

Managing Museums

The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?

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Abstract: Are historic sites and house museums destined to go the way of Oldsmobiles and floppy disks? Visitation has trended downwards for thirty years. Theories abound, but no one really knows why. To launch a discussion of the problem in the pages of *The Public Historian*, Cary Carson cautions against the pessimistic view that the past is simply passé. Instead he offers a “Plan B” that takes account of the new way that learners today organize information to make history meaningful.

Keywords: History museums, historic house museums, museum visitation, future of public history education, learning styles, new media

R.I.P. Drive-in movies, traveling circuses, *LIFE Magazine*, the Scarsdale Diet, contract bridge, zero-base budgets, Lionel train sets, Rock 'n' Roll. Everything we do for fun or self-improvement goes through a life cycle. Once born, it builds, it booms, and eventually and inevitably it busts. Often so do the institutions that provide these experiences. Now gone—or going-going-gone—are regional orchestras, serious bookstores, network news, fraternal lodges, labor unions, the record industry, and country-club Episcopalians.

History museums, and historic house museums in particular, look to be entering the same nosedive to oblivion.

Or are they? It depends on whom you ask. Speakers at the symposium where these remarks were first presented reported both good news and bad. My assignment was to weigh them in the balance. To do that again here in the

pages of *The Public Historian*, I encourage readers to start by casting an eye over the whole landscape that history museums occupy today. Then let's drill down and try to fathom what may really be going on under the surface, largely out of sight. Finally, I know that I won't be forgiven if I don't take a stab at the question, What's Plan B. So that too, in conclusion.

Is the condition of ailing history museums terminal or not? News of dead or dying institutions appears regularly in the public press.¹ Last year Colonial Williamsburg created a small sensation when it announced its intention to sell nearby Carter's Grove Plantation to any private or corporate buyer willing to accept the stringent preservation easements attached to the property.² Too expensive to operate was the reason given; unspoken was the additional awkward fact that the plantation no longer served as an added attraction for visitors to Williamsburg. Instead it had begun competing head-to-head with the restored town for a dwindling number of ticket-buying customers.

Meanwhile, up the road in Richmond, the Museum of the Confederacy, once the "Shrine of the South," declared that it too had reached a "tipping point" that threatened its very existence.³ Plummeting attendance (from 91,000 in the early 1990s to 50,000 today) left it so strapped for cash that the director proposed selling the original downtown property and moving Jefferson Davis's Confederate White House to Lexington, Virginia. Sturbridge Village in New England has made a different but no less drastic choice. The region's largest assembled collection of historic house museums slashed the staff of costumed interpreters from seventy-two years ago to only twenty today.⁴ Headlines like these alert the public that some of the country's most venerable institutions are in deep trouble.

There are exceptions, success stories that buck the downward trend in visitation. The waiting lists for daily tours through the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City grow longer every year, for instance.⁵ Terry Davis, president of the American Association for State and Local History, insists that size matters in understanding attendance figures. "The 'destination sites' have the biggest problem," she says. She means the dinosaur destinations—the Mount Vernons, the Williamsburgs, the Sturbridge Vil-

1. Bruce Courson, "Why Rural Museums Are Becoming Ancient History," *Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2005; David A. Fahrenthold, "Living-History Museums Struggle to Draw Visitors," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2005.

2. Tracie Rozhon, "Homes Sell, And History Goes Private," *New York Times*, December 31, 2006; Marian Godfrey and Barbara Silberman, "Carter's Grove Reassessment is a Model for Historic House Museums," *Virginian Pilot*, January 29, 2008; Edward A. Chappell, "Carter's Grove: Next Chapter," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 68–73.

3. Neely Tucker, "Swept Away By History," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2007. The saga continued in Neely Tucker, "Plan Would Divide Confederate Museum's Relics," *Washington Post*, September 6, 2007.

4. Jenna Russell, "A Historic Replica Retrenches, Sturbridge Village Cuts Staff, Facilities to Make Ends Meet," *Boston Globe*, November 21, 2005.

5. The Sandwich Glass Museum in Sandwich, Massachusetts, appears to be another success story. See Courson, "Why Rural Museums Are Becoming Ancient History."

lages. “Small grassroots organizations,” she points out, “haven’t suffered very much at all.”⁶

Tell that to Michael Wilson, who runs Great Camp Sagamore, the Vanderbilt hideaway in the Adirondack Mountains. His numbers have always been modest: 12,000 walk-ins annually during the peak years before 2001, but since then, they have dropped to 7,000.⁷ Listen to the scuttlebutt at professional meetings, and you have to conclude that many “grassroots” house museums aren’t faring any better than the Vanderbilts.

The truth of the matter is that nobody knows for sure what’s really going on. No national organization keeps statistics on museum attendance—nor the American Association of Museums, not AASLH, not the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Nor is there an industry-wide formula for counting admissions. Worse yet, visitors to any one museum are frequently not counted the same way from one year to the next. So, without reliable, comparable numbers, the *perception* goes unchallenged that paid attendance at history museums has plunged in the last five years. That perception is fed by the few numbers that do leak out: Colonial Williamsburg down 18% in the four years since 2000, Monticello 15%, Mount Vernon 28%.⁸ Other troubling signs point in the same direction. No house museum or historic site, whatever its size or fortunes, can take encouragement from a recent survey conducted by Research Advisors, a marketing research firm serving the museum community. They found that history museums rank dead last with family audiences who visited the eight different kinds of museums they surveyed.⁹ Does this perception of declining attendance, plus the reality of rising costs, add up to a full-blown crisis? Or is it, as Terry Davis prefers to see it, “just a business change we have to get used to”? The real answer seems to be anybody’s guess. On the other hand, nobody believes that history museums are *better off* today than they were in, say, the good old days of Enola Gay and Disney’s America.¹⁰

