

AASLH

SPRING 2008 VOLUME 63, #2 \$10

HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



**DO-IT-YOURSELF STRATEGIC
Planning for
Small Museums**

*Understanding
Change and Transformation
in History Organizations*

**Creating Personal
Connections**

Personal Connections *and the Great Cosmic Soup*



Students visiting the Indiana Historical Society's Indiana History Train connect to Indiana's past with costumed interpreters who complement the content of the exhibition onboard. Here, a class from Fort Wayne, IN, is "mustered in" to the Civil War's Union Army and taught how to march by interpreter Chris Koers.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the article that follows, Dale Jones lays out the case for the importance of personal connections at history museums and historic sites. This is the first in a three-part series on the subject.

BY DALE JONES

Sunset, buildings and stillness: this is the impression that remains as my first "personal connection" at a Kentucky living history site, the Homeplace 1850. That experience, like stepping into another time, connected with me in some indescribable way.

Throughout my museum career, I have tried to understand what it means to have a personal connection at a history museum or historic site and how to increase the likelihood of such connections among visitors. This past year, I began to explore personal connections with several questions in mind:

1. Are there multiple types of connections?
2. How do they relate to meaning and relevancy?
3. Do connections lead to satisfied visitors who return?
4. Are there strategies for enhancing connections?

This article explores those questions. Consider these two accounts of personal connections:

During a fall weekend in Massachusetts, a visitor standing beside a huge ox at Hancock Shaker Village

had an a-ha moment. "I have never stood next to anything this big that was alive." She talked about living and working with animals and differences between our closeness to animals today and during the Shakers' time. The lines between past and present blurred for her and she compared her life with the Shaker world she was visiting—all from standing beside an ox and making a personal connection. —ELLEN SPEAR

The teenaged girl visiting Conner Prairie had just seen a play about a wife still in deep mourning a year after her husband's death. The wife finds renewed meaning in life when she is suddenly called to deliver a friend's baby. She has a realization, an epiphany, that her life does have meaning, that she is helping bring new life into the world. When the teenager was asked if any part of the play resonated with her, she replied "The end. I had a friend who died a year ago. I have had trouble letting go. It helped me to see her let go of her husband's death." She had connected with the idea and emotion of "letting go" in the play.

—DALE JONES



THE NATURE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Several types of connections occur in each account. The woman at Hancock Shaker Village connects with the ox because animals are an important part of her life. That leads her to make connections beyond the animals to the relationship of people and animals now and in the Shakers' era. In the second encounter, the girl connects with both the idea and emotion of the wife's epiphany of letting go. These examples begin to reveal the variety and complexity of the personal connections visitors make at historic sites.

The value of fostering personal connections has become increasingly important in our field. Many organizations are putting the concept front and center in their missions. Some examples:

- The Atlanta History Center's mission is to inspire people to connect to the past so they may better understand the present and prepare for the future.
- The Brooklyn Historical Society connects the past to the present and makes the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today's diverse communities, and for generations to come.
- The Chicago History Museum's purpose is to help people make a meaningful personal connection to history.

As organizations strive to create experiences that connect, one wonders about the nature of these connections. Recent research, although scant, is instructive. In *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen wrote that people feel connected to the past when they: 1) encounter "real" or "true" history; 2) feel transported back to a time when an object was used or to a place where an event happened; 3) have memories and associations triggered by objects, themes, or ideas; or 4) are part of a social experience with family or friends. Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood suggest in their research that visitors seek a numinous experience—a personal, affective connection based on deep engagement,

transcendence, or feeling mentally transported; empathy with the lives and feelings of earlier people; or awe or reverence when being on hallowed ground or in spiritual communion with an object. This numinous experience seems to correspond to my own experience of stepping back in time described above.¹



Scott Dickerson

Above: A visitor to the Pratt Museum makes a connection to the perspective of homestead women in Alaska the old-fashioned way—with a rotary dial phone. Right: A Colonial Williamsburg interpreter helps guests connect with history as young visitors help carry a ladder to hang a bag of feathers and a bucket of tar from the Liberty Pole during "Revolutionary City."



The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

To further understand this complex landscape of personal connections, I interviewed fourteen history professionals who are thinking about connections as they relate to our field (see sidebar). Their comments, and my organization of themes that emerged, follow. Several categories of connections emerged in the conversations that mirrored elements of the above research: Familiar/Intellectual, Emotional/Empathetic, Social, Ideas, and Stories. I have described each in detail below.

Familiar/Intellectual Connections

Connections to the past start with familiarity. Ellen Spear says that visitors "connect from past to present with objects, things, or places that are familiar." Visitors then connect with people from the past as they realize that those people are like them. "You can see the light bulbs go on over people's heads... because it becomes a story of the present and not just the past."

