

## “I Thought You’d Be Pretty”: Interpretation and Disruption in Historic House Museums

Costumed interpreters working as servants, trades people and the laboring classes in historic house museums create opportunities to disrupt visitor expectations derived from movies or museums that emphasize the pristine and beautiful over the messy and accurate. If interpretation’s aim is not instruction but provocation, costumed interpreters can serve as the source of both provocation and instruction.<sup>1</sup>

David Peterson complained in 1988 that “living history excels at quickly illustrating a simple topic, and not all topics are amenable to these restrictions,” and that the urgency with which interpreters and living history practitioners argue their authentic costuming missed the point: “there is much more to history than meets the eye.”<sup>2</sup> Costumed events can bring the hidden history of the work of a house into the visitor’s view, even within a traditional “historic house museum” context; indeed, costumed interpretation can be a first step toward expanded interpretation that more fully reveals the working and living history of a house, its occupants, and their community.

Visitors and docents can be taken aback by presentations of servants and labor, even in a *Downton Abbey*-saturated culture. The first time I wore historic costume in the John Brown House Museum (JBHM) where I work, one of our docents commented, “I guess ladies were more comely in Williamsburg than in New England.” A few months later, I was an interpreter at a local 1799 farm, when a visitor walked in and said, “Oh... I thought you’d be pretty, like the Jane Austen ladies on the BBC.” Even on the farm, visitors’ expectations were created less by historic sources or immediate context, and more by what they had seen before—on TV.

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman Tilden. *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Chapel Hill: 2007 p 35

<sup>2</sup> David Peterson. “There is no Living History, There are no Time Machines.” *History News* 43:5, 28-30

These reactions to presentations of the ordinary and necessary coincided with, and helped inform, the development of living history events at Federal mansions in Rhode Island. The first of these was “Spring Cleaning” in April 2012, when Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS) Collections staff members spent a day cleaning the JBHM using 18<sup>th</sup>-century techniques while dressed in historic costume. Visitors were interested in our appearance as well as the cleaning methods (if a little hesitant to try them out), but we counted the day a success in helping our audience recognize the work required to maintain the lifestyles of the early Federal rich and famous.

After this, the RIHS developed an annual living history event, “What Cheer Day,” set in October 1800.<sup>3</sup> Costumed interpreters portray family members and servants of the Browns of Providence, one of the wealthiest families in early Federal Rhode Island. Census information provides the age, race, and gender of the people living in the house in 1800. Comparing this data to family letters and diaries, we believe the Browns had five servants living in the house, and costumed interpreters portray four of those five people.

It’s important to us to represent the work required to maintain the Browns in their house: twelve rooms with fireplaces; a basement kitchen, an exterior wash house, a summer kitchen, stable, and woodshed as well as a kitchen garden all required attention. Changes to the house made by a twentieth century owner removed the side servants’ and tradesmen’s entrance and stair, several out buildings, and the basement kitchen. Subsequent preservation decisions capped chimneys and rendered fireplaces unusable<sup>4</sup>. Thus, any living history event that aims to represent a century other than our own takes place in an altered and inescapably false setting. Still, we persevere, because we believe it’s important to present an interpretation that differs from the

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<sup>3</sup> See “Risky Business: What Cheer Day Case Study” in this issue for additional information on What Cheer Day.

<sup>4</sup> The house is heated and by a geothermal system installed in 2010 that makes use of early 20<sup>th</sup> century ducts.

usual guided or audio tour that focuses on the Brown family without mentioning the people who maintained the house and the family's comfort.

Dress differentiates between Brown family members and servants, both through fabric selection and style choices, as we recognize that although visitors may not distinguish between fabrics, they can tell “nicer” clothes from working clothes.<sup>5</sup> Brown family members and their mantua maker dress in clothing derived from late 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolors and fashion plates, while servants dress in replicas of extant garments documented to the “lesser sorts” or inspired by Paul Sandby drawings.

While these differences work, we use space as much as costume to differentiate between Brown family members and the household staff. Interpreters representing family members are most likely to be found in the rooms, where they become part of the display, while interpreters representing servants and trades people occupy and move through the hallways, stairs and outdoor areas. This is not necessarily inauthentic—these are service spaces as much as circulation spaces, and would have been used to transport food, laundry, clothing, and waste—but it is interesting to note that we represent the family in the museum spaces, making them as precious as the furniture we display behind a barrier on the typical house tour.