In any case, anxious administrators and nervous trustees are not waiting for solid numbers before seeking solutions. The remedies they have been experimenting with depend, of course, on their diagnosis of the problem. What could explain the seeming downturn in attendance all across the country? Here again,

6. Terry Davis to Cary Carson, personal e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2007.

7. Conversation with Michael Wilson, August 26, 2007.

8. Attendance figures for 2000–2003 reported by Daniel Jordan, executive director of Monticello, at a symposium, “Why Is Historic Visitation Down?” National Trust for Historic Preservation annual meeting, Louisville, Kentucky, September 30, 2004. A consortium calling itself The Outdoor History Museum Forum does not make public the attendance statistics it collects for member institutions, a practice that reinforces the impression that they do not contain good news. Paid admissions figures published in Colonial Williamsburg’s annual reports hint at an even sharper decline since 2000, closer to 21.5%.

9. “Museum Audience Trends,” Research Advisors Study of Family Visitation at Museums, Part II, online newsletter from Research Advisors (1497 New Scotland Avenue, Slingerlands, New York 12159), Summer 2007.

10. Davis to Carson, August 2, 2007.

speculation is rife in the absence of national or even regional market surveys focused specifically on the audiences that do or do not visit history museums and historic sites. “Competition” is usually fingered as the number-one culprit, the competitors being everything from theme parks and water slides to shopping malls and video games. Overpopulation among history museums themselves means more competition. It is estimated that fully half the museums in the country have opened since 1960.¹¹ Close behind competition is a host of other presumed causes—high gas prices, 9/11 jitters, changing vacation habits, working mothers, the chilling effect of Standards of Learning on school visits, and—always and forever—the conviction among history teachers that the ascendancy of social studies has created an entire generation of historical dummies. Probably all can be blamed to one degree or another.

Guesswork then is currently the best available strategy both to measure the extent of the alleged problem and to understand its suspected causes. Guesswork also directs the search for solutions. The most desperate responses aim simply at staunching the flow of red ink, reducing expenditures in the face of fixed expenses, rising costs, and falling gate receipts. Sturbridge Village shuts its four-year-old Oliver Wright Tavern and cancels Thanksgiving Dinner for a thousand registered guests.¹² The Mariners’ Museum in Newport News, Virginia, collapses its education staff from a department of seven to a barebones office of two. Smaller museums, among them many house museums, reduce hours, freeze salaries, defer maintenance, and leave vacancies unfilled. Terry Davis is probably right about these short-term economies; they’re the painful but not unfamiliar downside to an ever-recurring business cycle.

A few museum professionals regard the situation more gravely. They are guessing that the history museum field is experiencing what Barbara Silberman terms “a seismic shift,” a bedrock upheaval of geologic proportions.¹³ What future that shift foretells set the agenda for a super-exclusive summit meeting held five years ago at Kykuit, the Rockefeller family Hudson Valley estate, now turned into a conference center. Twenty-eight senior museum professionals met in 2002 (and reconvened a year ago last April) to take a big-picture view of the situation—to trouble-shoot problems industry-wide, explore far-reaching solutions, and, generally speaking, rethink historic house museums for the new century.¹⁴

The self-evaluation part of the three-day exercise produced few surprises.

11. Cited in Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 117.

12. Russell, “Historic Replica Retrenches.”

13. From remarks delivered at a public lecture sponsored by the organization she heads, the Heritage Philadelphia Program, February 1, 2006.

14. “Rethinking the Historic House Museum of the 21st Century,” Kykuit Conference Center, April 2002, and April 2007. Proceedings of the recent meeting are reported by Jay D. Vogt in “The Kykuit Summit: The Sustainability of Historic Sties,” *History News* 62, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 17–20. Nancy Campbell generously shared with me a typescript copy of the “Findings and Recommendations from the Kykuit Conference,” April 2007.

Conferees acknowledged that there are too many house museums for the good of all, and by and large they are too much alike. As one participant put it, “Too damn many spinning wheels and too few examples of 20th-century lifestyles.”¹⁵ Sameness aside, they worried that many house museums’ period rooms, guided tours, and interpretive programs are—not to mince words—“boring.” As someone explained, many, maybe most house museum offerings are “tired and antiquated—disconnected both from current issues and from their own communities.” That verdict will come as bad news to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and other foundations and agencies that have encouraged institutions, large and small, to make the lessons of history relevant to today and heartfelt to their constituents. Instead, the Kykuit conferees concluded that federal, state, and private funding, however welcome, has added to museums’ headaches by fostering too much new programming. Those extra responsibilities sometimes stretch fragile institutions beyond the breaking point.

Make a mental note of two findings in particular from the Kykuit meetings—the part about dull and dreary museum programs and the role that NEH and other grant-making agencies play in program planning. I will circle back to both a little later.

First though, while I am still trying to put my finger on the troubles we find so vexing, it must be acknowledged that some progress has been made. Smart people are beginning to figure out what works and what does not. A few promising new strategies did emerge from the Kykuit meetings. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has taken some of the conference recommendations to heart. The Trust, as you know, owns and operates a string of landmark house museums, twenty-eight in all. The Trust, and notably its stewardship vice president, James Vaughan, have been willing to take considerable risks to ensure their preservation. The Trust experimented with privatization well before Colonial Williamsburg put Carter’s Grove up for sale. Seven years earlier they quietly helped the Lee-Jackson Foundation “save” Robert E. Lee’s boyhood home in Alexandria by decommissioning it as public museum and selling it, with protective easements, to a wealthy private buyer who could afford to take care of it properly.¹⁶ The Trust encourages mergers and collaborations. It challenges its property managers to make creative use of parklands associated with some of its holdings. Jazz concerts, Shakespeare festivals, storytelling jamborees, and other popular community events not only attract new visitors, they raise money that can be spent to care for historic structures.