John Durel sees connections moving from a "purely intellectual connection to one that is social—that reminds me of a story my father told me"—and then goes deeper to a spiritual level to a feeling of...connections with nature, the universe, or human beings that lived in another time, at a different place."

Others suggest similar connections that fall within the general category of familiar/intellectual connections. John Latschar thinks visitors to Gettysburg connect because they have a personal connection with an ancestor, or through a process he calls "monumentation," in which visitors "painstakingly go over the troop rosters" on monuments searching for a specific name, that when found, gives them a very distinct connection with the past. A sense of place also brings visitors; as Latschar says, "They know something incredibly important happened here."

Another structure of personal connections that Barry Dressel notices is twofold: nostalgia, "an interest in history based on history within a visitor's lifetime," and a personal experience based on historical education, which is related to nostalgia. "If you have a good enough history experience, you can be nostalgic for something you didn't have any direct personal experience with."

Interviewees who graciously contributed their time and insights for this article:

JAY ANDERSON

Professor of History, Utah State University

HEATHER BEGGS

Director, Pratt Museum, Alaska

CINNAMON CATLIN-LEGUTKO

Director, General Lew Wallace Study & Museum, Indiana

JOHN & ANITA DUREL

Durel Consulting Partners, Maryland

DAVID CROSSON

Executive Director, California Historical Society

BARRY DRESSEL

President & CEO, Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites

REX ELLIS

Vice President of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Historic Area

RENEE EPPS

Executive Vice President, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York

JOHN HERBST

President and CEO, Indiana Historical Society

JOHN LATSCHAR

Superintendent, Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania

ALEX RASIC

Public Programs Manager, Homestead Museum, California

ELLEN ROSENTHAL

President and CEO of Conner Prairie, Indiana

ELLEN SPEAR

President and CEO, Hancock Shaker Village, Massachusetts

Emotional/Empathetic Connection

In a recent *History News* article, Margot Créviaux-Gevertz reported that “visitors to historic sites want to make emotional connections [and] find relevance to contemporary life.” This emotional connection occurs first, according to David Crosson, who says, “When visitors make connections, it is an emotional connection before it is an intellectual connection. The heart has to be touched before the mind cares.” Jay Anderson concurs. “It’s a very feeling, visceral experience.”²

Empathy, an intellectual or emotional identification with someone in the past, can also be the basis for connections. Alex Rasic’s site fosters empathetic connections, “We use families that lived in the houses at our site as case studies, so visitors get to know them. History is personalized through the people we talk about.” Ellen Rosenthal says these empathetic connections enable visitors to “connect in some way to the humanness of the people of the past.”

Social Connections

Fostering social connections has become increasingly important for history museums and sites. “You want people to talk to each other and to tell each other stories and reflect to each other, especially if they are shared experiences,” says Rosenthal, “and that happens when those connections take place.” Anderson sees these visits as opportunities for people to connect with loved ones. Rosenthal also notices that parents facilitate connections between their children’s experience at the museum and what they have learned at home or school. Heather Beggs observes that local residents, invited to collaborate on design of exhibits, connect with the community experiences that take place at the museum as a result of their involvement.

Idea Connections

Visitors often connect with ideas or values that resonate with them. Spear notes that visitors “connect to the idea of living a principled life, which is at the heart of the Shaker story. It’s that great truth that allows people to connect to their own lives.” In the opening example of connections, the girl at the play at Conner Prairie connected with the idea of letting go.

Story Connections

“History is just storytelling. And museums are just a way of telling stories.” Anderson’s comment illuminates how a museum can play to the natural desire for stories that help us explore, understand, remember, and share our experiences. Moreover, stories can help visitors empathize and understand people of other times and cultures. “Storytelling is incredibly powerful,” says Renee Epps of the Tenement Museum, “and one of the things that visitors speak very highly of.” (I witnessed this on a recent tour of the Tenement Museum, when I overheard a young man say in awe, “Wow, the stories that are here!”)

The same stories can serve as connectors in quite different ways for different people. Beggs utilizes stories for connecting with travelers coming to Alaska on once-in-a-lifetime trips and for local audiences who tell stories of their communities. The local residents make connections

through story-based exhibits by participating in interpreting the story and then through multiple use of the exhibit. “Traveling visitors then feel they are hearing the story not from the curators, but from the community.” Crosson and others advocate similar strategies that let stories emerge from the community.

MEANING, RELEVANCE, AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

The concepts of meaning and relevance are clearly intertwined with connections. Creating a personal connection for visitors is a goal of most history professionals but often only as a stepping stone to deeper connections leading to meaning and relevancy for the visitor. “Unless visitors draw something that they can actually act on and it changes the way they live,” says Spear, “it will become just another media experience done in 3-D.”

Many sites aspire to lead people to relevancy through making connections. Epps says, “We try to help visitors connect what they are learning about the past and what they may know about their own family in the past to what is going on with immigration today and the experiences people are having today. At times you also see that a-ha moment—a connection with understanding what people are addressing today and understanding that their families went through similar experiences in the past.”

