

Presenting Backcountry History to the Public

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Introduction

How many Americans dreaded studying the American Revolution from a textbook but, years later, found themselves at Colonial Williamsburg on a family vacation? What makes a museum attract a crowd? Can public history be an effective way for backcountry scholars to reach broader audiences? This new section of the *Journal of Backcountry Studies* will explore new ways of presenting historic scholarship on backcountry history through public history. Each issue will highlight a different museum, historic site, or other public history work that presents backcountry history to audiences not often reached by academic scholars.

Defining Public History

People have misconceived notions as to what public history is and its purpose. Many feel that it is simplified history, dumbed down for the general public, or is Disneyfied, with the sole purpose of entertaining instead of conveying the truth. However, public history plays a valuable role in bridging the gap between academic historians and the general public.

As a field, public history remains an enigma. Most individuals, when asked to define "public history," would be at a loss. As an umbrella term, it serves to define a large span of history-related professions found outside academic circles. These professions range from museum curator or archeologist to historical consultant, with individuals employed by the government, private corporations, or Hollywood. These individuals work to articulate historical scholarship, allowing it to become more accessible and tangible to the general public. They "attempt to make history useful"¹ by helping people make connections between themselves and the past in order for them to understand where they come from and why things are the way they are today.

The goals of public historians are not only to make history accessible, but to make history relevant to the public. They teach children and adults how to find meaning in objects that they normally would not see relevance in. For example, some might see a historic house in a downtown as an old building standing in the way of progress, but through the effort of preservationists working with the public, people can understand the historical significance of the house and what valuable history it can teach. Public historians work to engage people in history through interpretation of objects, structures, and landscapes. Bringing history to life in a tangible way can make history less intimidating and more personal to people.

¹ Ian Tyrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 157

History of Public History

Historians' involvement with the public over the years has depended greatly on the public's interest in history. The late nineteenth century was a time of nationalism in America and the number of patriotic groups and historical societies increased across the country. They often called on historians to lead their organizations, thereby initiating contact between the academics and the local communities. As some historians increasingly worked with state and local historical associations, they started separating from the academic historians working in universities. The American Historical Association (AHA) began focusing their professionalization efforts around the academy, thereby excluding the historians working with the public and making their work appear less significant. However, the call for historians to work outside universities increased with World War I and the military's desire to document its history. The military hired a number of historians to undertake this project, but this surge did not last, as federal and public interest in history did not sustain long after the war.²

The first major advancement for historians working in the public came from the New Deal policies during the Great Depression. In order to solve unemployment issues, the federal government created jobs within the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for unemployed historians. The Historic American Building Survey (HABS), created in 1933, and the Historic Sites Act (1935) employed historians to identify, survey, and document historical buildings and sites of cultural value to the United States. The National Parks Service (NPS) expanded their efforts to utilize historians in restoring landmarks, clearing battlefields, and researching and documenting history related to the parks. The National Archives (1934) also created job opportunities for unemployed historians, which later developed into the archivist profession. All of the research, documentation, and other work by historians during the New Deal not only benefited the general public but also proved useful to academic historians during their research.³

Federal jobs for historians continued to grow throughout the mid- twentieth century, creating more opportunities for them to work outside the academy. After World War II, the government hired many historians to document the war. Many federal agencies and, later, private corporations also employed historians to document and maintain records within the agency or company. Due to the growth in tourism in the 1950s, the NPS expanded their park interpretation and used historians to create visitor centers with exhibits, pamphlets, and other interpretation materials. The National Historic Preservation Act (1966) also created more career opportunities for historians to work with the public through preservation issues.⁴

Despite the government and corporations hiring a large number of historians, by the 1970s, there was still little professional training for this historians working in the public. A few universities, such as American University and the University of Delaware, worked with state and local history organizations and American Association of Museums (AAM) to create some professional standards. In the mid-1970s, a job crisis among

² Rebecca Conrad, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 148-151.

³ *Ibid.*, 151-154; Tyrell, 173-178.

⁴ Conrad, 156-161 ; Tyrell, 187.

history PhD graduates developed due to the large number of graduates competing for a few number of teaching positions across the country. This, combined with the New Left's movement to study everyone's history (not just the white elite's story), inspired Robert Kelley and G. Wesley Johnson to create the first public history program in the United States at the University of California at Santa Barbara. They created the program not only to train historians to work in the community, government, and corporations, but also to show others that public history was an important and growing field. Kelley firmly believed that, "Changing and improving the public process throughout American society, by bring the historical consciousness into a working role in the daily conduct of affairs, is a purpose honorable in character and elegant in its dimensions."⁵ Since then, a number of colleges across the country have added public history programs to their graduate, and now undergraduate, degrees, a testament to the popularity and growing influence of this new field.⁶

As the field of public history continues to expand, its professionals continually seek new subjects to study and introduce to new audiences. One such subject is the backcountry, which is growing in popularity with public and academic historians. Museums and historical houses are working to present everyday people and their lives to the public and to increase their understanding of backcountry history. On such museum is Tannenbaum Historic Park.

Tannenbaum Historic Park: Teaching Backcountry History to the Public

Tannenbaum Historic Park and Colonial Heritage Center in Greensboro, North Carolina, is a museum dedicated to teaching backcountry history to the public. The seven acre park was purchased by the city of Greensboro in 1988 and now consists of a museum (which opened in 1992), the 1813 Hoskins House, a restored 1830s barn, a replica kitchen, and a blacksmith's shop. The land purchased once belonged Joseph Hoskins and was a camp to British troops during the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Today, the mission of the museum is to teach and tell the story of the backcountry of North Carolina, specifically colonial Guilford County, before, during, and after the American Revolution. With an average of 12,000 visitors per year touring the museum, the goal of Tannenbaum is to make a connection with visitors by telling a story they can relate to, a story of the common man that will inspire visitors and allow them to make an emotional attachment to the people of the backcountry.