Some experiments bomb, predictably. Already innovators have burned their fingers often enough to have doped out a partial list of no-nos. For example,

15. James P. Vaughan, vice president for stewardship, National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Historic Houses in the 21st Century: Preserving Historic Houses Today,” lecture presented at Christ Church, Philadelphia, February 1, 2006.

16. “Robert E. Lee’s Childhood Home Is Sold,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2000.

don't squander funds on expensive advertising beyond the usual rack cards, Web sites, and travel directories. "Additional marketing offers very little return," say those who have learned the hard way. "Do it," and usually "nothing happens."¹⁷

Still worse, because the added costs never go away, is the false hope that new galleries, blockbuster exhibitions, souped-up period rooms, or major acquisitions will somehow bring back the lost audiences of yesteryear. They don't—not after the buzz dies down, certainly not for the long haul. Conventional wisdom is unanimous that, "except for opening night, almost universally there's no longer-term impact from [adding new galleries] except that you now have more building to maintain and operate."¹⁸

Major disasters have recently befallen museums that have bet the farm on ambitious expansions or new visitor centers in a gamble to reverse their sagging fortunes. Didn't happen for the City Museum of Washington D.C. That venerable institution had long inhabited a splendid Victorian mansion complete with its original furnishings. Four years ago the historical society moved to a new home after spending \$20 million to spruce up a redundant Carnegie library. Fifteen months later it closed its doors forever when attendance barely reached 36,000, far short of the 100,000 to 450,000 projected.¹⁹

Right now, just down the road from Williamsburg, we are biting our nails as the Mariners' Museum dog-paddles desperately in a sea of deficits after opening a wonderful new wing built to display the ironclad gunboat, the Monitor. Meanwhile visitation at the museum hovers around 40 percent of the estimated—and budgeted—ticket forecast.²⁰ Bankruptcies grab the headlines when major museums go belly-up. But plenty of house museums are gamblers too. And usually losers, according to Jim Vaughan. He claims that he "can't think of one successful case where somebody [told me], 'we restored our parlor and people just beat down our doors'" to see it.²¹

To be fair, for all the countermeasures that come up short, there seem to be some that really can draw crowds and win public support. But take a closer look. For the most part, successful new ventures tend to be peripheral activities. They are events that take little account of the host museum's educational mission. They are things like weddings, bar mitzvahs, antique car rallies, ice cream socials, and silent auctions. All good wholesome fun, to be sure, and they generate income. Nobody can sneeze at that. All the same, they relegate the centerpiece historic house or site to the background—educationally and often literally.

17. Vaughan, "Historic Houses in the 21st Century."

18. Vaughan, "Historic Houses in the 21st Century."

19. Blake Gopnik, "Object Lessons; One Museum Soars, One Plods. Both Want Open Minds, but the Former Knows Eyes Come First," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2004; Jacqueline Trescott, "City Museum to Close Its Galleries," *Washington Post*, October 9, 2004; Debbi Wilgoren, "A Last Day With Many First Visits," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2004.

20. Arthur Barnes to Cary Carson, personal e-mail correspondence, September 12, 2007.

21. Vaughan, "Historic Houses in the 21st Century."

By contrast, museums' attempts to beef up or jazz up their education programs often lead to those expensive flops. So what's the answer? "Take what you can get" is the pragmatic advice that is sometimes given. After all, preservationists argue, *saving* old houses is the ultimate goal. If it takes jumble sales and bridal showers to do that, why quibble?

Because these sideshows aren't history, that's why! Public historians *must* take exception to the expedient notion that attendance figures—door counts—are a false indicator of museum healthiness. To quote Jim Vaughan again, the National Trust, he says, is "trying to shift our measure [of success] to the *quality* of what we do rather than the *quantity* of what we do."²² Quality should be everybody's goal always, of course. But numbers matter too. A lot! And not even primarily for the ticket income they earn. We public historians were not put on Earth to run dog shows or referee Easter egg races, however much revenue they raise for preservation. We must never forget that fundamentally we are history teachers. If our institutions of lifelong learning are not teaching history, or if we are teaching to ever-smaller numbers of learners, then *those* are the problems *we* need to tackle and solve.

That's where I want to take my remarks from this point forward.

Plan A was everything that history museums used to do to attract, instruct, and entertain ticket-buying visitors. Plan A extended to outreach programs, programs for schools, and, more recently for museums with Web sites, Internet programming. The whole Plan A package depended—bottom line—on gate receipts, on income earned from ticket sales, in a word, on healthy attendance numbers. Regrettably those numbers, however inexact, are now headed south for too many museums. Whatever the reasons may be, Plan A no longer works as it had been working for as long as most of us can remember.

So is there a Plan B? Or, to ask the question more tactically, how can we steer our struggling institutions toward a place where we and our successors can eventually discover workable, sustainable alternatives to the tried, true, but now pretty much worn-out practices that we rely on to teach museum history today?

To get our bearings and set off in the right direction requires that we see the museum attendance problem in longer perspective and seek a broader understanding of the leisure-time learning environment from which our visitors come. When I lift up my head and look around, right away I see three observable facts that command my attention. None figures in most of the recent news stories about history museums' current troubles. Let's look at these attention-getters one by one.

