Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public

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How does the public understand and use the past? What role should historians and historical scholarship play in the public’s understanding of the past? How do we as historians address our responsibilities to the public and still remain advocates for history and scholarly integrity? How do we make the difficult choices that are our responsibility to make? This essay argues that historians working in museums must be advocates for both history and our visitors, negotiating the gap between our understanding of the past as historians and the public’s.

One of my responsibilities at the National Museum of American History is the Star-Spangled Banner, the actual flag that inspired Francis Scott Key in 1814 to write what became our national anthem. As project director for the flag, I deal with its meaning and significance daily, grappling with the...
role of this flag and of the American flag more broadly in American life, in defining what it has meant to be an American. While some people believe the story of the flag should be a simple one, an easy story of patriotism and national identity, it isn’t—it’s a contested story about what makes us a nation, what it means to be a citizen, the tensions between individual rights and the need for community and a civil society. Our goal with the flag and indeed throughout the Museum of American History is to challenge our visitors’ long-held understanding of American history, to challenge stereotypes and assumptions. We want to engage the public in the complexity of the American experience and to help them understand our contested past.

But that’s often a tough sell. Even before September 11, critics questioned why NMAH as the nation’s history museum did not do more positive, more celebratory exhibits. Now, with troops in Iraq and continuing fears of terrorism, we’re even more vulnerable: we risk being deemed unpatriotic, failing to foster the unity essential to the nation in a time of crisis.

How do we deal with those who want to celebrate the past, emphasizing national unity and playing down our differences? Can our goal remain to mirror a diverse and often contested past? How do we convey that being patriotic does not mean “love it or leave it,” that commitment to our nation and its ideals includes recognizing that we have not always lived up to those ideals, that we’ve fallen short. How do we tell history as it really was rather than as we wish it had been? How do we as public historians avoid yielding to our own insecurities and keep focused on interpreting history? How do we do good history instead of spending all our time worrying about whom we might offend? It’s tough. Even the Smithsonian joined the post-September 11 patriotic bandwagon, trying to attract visitors to Washington with ads that encouraged them to renew acquaintance with their “inner patriots.”1 Contested history is not an easy sell in normal times; it’s even more problematic in times like today of fear and uncertainty, in a highly politicized climate.

At the heart of this issue is whose vision of America should be interpreted. What role should historians and historical scholarship play in the public’s understanding of the past? This is a very real problem that we in the history community face, for, like it or not, the popular perception of history is at odds with where we are today as a profession. I find a troubling dichotomy regarding history:


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I want to thank especially my colleagues at NMAH—much of what I’m going to talk about grows out of collegial discussions and debates we have had over the past five years. While I don’t always agree with what others say, I do learn from and value the exchange.

The public’s view of history versus the historian’s or the curator’s

A fixed story versus an ambiguous, messy, provisional past

Answers versus questions

Knowable, objective truth versus contingency, meaning, interpretation, critical analysis

A linear/Whiggish view of the past that celebrates achievement versus a history that is more complex, seeing both negative and positive, progress and failure

In *The Presence of the Past*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen look at the gap between professional history and the public’s understanding and uses of the past. I’m troubled by their dismissal of historical scholarship as fragmented, specialized, and boring. Although that certainly applies to some work, it’s a gross over-generalization, ignoring the important ways that historians (like my colleagues at NMAH) add meaning and understanding to the past. But I’m even more troubled by their positive assessment of public historymaking—it is hardly encouraging for us as public historians. The past that Rosenzweig and Thelen find the public engaged in is fundamentally different from the history to which we are so committed. According to them, the public’s understanding and use of the past are intimate and personal, limited largely to the familial and experiential, more about commemoration, nostalgia, and life-coping skills than meaning or complexity. That’s a fundamentally different sense of the past than what we as public historians are committed to exploring and sharing, and it challenges the viability of our work.

