audience that will revisit Riverside as the years go by to see how the outbuilding reconstruction has progressed and how the interpretation of the site has evolved. These participants literally helped to uncover some of the information and they are helping us to build our future.

Patti Linn has been the Site Manager of Riverside, the Farnsley-Moremen Landing in Louisville, Kentucky, since 1994. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of Louisville and a Bachelor of Arts from Murray State University. Ms. Linn has experience as both a public school teacher and a museum educator.
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