First is the fact that visitation has been trending downward, not just for the last five or six years, not just since 9/11, but for more than twenty years. So out the window go all the explanations that start with terrorism, gas prices, Republican tightwads, and other up-close bogeymen. Attendance figures go-

22. Vaughan, "Historic Houses in the 21st Century."

ing back to the 1970s are even less reliable than recent counts. But the trend is unmistakable. Williamsburg's numbers slide from a high of just over a million paid admissions through most of the 1970s and eighties to an average of 954,000 in the nineties to 803,000 in 2002 to 734,000 in 2005.²³ Over the same period Mount Vernon's averages have dropped decade by decade from 1,054,000 in the seventies, to 1,011,000 in the eighties, to 992,000 a decade ago, to 935,000 since 2000.²⁴ The National Trust reports dwindling attendance at its sites by two or three percent annually.²⁵ Nothing drastic from one year to the next, but cumulatively the little losses add up to big numbers over twenty or thirty years. The overall pattern should command our attention. It should alert us to the strong probability that some fundamental bedrock shift has been tilting the cultural landscape in this country for almost a generation, whether we have noticed it or not.

Reality check No. 2. History museums share this same leaky boat with many other cultural institutions. Declining attendance and failing support are now widespread problems throughout the arts and humanities community. But not universally. There are notable exceptions. Certain kinds of cultural institutions are doing well. It is worth noting which are which and asking why the difference. Symphony orchestras, for example, are very hard pressed.²⁶ Meanwhile opera companies are thriving and multiplying as never before.²⁷

For that matter—and this brings me to my final bellwether—these are also the best of times for a brand-new breed of history museum. How many of you have visited—or even heard of—the National Museum of the Marine Corps outside Quantico, the Spy Museum in Washington, the Abraham Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Illinois, the National World War I Museum in Kansas City, or the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville? These are just a few. As a reporter for *The New York Times* wrote last fall, “Across the country, shiny new history museums are pushing up like poppies on a battlefield, while the war horses struggle to scrape off their mold.”²⁸ Granted, none of the newcomers is a conventional historic house museum. But their multimillion dollar investments in exhibits and programs, their star-power in attracting huge

23. From the Foundation's annual reports. Paid admissions rose to 745,000 in 2006, but leveled off last year (except for a boost from giveaway tickets) despite a popular, year-long, 400th anniversary celebration at nearby Jamestown.

24. I am grateful to Daniel Jordan and Dennis Pogue for sharing with me attendance figures for Monticello and Mount Vernon, 1970–2005.

25. Vaughan does pick up on the significance of the long-term trend in “Historic Houses in the 21st Century.”

26. Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005); Stephen Brookes, “The Post-Classical: No Coats, Ties or Stuffed Shirts,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2007.

27. Jonathan Leaf, “America's Opera Boom,” *The American: A Magazine of Ideas* 1, no. 5, July/August, 2007. To appreciate how quickly opera's fortunes have improved, see Bruce Crawford, “The Met Looks to the Future,” *Opera News*, September 1, 1993.

28. Kathryn Shattuck, “History's Real Stuff (Sorry, Miss Grundy),” *New York Times*, September 9, 2007; John Maynard, “I, Spy: The Secret Agent Experience,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2007.

crowds, and their impressive box office receipts should be compelling reasons for us to find out what accounts for their popularity.

All three phenomena are worth heeding—the decades-long slump in history museum attendance, the mixed signals from other cultural institutions, and the smash-hit success of the new multimedia attractions. Their messages are not always easy to sort out. The popularity of the razzle-dazzle attractions challenges the conclusion that pessimists draw from declining attendance, that younger museum-goers have lost interest in the past. On the other hand, the opera revival seems to contradict the easy assumption that technology is the secret to success. One thing, though, comes through loud and clear. Museum historians need to entertain the real possibility that rising generations of learners since, say, the 1970s acquire and process information very differently than previous generations did, those old folks that our older museums were built to serve and served well. In these troubled times, many museum professionals find solace in a widely publicized study that found that Americans trust museums as history teachers more than they trust schools or even their grandparents. That is a misplaced comfort. Trust is not the issue. What is, is the ability of museums to make effective connections with the way people today have become accustomed to engaging in the learning process. Not how they cope with the museum environments we already give them. But how today's learners actually prefer to organize information and put it together to make meaning.

Guest research and visitor surveys take us part way there. I don't mean the kind of market research that intercepts museum-goers and asks them to rank their experience from one to ten, one being "Refund my money!" A few institutions—not as many as should—regularly conduct in-depth studies aimed at finding out what people see and do in the course of a museum visit and what they learn and don't learn along the way. Three recent surveys from Conner Prairie, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg give new urgency to what museum educators have known for some time.²⁹ Modern visitors are not content to be passive spectators. Patient onlookers they have ceased to be. Conny Graft is the director of Williamsburg's guest research unit. The visitors she canvassed in her most recent survey told her that they wanted more interactive and engaging experiences. They wanted experiences that helped them "feel like I am [transported] back in time." Mind you, the fully populated, eighteenth-century town they pictured in their imaginations would totally outstrip Colonial Williamsburg's personnel budget, large as it is. Given their druthers, they told Graft they wished the Foundation would "flood the streets with hundreds of costumed people, twenty-four hours a day! And they wanted to hear about

29. "Reframing Authenticity: Discourse Analysis at a Living History Museum [Conner Prairie]," PowerPoint presentation by Mary Theresa Seig and Jane Metrick, July 27, 2006; "Monticello Strategic Marketing Plan," report prepared by Southeastern Institute of Research, September 12, 2005; "Colonial Williamsburg Guest Satisfaction: Issues and Insights, 2006 Year-end Summary," report prepared by Southeastern Institute of Research in conjunction with Guest Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, March 2007.

common people—tavern workers, slaves, struggling merchants, families of poor soldiers, and other people to whom they could relate.”³⁰

While these survey data hold few surprises for museum educators, surveyors can discover important insights into popular learning habits by reading between the lines. Museum visitors today expect to be transported back to another time and place in their imaginations. It is no longer enough merely to be told about times past. They are fully satisfied only if they live it—feel it—experience it. That is the first way that the TV- and now the Internet-generations learn differently than all their benighted ancestors who were raised exclusively on books, or, when visiting museums, were lectured to by talking-books. More about the influence of visual media in a minute.