More specifically, I don’t take comfort in their finding that the public trusts museums “as much as they did their grandmothers.” That trust is apparently based on a perception that museums stand for authenticity and accuracy in a way that professors, teachers, and books do not. At first glance that may seem flattering, but Rosenzweig and Thelen explain that the public feel they can go to museums and interpret artifacts as they want, unmediated, without concern that ideas are being interposed between them and the objects. And that means the public really don’t get what museums do, that we too have perspectives, make choices, present arguments, just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession. The difference is that the objects we exhibit and the institutional contexts in which we work confer authority and validity on our work, an authority and validity that I’m uncomfortable claiming. I would prefer that visitors to the National Museum of American History value what they find

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3. Ibid., 3, 12, 22, 70. Rosenzweig acknowledges this as a problem in “Everyone a Historian,” his portion of “Afterthoughts,” 186–88.
5. Ibid., 32, 105–8, 195.
there not because it’s in the Smithsonian and must be the real thing but because we’ve truly engaged them in good history.

Put simply, I take little comfort in the presence of the past that Rosenzweig and Thelen find. What we have, to be blunt, is a great yawning gap between our understanding of the past as historians and the public’s. A gap that can’t be addressed simply by adapting professional practice to popular uses, as Rosenzweig and Thelen propose.6 It’s more fundamental than that. It challenges the viability of the practice of public history.

Who’s responsible for this? To a greater extent than we would like to admit, we as historians are the problem. And I don’t mean “radical revisionist historians” who’ve hijacked the profession, but all of us, revisionists and conservatives, academic and public. Most historians assume the validity of what Jack Tchen has called “trickle-down, all-authoritative academic history.”7 Outside public history classes and programs, the training of historians remains very traditional, focusing on developing individual, autonomous scholars and involving little or no engagement with the public and no understanding of it. Our sense of what constitutes history and the sources for it has changed significantly over the past several decades with new perspectives, new theoretical paradigms, new interdisciplinary approaches to our work, and the like. That has re-invigorated our work and can be an important basis for re-engaging the public, but it has for the most part happened within a traditional scholarly culture. Even when we’re exploring “the people’s history,” we remain largely isolated, self-referential, writing for and talking to one another. Our training as historians has not prepared us to address the tensions between our understanding of the past and the public’s, between scholarly integrity and our responsibilities to the public. We’re trained to be the authorities.

But when history is interpreted to the public, in museums and historical organizations, that tension has to be addressed—history has to be negotiated. While not abandoning our integrity as historians, we have to recognize that we also have institutional responsibilities (tied to our missions and the public trust) and that the public feel they, not historians, own the past. Historians—particularly those in the academy but also others—too often do not see issues of ownership. We are eager to take more populist, from-the-ground-up perspectives and mine new sources, but are not really willing to share authority, to truly share voice with the subjects of our work. There are wonderful examples of history museums sharing authority, but they remain more the exception than the rule. Most history curators still see themselves as the authorities, just as our colleagues in the academy do. We still, for the most part, think of the public essentially as the audience, the recipients, and that’s very telling.

These tensions between our understanding of the past as historians and the public’s, between scholarly integrity and our responsibilities to the pub-

6. Ibid., 178–84.
lic, are particularly problematic for NMAH. As the nation's history museum, the stakes are high. What we present is seen as an official statement, a national validation, and is always under scrutiny. But similar expectations and tension play out at every institution.

But there's another side to the problem. If historians and curators often don't fully understand the public, it's also true that the public does not really understand the roles either of museums or of history and historians. Rosenzweig and Thelen argue that the public trusts museums largely because of the authenticity of the things we collect and exhibit. That would be fine if that were all that we are about, but we do so much more. Too often, however, we keep it hidden. We need to share the curatorial process and help visitors understand what museums and curators do. We need to help them understand that scholarship, interpretation, and controversy are central to what we do. In an article in Museum News several years ago, Lonnie Bunch argued that the public needs to understand “what museums do, how we arrive at the decisions we make, and how cultural institutions . . . are different from the cultural institutions of the 1940s.” The public needs to understand the political and social contexts in which museums were founded and operate and that we are not, even when we claim to be, objective historical authorities. The public needs to understand how museums have shifted from preoccupation with the authenticity of artifacts to issues of significance and meaning; that the selection of artifacts for exhibition is itself a subjective act, a way of shaping perspective, establishing point of view; and that artifacts never simply stand as objective evidence.