Does What Cheer Day succeed in representing servants and work? Interpreters and activities succeed in differentiating classes, but ultimately, these are bad servants and the Browns are bad at having servants—it is impossible to replicate sketchily documented relationships—but in the absence of well-dramatized servant/master roles, we fail to truly replicate the divergent classes that lived in the JBHM even as we interrupt the typical interpretation and disrupt the nostalgia of tourists who “wish they could have lived then.”

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<sup>5</sup> Alice Davis Donahue, “Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Clothing: A costume plan for the National Colonial Farm.” Master’s Thesis, University of Maryland, 2008, p 20

At Whitehorne House, a Newport Restoration Foundation property that functions as a museum of Rhode Island furniture, a 2015 Newport Winter Festival special program presented the story of two maids, but only in the kitchen: the rest of the house remained a shrine to the craftsmen of Newport. Costumed interpretation here has evolved from 2010 and 2011's "Keeping Christmas with the Whitehornes" with local college actresses portraying two Whitehorne daughters and delivering a script-driven presentation to 2015's "An Afternoon in 1820," with two costumed first-person interpreters interacting with visitors on a variety of topics.

The 2015 program was, for the interpreters, inspired in part by the mess of WCD: laundry spilled on the floor: coats, cloaks and bonnets were hung on furniture, and the maids occupied themselves with the newspaper, mending, and millinery at a table stocked with winter foodstuffs and Mrs. Whitehorne's own fruited gingerbread for sampling<sup>6</sup>. Representations of maids in 1820 Rhode Island were impossible to find, so the interpreters worked from prints, drawings, and extant garments to develop two personas dressed to signal similar class level and different ages.

Once again, these were bad maids, scheming to leave the Whitehorne's employment to open a millinery shop in Newport similar to one the maids had operated in Salem<sup>7</sup>. The interpreters talked with visitors about the difficulty of travelling to Newport—a popular topic on a very snowy New England day—and the costumed interpretation of 1820 allowed visitors to engage with history on a level they would not have otherwise enjoyed, to connect with the past personally, and to challenge the formal furniture-based presentation of the house.

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<sup>6</sup> See Risky Business: What Cheer Day Case study for a description of messing up the historic JBHM.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://kittycalash.com/2014/08/03/the-milliners-shop/> for a description of the Salem shop, part of the 2014 Salem Maritime Festival.

Allowing visitors to engage in and actively challenge the history presented to them—whether by asking deeper factual questions or engaging in debate about women’s rights—achieves the goal of interpretation as provocation in a way that standard house tours cannot.<sup>8</sup>

Costumed interpretation is not the only way to achieve this level of visitor engagement, and not all visitors enjoy it. But costumed interpretation succeeds in historic house museums when it serves as a disruption, as an all-the-way, as-far-as-you-can-take it interpretation derived from themes and tactics outlined by Franklin Vagnone in “An Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums.” “What Cheer Day” at the John Brown House, and to a lesser extent, “An Afternoon in 1820” both use Anarchist’s Guide tactics of ending the passive tour, decentralizing experience, killing silence, and embracing simultaneity and gossip to inform program flow and content, and the research underpinning the programs<sup>9</sup>. Costumed interpretation that occupies a house or a space in a house demands a different kind of experience, ignores the standard house tour, and provides a more holistic visitor experience, even as it remains artificial in a house without working fireplaces.

Representing work in the ‘great houses’ of Rhode Island’s Federal merchants is difficult at best, given the need to conform to museum collections management standards, the temporal nature of the programs, and the overwhelming aesthetic of the houses and their furnishings—and, perhaps as importantly, the museums’ need to please visitors with a positive experience—a criticism of living history also leveled by David Peterson in 1988.<sup>10</sup>

The risk of hesitating to challenge visitor expectations is the continued presentation of a sterile vision of the past in mahogany mausoleums that fails to bring enliven houses and elides

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<sup>8</sup> Donahue p 10, citing Freeman Tilden, “the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.”

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Ryan and Franklin Vagnone, “Reorienting Historic House Museums: An anarchists’ guide.” ARCC/EAAE 2014 | Beyond Architecture: New Intersections & Connections Re-Disciplining: The Rise, Fall and Reformation of the Disciplines. History, Theory, Historiography, and Future Studies

<sup>10</sup> Peterson p.29

the work required to maintain a house in 1800 or 1820. The reward of connecting people to the past is far greater than the risk of the portraying little-known historical characters and possible inauthentic relationships.