The second clue to modern learning preferences comes in the statement that visitors to Williamsburg, once they are taken back to the eighteenth-century town they imagine, want to meet ordinary people to whom they can relate. In other words, they are not content to be mere spectators even in these virtual worlds. Instead, they expect to become personally acquainted with the historical figures they meet there, share their joys and sorrows, and in effect join in the action of story being told.

As I said, there is little that is terribly new here. Museum historians have appealed to visitors’ imaginations for years. Costumed actors have become the stock-in-trade of historic site interpretation. The best of these actor-interpreters are past masters in the art of encouraging laypeople to cast themselves in roles that put them in the middle of the historical events portrayed. The glitzy new multimedia attractions have upped the ante significantly by raising the level of audience participation to exciting new heights. They owe much of their popularity to high-tech imagineering that turns audiences into spymasters, Marine Corps leathernecks, and Cassius Clay’s sparring partners.

Some virtual experiences are genuinely educational. Getting behind the wheel and actually driving a Model-T Ford at the Henry Ford Museum is a learning experience that any modern cruise-controller will never forget. Other simulations are nothing more than theme-park special effects—the icy sting of “real” (fake) snow as Washington crosses the Delaware inside Mount Vernon’s new, \$60-million orientation center, for instance.³¹

Most small museums cannot even dream of employing professional actors or virtual-reality simulators, however compatible they may be with modern learning styles. Plan B, if it is going to work for them, has to be affordable; it has to be do-able with the human and financial resources they can realistically muster.

Happily, it can be. There is another lesson to be learned from visitors’ responses to audience surveys. The desire of modern museum-goers to imag-

30. Conny Graft, “Listen, Evaluate, and Respond! The Colonial Williamsburg Visitor Research Story,” *AASLH History News* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2007).

31. Jacqueline Trescott, “Fleshing Out a Founding Father” and “The New Buildings at Mount Vernon: America’s First Home Gets an Upgrade,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2006.

ine themselves back in the past, and their expectation that their pretended persona will share history's trials and tribulations with the historical figures they meet there, all presupposes that there is an underlying, on-going story that museum educators let them in on. Stories are the *sine qua non* of popular history, of course. Storytelling is what we public historians do—or should do. I am often surprised and disappointed by museums that stubbornly insist that visitors stay focused on exhibited objects rather than using those objects to take visitors back to the three-dimensional places where history stories took place.³² Nowadays everyone with something to sell, be they advertisers, politicians, newscasters—whatever, knows that the messages people pay attention to are those that come wrapped in a human interest story. (By the way, I think that's what explains the competitive advantage that opera companies have over symphony orchestras.) For starters then, Plan B must embrace the reality that storytelling is the powerful medium in which modern learning takes place. Let's see where that takes us.

Bigger is better in this regard. The bigger the narrative, the better it can teach a chunk of American history that is genuinely worth taking the trouble to learn. We glimpsed that truth at Colonial Williamsburg three years ago when we invented something called the "Revolutionary City."³³ This program is a fully scripted, theatrical production that became the centerpiece of the Foundation's educational curriculum beginning in 2006. Billed as "A Colonial Williamsburg Adventure," it is an elaborately produced piece of street theater presented live in two, two-hour installments on consecutive days.³⁴ Day One sucks visitors into the maelstrom of events that lead to the Declaration of Independence and quickly unraveled into a perilous war with the British

32. Barbara and Cary Carson, "Things Unspoken: Learning Social History from Artifacts," in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives in the New Social History*, James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams, eds. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 181–203.

33. Cary Carson, Rex Ellis, Jim Horn, Kevin Kelly, Richard McCluney, and Bill White to Colin Campbell, "Teaching Citizenship at Colonial Williamsburg: What We Offer Today," memorandum, March 18, 2004 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); Cary Carson to Jim Easton (chairman, ad hoc Historic Area Planning Group), "Williamsburg Needs a Restricted-Access Precinct in the Historic Area," confidential memorandum, November 16, 2004 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); Rex Ellis to ad hoc Historic Area Planning Group, "Historic Area Immersion," confidential memorandum, December 17, 2004 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); James Horn (chairman) for the Education for Citizenship Steering Committee, "Education for Citizenship. From Subjects to Citizens: Our Struggle To Be Both Free and Equal," draft report, April 29, 2005 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); Colin G. Campbell, transcribed remarks to a community leaders' breakfast, May 10, 2005 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); Colin G. Campbell, "From Subjects to Citizens: The American Experience," lecture to the Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, New York, July 10, 2006 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.); Cary Carson to Robin Reed and Bill Weldon, "Revolutionary City = Baghdad Outside the Green Zone," memorandum, November 15, 2005 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.).

34. Edward Rothstein, "An Upgrade For Ye Olde History Park," *New York Times*, April 6, 2007; Margot Créveaux-Gevertz, "Revolutionary City Comes to Colonial Williamsburg," *History News* 61, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 7–12.

superpower; Day Two hammers participants, role playing as “Citizens at War,” with a long string of reverses, shortages, treasons, threatened slave uprisings, and other dire setbacks until quite unexpectedly victory is achieved at Yorktown. More than thirty professional actors portray the lives of a few history-book celebrities and many more of those ordinary townspeople whom visitors say they want to meet and whose pain they say they are eager to feel. Each day’s events are presented in a series of seven episodes staged at various locations up and down the street. Visitors move from one scene to another.