Similarly, the public does not understand the larger context of our work—what historians do and what history is and is not. At the Enola Gay hearings in 1995, a Senator asked “. . . is it really the role to interpret history, rather than just simply to put forward historical facts based on the validity of the fact and the historical value? . . . I was a history major. In the days when I studied the text . . . [it] was essentially a recitation of fact, leaving the reader to draw their [sic] own analysis. . . . I wonder about the wisdom of presenting any interpretation.” That was not some right-wing ideologue—that was Diane Feinstein, Democratic Senator from California and a graduate of Stanford. If she doesn’t get it, what are the odds our visitors do?

We as historians are responsible for this. We want to share the end product but not the process. It’s understandable that the public questions what we do—we’ve not done a very good job of teaching what history is and is not. As Alan Brinkley has put it, we teach comfortable myths in our schools and then expect visitors to understand when we turn around and challenge them.

8. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past, 12.
This all came to a head in the “history wars.” For those of you too young to remember, the debates over National History Standards and the interpretation of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum were part of a larger debate over history that encompassted the infamous *West As America* exhibit, the Columbus quincentennial, and other hot-button issues a decade ago. But if you think it’s past history, buried back in the 1990s, note that the interpretation of the *Enola Gay* once again became an issue of contention for NASM in the fall of 2003. A dispute over the label that accompanies the exhibition of the *Enola Gay* at NASM’s new Dulles facility threatened to dredge up all the old issues and concerns.12

How do we address this gap? How do we make the difficult choices that are our responsibility to make? How can we be both advocates for history and advocates for the public, our visitors?

*Advocates for History*

As advocates for history, we have a number of obligations. These may seem obvious to many of you, but I’ve seen too much evidence to the contrary.

- First of all, we must figure out how to share what we as historians and curators do—not just the end product. If we want the public to understand that history is more than some fixed story, that it is a way of knowing and making meaning, we must be more open about what we do, about how we make choices and why. We need to pose more questions, not just provide answers. This is a real challenge. When I first came to NMAH, we were hoping to produce an exhibition called *American Legacies*. The purpose of this was to help visitors understand what the museum has collected and why and how we learn from objects. We wanted to engage them in the context of the museum as a prelude to their encountering our interpretation of the past. Mainly for financial reasons, it never happened (although it yielded a terrific book), but that’s the sort of thing we need to be doing.13

- Second, I would argue that history cannot simply be about “things” or “events” or “ideas”—it must be about people. To engage our visitors, we must present the past on a human, even intimate scale. The history we present should not be about only famous individuals or anonymous aggregates, but one that demonstrates human agency, that is about real people, ordinary and extraordinary, dealing with real life and making choices. We need to populate the past. Rosenzweig and Thelen argue persuasively that the public en-


gages in a past that is personal and firsthand. National events and public moments take on meaning when connected to individual lives and personal moments. This is something that we’re really focusing on at NMAH. In November 2003, we opened a new exhibition called America on the Move, which is a major reinterpretation of our transportation collections, shifting from showing examples of technology to focusing on real stories about real people. Visitors encounter not anonymous Okies but James and Flossie Haggard and their family making their way along Route 66 to California; they encounter a real school bus driver, Russell Bishop, who drove a school bus in rural Martinsburg, Indiana in the late 1930s; and there’s the Cate family, who vacationed at the Decatur Motor Camp in York Beach, Maine; and other real people with real stories.