In order to accomplish this goal, Tannenbaum is undergoing a complete renovation of the museum's exhibit space. According to Brent Brackett, Tannenbaum's curator, the original exhibits were set to tell a textbook story of life in the backcountry in very broad and general terms.⁷ In 1999, the museum decided to take Tannenbaum in a new direction, one that is more focused on telling a very specific story about the people who lived in colonial Guilford County- who settled there, where they came from, what

⁵ Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *The Public Historian* 1 (Autumn 1978): 21.

⁶ Conard, 163-4; Kelley, 19-21; Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 12.

⁷ Brent Brackett of Tannenbaum Historic Park, interview by author, 20 April 2007, Greensboro, North Carolina.

they did when they got to the county, what their religious, ethnic, and political alliances were, and how they interacted with one another. Full-scale planning for the renovation began in 2004 as they contracted Riggs-Ward Design of Richmond, Virginia for the new exhibit design. Research also began on the military records, pension applications, land deeds, wills, and court records of the county in order to learn more stories about the individuals of the area. While the general story of the Germans, Scots-Irish, Quakers, Africans, and African-Americans may be indicative of what people in the backcountry from Virginia to present-day Alabama experienced, being able to add the personal element of individuals' lives will make the story come to life for the visitors. According to the Brackett, "The thing we are shooting for with the renovation is specificity. We really want to be able to tell specific stories of these families and to follow the course of the family over time." To do this, the new exhibits will follow three generations of families before, during, and after the American Revolution.

The planned exhibit hall, to be complete in 2011, is divided into three sections, the first being the "Before" exhibit area. Visitors will enter from the foyer into an introductory film area where they will watch a short film on what happened in the county during the European settlement. Here, they will be introduced to some of the families involved in the story. One of the main concerns with the new exhibits is creating an immersive atmosphere that will hold people's attention. In order to do this, slight structural changes will be made to allow the visitors to enter into the second exhibit hall after the film without returning to the lobby, as it is currently set up.

The second exhibit hall will tell the "During" story of what life was like in the area during the seven years of the American Revolution. While it is only one-third of the story, it is the reason why most of the visitors come to the museum; the Revolution is the heart of the story. Visitors will learn about the second generation of the families they were introduced to in the first section, about the militia life in the area, and life on the homefront during the war. "It's not just about the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, that's really important, but for the most part, it is Americans fighting Americans. That is a key component to telling the story." In order to tell the story, the exhibit space will include wall-sized murals, dioramas, and even synthetic flooring that has a realistic appearance of a roadbed complete with mud puddles.

The third exhibit hall will feature what the community was like after the American Revolution: how people settled their differences, which people had their land confiscated, and which people had to take loyalty oaths to remain in the county. It will complete the story by telling about the third generation of the families. To aid with this, the museum will display archeological items found in the area over the past twenty years that are representative of items the families would have owned during this time. The visitors, adults and children alike, will be able to relate to the families through the objects on display.

The importance of the new exhibits at Tannenbaum is to give individual voices to the people who lived in the backcountry. "It is important because it is a story that is largely untold. It is untold because the tendency when you are dealing with the unwashed masses of people living in the backcountry is to talk about them in very broad terms. We found a lot of the time is that when we look at specific examples we see individuals running against the current." These are not the elite men students study in textbooks but individuals with unique stories: Quakers who decide to fight in the war, Presbyterians

who decide to become Quakers because they are against the war, and African-Americans who purchase their freedom. Tannenbaum plans to show the public that life was not as folkloric as they are told and they will do it in such a way as to engage the visitor.

Beyond the museum exhibit space, Tannenbaum conducts living history programs among its outbuildings every Saturday. The reenactments allow visitors greater access to history and a better understanding of life in the backcountry. "We have to be visual, we have to be history that people can see and smell." They believe that by making an investment in living history, they are making an investment on the future. Not only are visitors entertained but they are educated in a way that will keep bringing them back to the park to learn more. "Our goal is to have people who come here and enjoy themselves, so that is one of the underlying things that is very important to us- laying the foundation for the next generation of people who will be doing preservation and historic research. You have to make [the story] important to them. You have to make them care about it so it has to be engaging." By making the story engaging and accessible to many audiences, Tannenbaum is spreading the scholarship of the backcountry and working to secure the subject's future as an important academic theme.

In the future, Tannenbaum plans to add more programming, such as public lectures and forums, in order to continue reach to the public and educate them on the relevancy of history in today's world. They, along with the city of Greensboro, are also in the midst of planning the David Caldwell Historic Park to continue the story of backcountry North Carolina. The historic park will feature David Caldwell, a Presbyterian minister who opened an academy for young men in 1767, and his contributions to the state. As Tannenbaum continues to expand, they strive to reach new audiences and connect more people to the history of the backcountry.

Public history plays an important role in the growth of backcountry studies. Public historians' goal of making history accessible and enjoyable, yet educational, to the public is useful in teaching academic historians' work to broader audiences. It is our hope that this new section of the *Journal of Backcountry Studies* will continue to share with its readers various public historians' work in achieving this goal.