“Revolutionary City” tells a great story. More to the point of my remarks here, the presentation strikes a perfect pitch with visitors’ preferred learning style. It takes them back in time, and it gives them a historical identity and something to do with it.

Plus one more thing, the real dealmaker for today’s modern learner. *It makes them feel important.* It tells a story big enough to convince them that their participation in the narrative has involved them in something important in American history. Listen to a survey respondent answering the question, “What did you like most about the Revolutionary City experience?” “It made me feel as though I were there,” this person said. “It made me feel as though these circumstances were really happening to me and that my life would be impacted by these happenings. *It felt important, very important.*”³⁵

If I tried, I could not script a more apposite lead-in to the problem that has drawn me forward, carrot-like, since I began. What *is* different about the way we moderns have learned to learn over the past forty or fifty years? What new learning habits must museum educators understand and build into Plan B if R.I.P. isn’t to be our epitaph too?

People who know about these things argue that television not only revolutionized communications, politics, entertainment, and the family dinner table; it also catapulted every couch potato into the epicenter of world events. For the first time in human history news coverage was instantaneous, prodigious, and above all visual. The miracle of television in the 1950s started our profound transformation from vicarious learners, many times removed from events, into virtual eyewitnesses who now arrive at crime scenes, battlefields, and crash sites sometimes ahead of the ambulances. In addition, television pioneered the conjuring act that put us, the viewers, at the center of unfolding historical events. “You Are There” was the title of young Walter Cronkite’s wildly popular TV show where journalists reported history-in-the-making events as if they were the evening news. The more we watched television, the easier it became to see the outside world from our new vantage point at the center of everything. “A sort of God’s-eye view,” anthropologist Thomas de Zengotita calls it.³⁶ We soon learned that virtual reality was actually better than

35. Southeastern Institute of Research report to Colonial Williamsburg, March 2007.

36. Thomas de Zengotita, “Attack of the Superheroes. Why Washington, Einstein, and Madonna can’t compete with you,” *Harper’s Magazine* 309, no. 1855 (December 2004): 35–42. See also Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You*

really being there. Television coverage not only gave everybody a front row seat, multiple cameras provided views from every angle. Close-ups, crosscuts, slow motion, and instant replay gave every viewer a player's view of the action—over and over again.

This new worldview, by placing each one of us at the center of whatever we ourselves chose to watch, eventually changed the way we gathered and processed information. Listen to Zengotita again: Little by little the real and the represented fused in our minds. It produced “a culture of performance” to which we were irresistibly drawn because the new media flattered us by inviting us backstage and even onto the stage. The alchemy that melds reality and the representation of reality gradually seeped into our psyches. It set us up to expect and eventually demand that our teachers make *us* equal partners in our own education.

Camcorders and video cell phones have accelerated what television started. Educators everywhere are challenged to repackage their instruction as a form of performance art in which the instructees can participate using these new personal technologies. Hand-held “clickers,” for instance, have invaded college and university classrooms. Students use a device similar to a remote control to answer lecturers' questions instantly and electronically. Significantly it was a TV analogy that came to mind when one college freshman was recently asked about clickers in the lecture hall. He said, “I feel like I'm in ‘ask the audience’ [mode] on [the show] ‘Who Wants To Be a Millionaire’.”³⁷

Or take religious instruction. Churches of all denominations are ramping up their technology to fill the pews and make worship services user-friendly. Worshippers in a church in Storrs, Connecticut, send instantaneous text messages to the pastor who then improves them into the sermon. We do this, he explains, “to help people engage in the conversation live during the service.”³⁸

Even television, where it all started, has succumbed to demands for more intimate interaction with its viewers. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News have begun airing footage shot by so-called citizen journalists using cell phone cameras. “It really empowers us, and empowers them as well,” says one industry spokesman. “We have two-way conversations, so it's not just about us showing the news, but the community being able to share the news with us.” Furthermore, it is cheap. Small armies of tech-savvy volunteers provide their services free of charge. I will come back to that point in my conclusion.³⁹

Live In It (New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

37. Valerie Strauss, “Breathing Life Into the Lecture Hall,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2007.

38. Virgil Dickson and Catherine Rampell, “High-Tech Churches Stir Fears of Lost Reverence,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2007.

39. Howard Kurtz, “Got a Camera? You, Too, Can Be A Network Reporter,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2007; Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People* (Sebastopol, Calif: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2004).

Classrooms, churches, newsrooms, sports arenas. Museums cannot be far behind. But how can we connect with this tech-drenched public and not sell our souls in the process? At Colonial Williamsburg we began talking about that dilemma several years before we launched “Revolutionary City.” It was often a piecemeal conversation, the subject usually coming up in connection with something else. But once in a while the directors and vice presidents addressed the problem head-on. Take, for instance, a memorandum that circulated to senior staff members at a management retreat in 2004. Entitled “Future Williamsburg,” it was deliberately written to challenge conventional wisdom and stretch people’s imaginations.⁴⁰ (Full disclosure: I feel free to quote from this confidential memo here because I am the author, because I have already received my honorable discharge from the Foundation, and, most of all, because what sounded so far-fetched only four years ago seems a lot tamer today.) I present the document here as an early draft of Plan B. Keep in mind that this proposition was originally and is still an exercise in pure sky-larking. Pesky feasibility studies can come later. Our first goal is simply to escape the gravitational pull of traditional thinking and soar to new heights guided only by what we have observed about modern learning styles. After all, the future has to be imaginable before we can get around later to judge whether it might also be workable. The 2004 memo began, as I have here, by looking back to the future.