• Third, the history we interpret must be broad enough to encompass the diverse experiences of the American people and the multiple political and ideological perspectives of our visitors. I would argue that rather than try to concoct a simple story of shared experiences, we should share many stories, from multiple points of view, exploring the complexity and richness of the American past. We should see difference and contest as a strength, not something to be plastered over with an idealized story of shared values and goals. Different voices give us a fuller picture of American history, each story telling us something about all the others. We have a responsibility to help our visitors understand that our history is diverse—we have an obligation to interpret history, not present the past as we wish it had been.

But what is the right mix of exhibits to explore the diversity of the American experience? The political reality is that every group wants visibility and wants and deserves an exhibit. But even as big a museum as NMAH has limited space and can’t accommodate every group. How do we set priorities? And in any case, do we really want to deal with difference by setting apart, segregating those who are different? At NMAH, our priority is integrating diverse experiences throughout the museum. But is that really the right way to go? Does that strategy mean losing the depth that exhibits like Field to Factory and A More Perfect Union provide? How do we balance the broader story of diversity with the need to explore in depth the distinctive histories of individual groups? Can we provide breadth and depth both? How do we avoid dividing the museum up by racial or ethnic group and yet not end up with only tokenism? And how do you explore difference in a broader sense—not just race and ethnicity but age, abilities (and disabilities), class, gender, language, nativity, religion, sexuality? And can we ever move on from concerns with difference and diversity—with “other”—to simply explore American history in all its richness and complexity?

All this becomes significantly more challenging for NMAH with the development of more specialized museums—not just the National Museum.

of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture but also the proposed women’s history and Latino museums. How do we fit in? How do we avoid ending up the national museum of white men who travel in the land and on the water? This is a very real challenge, but one we have to face.

• Fourth, the history we interpret must be challenging. We cannot simply present a self-affirming, validating past, regardless of how politically popular that might be. Our goal must be history that, as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs put it in Telling the Truth about History, may be painful but can also be liberating. This isn’t about being partisan or presenting a political point of view but about challenging visitors to think, to engage in the past in all its messiness. Historian Ed Linenthal has cautioned against assuming that what the public needs is a simple story. He insists that complex stories can and must be told, that we must resist “the insidious and dangerous attempts to sanitize or romanticize history” that make places of memory become places of forgetting. In other words, we cannot abandon our responsibilities as historians and curators.

In rethinking the history of transportation for our new exhibit America on the Move, NMAH has shifted its focus from the technology of transportation to the social and historical context to help visitors understand how the choices we have made have shaped us as a people. One of the most compelling moments in the exhibit centers on the 1401 locomotive, which has been sitting at the east end of the museum since it opened in 1964 as an example of railroad technology. It is still sitting there but now in context: pulled up at the train station in Salisbury, North Carolina in the 1920s. Sitting in the station is Charlotte Hawkins Brown, an African American educator who rode the train out of Salisbury, fighting the practice of Jim Crow. No longer is the 1401 just a piece of technology. It is now a piece of American history, telling a story that not everyone wants to face but that is essential to understanding who we are as a people. This is a story that is essential to our understanding, as our marketing slogan says, “how we got here.”

• Fifth, history must work on different levels. It must be accessible and yet complex, encouraging diverse perspectives and interpretations. That’s a tall order. We all know the challenges of trying to capture history’s complexity in a label or historical setting or even an entire exhibit. But it is important that visitors appreciate and engage in that complexity and recognize the complicated forces that have shaped and continue to shape us as a people. We have to figure out how to do that better.

Advocates for Visitors

But developing exhibits isn’t just about history, about content. We have to be advocates for both history and visitors. How do we better engage our visitors? Note that I’m saying “visitors,” not “audiences”—the latter strikes me as assuming passivity, receptivity, and we need to move beyond that.