No one can say for sure, but I for one would not be surprised if twenty years from now our successors look back at the turn of the twenty-first century and see that historic sites and museum villages were following the same path that professional sports went down starting in the 1950s. Once upon a time, baseball, football, and basketball fans could experience sports events only by buying a ticket and spending a whole afternoon at the ballpark or arena. Then came television and a mass exodus from stadiums and field houses. But soon televised sporting events created a national audience of stay-at-home spectators that was vastly larger—eventually larger by tens of millions—than the fans who used to fill the stands on game day. By the early ’70s the sports industry had tapped into TV’s huge advertising revenues to make ballplayers millionaires and to build glamorous new stadiums for those media-created celebrities to perform in. Soon the fans—by now a multitude—began streaming back to the glitzy new ballparks to grab some of the excitement they sensed from the broadcasts and to see up close players whom TV had turned into stars. Today most fans don’t attend every game, but they come with their buddies and bring their kids often enough to make club owners very rich men and women indeed.

Probably no other pastime will rival the success of professional sports any-

40. Cary Carson to Colin Campbell and Administrative Officers, “Future Williamsburg,” confidential memorandum, August 25, 2004 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archive, Williamsburg, Va.).

time soon. But there are runner-ups. Circuses, for instance, were once the only place where ordinary folks could satisfy their curiosity to see exotic animals. They too dwindled to nothing in competition with a never-ending parade of wild animal shows on TV from the 1950s to today. Again though, television quickly built a large new audience of knowledgeable enthusiasts whose interest and sophistication have created a renaissance in the zoo world.

Might museums not be following in the footsteps of these and other once popular pastimes that technology has transformed into virtual experiences? Isn't it possible that what we're witnessing is not a falling off of interest in American history, but a growing preference to engage it initially in off-site media? Conceivably the "Bowling Alone" generation finds virtual visits more convenient, fun, interactive, stimulating, and hassle-free than their parents' practice of loading the kids into the family station wagon, checking into motels, waiting in line, and finally dogging a tour guide through a house museum.

If my guess turns out to be even half right, maybe we have entered the first stages of a transformation that, when complete, will bring the Colonial Williamsburg experience to millions of history learners first and foremost on-line. In that scenario, real-time visits to the restored town will become optional, but much-anticipated special events for people who catch the history bug first from watching us online, on video, or on TV.

But hold on here! What would "watching us online" actually look like? How could "virtual Williamsburg" change places with "reality Williamsburg" and still live up to the Foundation's obligation to be a responsible museum educator?

Here I invited my fellow vice presidents to consider a string of what-ifs. The suppositions went like this:

- *Imagine a future time when Colonial Williamsburg mounts online every day a 30-minute episode in a continuing, year-after-year historical soap opera that is seen daily by hundreds of thousands of devoted fans across the country.*
- *Imagine that Colonial Williamsburg anchors this show on the streets and greens and in the homes, shops, and public buildings of Williamsburg in the years leading up to the War for Independence. The main storyline—the drift into rebellion and the shock of revolution—and the unforgettable principal characters—the Founders—are drawn straight from the history books. The supporting cast and the subplots—the intrigues, scandals, betrayals, love triangles, and consumptive illnesses—all those are constructed with the same careful, purposeful, educated guesswork that our research historians and program planners employ today. The show becomes the principal vehicle for spreading our "Becoming Americans" message to millions of viewers.*

My flight of fancy continued . . .

- *Imagine that the Foundation re-allocates its multi-million dollar advertising budget to hire first-class writers, producers, and a core cast of eight or ten professional actors who populate the drama with personalities that viewers love or hate, but can't turn off.*

- *Imagine that the drama is available only in streaming video: it can be watched online, but not downloaded. Maybe each daily episode comes for free—a loss leader. But subscribers get access to a full archive of previous episodes, interviews with their favorite characters, and background material on the times and events portrayed. There are hot links to our Web site for fans who just can't wait a minute longer to plan a visit to real Williamsburg. Teachers and students have access to documents, lesson plans, and our digital library. Best of all, being an Internet production, there are peripherals, spin-offs, and advertising revenue to collect.*

- *Back home in Williamsburg, imagine that the Historic Area offers walk-in visitors a limited “sampler” of interpreted exhibition buildings and trade shops on a one-day ticket. All other sites are open only to visitors who book ahead. These are the fans who come to see the soap opera in production. They're the groupies who clamor to meet and chat with the TV celebrity actor-interpreters. These small group tours could be customized, packaged, and priced to become the standard on-site experience for guests who make Future Williamsburg their primary destination.*

My memorandum did not end there, but that much was enough pie-in-the-sky for my colleagues. Their skepticism was well deserved, although it must be said that some features of my fantasy later popped up in our design for the “Revolutionary City” program.

Flawed though it was, this early version of Plan B got one thing right. It made the essential connection between a media-driven superstory—an online or television experience shared by millions—and a coordinated menu of spun-off, on-site, museum visits offered to students, families, groups, and individuals as museum programs always have been. I foresee that the first important step into the next brave new world for history museums will only come when institutions in a particular region of the country band together and pool the stories they now tell separately. Regions might be as circumscribed as, say, “greater Boston,” or as spread out as “the plains states.” The consortiums I have in mind would support the creation of a sprawling, long-running, historical television or Internet drama. In its overarching narrative, every house museum and historic site in the region would find contexts and connections from which to create programs and activities that visitors could enjoy only by visiting the real place.

Call this Plan B, Part I—the superstory element. Achieving it will require an ambitious collaboration, not just museums and historic sites with one another, but with independent filmmakers, software engineers, regional theater groups, and public television. A televised or online superstory cannot be a miniseries. It cannot be *John Adams* in seven episodes or Ken Burns in thirteen. It needs to be an on-going soap opera. It needs to win a following of dedicated viewers who tune in week after week after week. Think “The Sopranos”—dense, noisy, collage-like, unfinished—but “The Sopranos” as serialized *historical* fiction. Think Latin American *telenovelas* and their world-

wide “Ugly Betty” knock-offs. Think the old “Forsythe Saga,” spanning many generations. For that matter, think baseball season—every game a new episode, every week new winners and losers, every season dizzying triumphs and heartbreaking disappointments, and every few years a doping scandal or a game-fixing scam. They all have one thing in common: they are deliciously, irresistibly habit-forming. No one accuses history museums of that!

Now for Plan B, Part II—the real-time, live museum component. This was not something I anticipated in my “Future Williamsburg” proposal. Even four short years ago I did not understand how visitors could be more than spectators. But they can be, and they want to be. Part II involves another partnership, this one between individual museums and a rising generation of plugged-in history learners. I don’t mean visitors who know how to use headsets, Acoustiguides, and touch-screen computers. Those just give spectators buttons to push. They don’t change the relationship between the teacher-museum and the learner-visitor. Instead I am talking about the newest hand-held technologies that put people “into the game,” as they say—kids armed with cell phone cameras and young adults with Blackberries and camcorders. Let’s junk the standard house museum tour. “Boring!”—remember? Let’s replace it with programs that museums deliberately design for technology-competent visitors who come already steeped in the regional superstory. They can use their personal, hand-held equipment to record visual information from curators, actors, guides, interpreters, and ultimately from themselves, their own reactions to what they are seeing and learning. Later they can download supplementary background material from the museum’s own Web site as well as Web sites associated with the serialized superstory, the hook that turned them into museum-goers in the first place.

There’s more. Collecting images and information is only half the fun. Re-assembling it and sharing it on do-it-yourself Web sites is the real sport for cyber jockeys. YouTube and Facebook are probably too focused on the personal, but sites like Second Life employ Web 2.0 technologies to send self-selected, “infinitely customizable,” whoever-you-want-to-be, virtual travelers on journeys to self-selected, wherever-you-want-to-go, virtual, travel destinations. These sites already include some very real historical places. Elsewhere on the Web, Eyespot supplies all the computer tools needed to upload and remix sound, music, and video “content.” The results are interactive narratives that give a thoroughly modern twist to Carl Becker’s famous phrase, “Everyman His Own Historian.”

Whoa! Time out, I hear you cry. Where is all this going? To tell the honest truth, I don’t know either. To me too it is still far from clear how public history uploaded and downloaded using these new social networking technologies can be made to work for museum historians. Like the record industry, like politicians learning to campaign on the Internet, we will just have to feel our way one click at a time.

But like it or not, something big is barreling down the information highway. How do I know? Just last fall the National Museum of African American

History and Culture in Washington launched an interactive Web site six years before this newest Smithsonian museum expects to break ground for the building itself. The Web site uses social-networking software that enables online visitors to contribute their own stories and thus “be part of the curatorial process,” says Lonnie Bunch, the founding director.⁴¹ That is the data gathering part. He also promises to provide “content and connections” that visitors can use to build their own community. He does not explain what that means, and for now maybe it’s just a bunch of Bunch. But what is important is that he’s talking the talk, and that’s the way we always feel our way beyond the familiar into the next *terra incognita*.

Whether you think Plan B sounds exciting or scary, almost certainly it sounds expensive. Can a small house museum afford it? No, not Part I. Not even Williamsburg’s pockets are deep enough to produce the kind of soap opera for national television that I described in my fanciful memorandum. But actually that is good news. The unaffordability of Plan B, Part I—the production of regional superstories—guarantees the collaboration that will be essential to its success. The cost of creating first-rate, attention-getting, television or online docudramas can only be borne by the same public, private, and commercial partners that fund them now. They include public television, private foundations, perhaps professional organizations like the American Association for State and Local History, and, most certainly, the National Endowment for the Humanities. I believe the time has come for the Endowment to create a special category of generous grants to fund the creation of regional superstories across the country. Nothing would do so much to help so many small museums in one fell swoop.

There is good news about financing Plan B, Part II as well. It is abbreviated B.Y.O.T.—Bring Your Own Technology. Forget the troublesome Acoustiguides and the unreliable Kodak carousels. Today’s learners pack their own technology. Why do you think television news is so smitten with all those “citizen journalists” with their digital cameras and video cell phones? Small museums may have to foot the bill for a Web site, but the essential interactive part of Plan B, Part II walks in the front door with the visitors.

I will close with a final crystal ball prediction. I believe the greatest challenge our institutions face in the future will not be dollars. Big solutions to big problems have a way of finding the funding they need. The real test will be museums’ willingness to collaborate in far more ambitious projects than they have ever joined together to accomplish before. That plus the oldest and greatest challenge of all—summoning the creativity to invent entirely new twenty-first-century ways to make history come alive, this time for Generations X, Y, Z, and beyond.

I began this talk with the words Rest In Peace. Nobody is ready for that, I hope. But time is ripe for history museums to rally around a Plan B of some-

41. Jacqueline Trescott, “Black History Museum Debuts Online,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2007.

body's making. Otherwise, we are at grave risk of earning another tombstone epitaph—my favorite, from a burying ground in New England—“Rest In Pieces.”

CARY CARSON has recently retired from his position as vice president of the Research Division, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

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