All of us want our visitors to feel a part of our museums. In a document my colleagues and I developed at NMAH a couple of years ago, we called for visitors “to be engaged and challenged”; to be inspired to learn more about the past; “to connect with the past and find places for their own experiences and memories . . . to see themselves as connected to history and makers of history. . . . We hope that what they learn from us will make them better historians of their own lives, families, communities, and nations.”19 And quite simply, we want them to enjoy their museum experience.

But most of us weren’t trained for that. We were trained as historians, and becoming visitor advocates requires some retooling. We have to recognize that ours—the curators’ and the historians’—are not the only voices, that we are not the only sources of authority. Rather than speaking from on high (like the Wizard of Oz) as the authoritative voice of history, we need to “share the process of history—how we use evidence, what we don’t know, how we form historical conclusions, and how our understanding of the past changes.”20 That means acknowledging that exhibits are developed and shaped by individual perspectives, and are not the product of some objective institutional authority. We need to help our visitors become engaged in history not as a set of facts but as a way of understanding and making meaning.

And we must also make space in our museums and exhibits for our visitors to share their experiences and memories. This isn’t about abdicating our role, privileging the public voice, and simply doing what the public votes for. I’m not arguing for Carl Becker’s “everyman his own historian.”21 In an article in The Public Historian some years ago, NMAH curator Steve Lubar warned: “Sharing too little authority means that the audience will lose interest in or be unable to follow the narrative; it over privileges the curator’s point of view. Sharing too much authority, on the other hand, means simply telling the audience what they already know, or what they want to know, reinforcing memory, not adding new dimensions of knowledge, new ways of approaching problems, new understanding.”22 As Ed Linenthal and others have argued, we need to engage visitors in this tension between history and memory, provide space

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20. Ibid., p. 6.
for both the voice of history and the voice of memory or the commemorative voice. At NMAH we are trying to negotiate this, trying ways to share authority. Our September 11 exhibit, for example, had a section called simply “Tell Us Your Stories” that was essential to the exhibit’s successful navigation of a sensitive subject.

Being advocates for visitors also means more conscious attention to visitors, learning styles, and other matters. At NMAH we recognize that our work involves more than historical research and conceptualization and that we must integrate audience needs and interests into the planning process, develop plans to engage diverse audiences, and create diverse experiential offerings. We are applying what we know from visitor research, behavior, and demographics and building time into project schedules for front-end evaluation, experimentation, and formative evaluation to expand our knowledge about visitors. This is not about polling visitors to find out what the topic of the next exhibit should be but about getting a better sense of where visitors are in terms of their understanding of the past, a better sense of what we need to do to move them from where they are to where we want them to be, to address the gap between the public's understanding of the past and ours as historians. We cannot take it for granted that they will respond to and understand what we are trying to do.

Put simply, in addressing our responsibilities as history museums, we face a complex mix of issues and obligations. Interpreting the past to the public is not an easy job, but it’s an important one—and one that we all embrace even when it’s tough going. Although I think we at NMAH have a decent grasp of the questions, we’re not sure what all the answers are. Interpreting history is a work in progress but knowing the questions, knowing what we don’t know is the most critical step.

I want to conclude with a story recounted a few years ago in the New York Times:

In a tense political climate, with budgets being cut sharply and Congress watching every other government program like a hawk, the secretary of the Smithsonian felt he had no choice but to insist that the head of one of the institution’s divisions keep the controversial views of a prominent researcher on his staff quiet.


After all, he realized, the researcher’s work could be perfect fodder for “ill-wishers” who would seize upon it as proof that the Smithsonian was cut off from the mainstream of American thinking, and a skeptical and peevish Congress would have an open invitation to squeeze the institution’s budget yet again. Far better not to publish this work, the secretary urged in a letter, lest it be read in Congress “by any representative of the numberless constituents, whose dearest religious beliefs are so wounded in a government publication.”

This was not a recent controversy—this happened over 100 years ago, in 1897. As historians, we can take heart that we’ve survived the politics of our work before and will surely again.