Visitors are often willing partners in this search for meaning and relevancy. “People are searching for meaning, depth, and value in their own personal lives,” explains John Herbst. “History helps them assign value to personal experience and history museums and sites offer this tremendous opportunity for people to see themselves in the sweep of events.”

Spear says they approach meaning and relevancy as agents of change. “People are yearning for actionable information. They make personal connections to ways they can act on what they are connecting to—ways that they can take away what they are seeing and experiencing and then apply it to their lives—so that they are living differently.”

VISITOR SATISFACTION, REPEAT VISITATION, AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

If visitors do not make personal connections, they are less likely to be satisfied and may never darken your doors again. Latschar considers the personal connection paramount. “If a personal connection between visitor and site is not made sometime in the visit, it’s not satisfying.”

“To the degree that a museum can provide personal connections,” Herbst notes, “that is the degree to which visitors will return.” Rex Ellis agrees. “If we don’t make the experience relevant...they won’t come [again]. It all begins with making strong personal connections.”

There are also powerful marketing aspects to visitors making connections. “Visitors become great ambassadors of the institution because they feel connected to the story,” says Epps. “They tell friends and family that they have got to go to the museum.”



Gettysburg National Military Park

A Park Ranger takes visitors on a 2006 Gettysburg battle anniversary walk. Being on the actual spot where an event of importance happened leads visitors to a numinous connection. That “sense of place” is how many visitors connect to historic sites.

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Strategies for how to create experiences in which visitors make personal connections permeated discussions. While no guarantees for success emerged, people suggested broad strategies for enhancing personal connections for visitors. The following is based on stories and insights (albeit from some very astute folks), and not meant to be definitive; it does, however, attempt to provide a framework for these preliminary investigations and conversations.

One of the most powerful strategies is simply to learn more about your visitors. For too long, many museums have operated with a disconnect between their offerings and visitor needs, knowledge, and desires—and this approach can lead to dissatisfaction and low attendance. By listening to visitors, we can identify their concerns and find out what will connect them to our history and our site.

The profession as a whole is beginning to understand the value of listening to visitor feedback. The spring 2007 issue of *History News* was dedicated to the topic, and its importance was also a discussion topic at the Kykuit II summit, held spring 2007. At Kykuit, a gathering of over thirty leaders of historic sites, funders, and representatives of national service organizations met to consider historic site sustainability. One of their key findings was that sustainability begins with a site’s community engagement and a willingness to change structure, programs, and services in response to changing community needs.³

Success can follow efforts to connect with visitors. “Institutions that are doing cutting-edge work,” says Anita Durel, “are usually looking outside themselves. They are looking from the community perspective inward. What they’re really asking is, What’s the demand? What’s really needed in this community and how do we address that?”

Ellis also sees audience feedback as a key to establishing relevancy. “We need to continue to solicit and act on feedback from our audiences; we have to embrace change, realize audiences are changing, and adjust our programming accordingly. If the ways in which we present history are not relevant, entertaining, and fun it won’t be deemed

important or worthy of their time.”

Stories are another example of a connection device. They are powerful tools that can be told by interpreters and docents, through museum theatre, in exhibition panels, and in audio and video presentations. But perhaps the most powerful ways are through live interpretation. Clearly, visitors value high quality, engaging live interpretation. It provides the flexibility to instantly respond and adapt to visitor questions and facilitate making connections. Live interpretation also carries with it the interpreter’s passion, energy, and enthusiasm—all difficult to communicate through text panels and technology. Visitors speak highly of “having interactions with educators or docents, of being able to ask questions, or of having that person do storytelling,” says Epps. Spear sees that personal contact as a necessity in this high-tech world. “When there is more and more technology then we’ll have the need as a society for more high touch—the ability to experience things firsthand rather than virtually.”

Museum theatre is another dynamic way to make connections and develop empathy. Créveaux-Gevertz reported that increased attendance, positive press coverage, and favorable visitor comments for Colonial Williamsburg’s “Revolutionary City” program indicated that performance-based interpretation is a successful tool in reaching visitors on an emotional and cognitive level. Crosson tells about a musical performed about César Chávez in a Mexican heritage center. He was impressed with the authenticity of the performance and the strong reaction of the students and even his own grandson. “I was told by the teachers that the kids were singing the anthem on the bus. That night, my grandson said he wanted to help those people that the play was about.” He suggests that museums should consider presenting similar interpretive programs and “not put all our coconuts in the exhibition basket.”⁴

The idea of the museum as a place to establish social connections is only starting to be acknowledged and take root. Research conducted at Conner Prairie and the resulting interpretive changes that focus on visitors have led to greater visitor satisfaction and increased attendance. Rosenthal notes that “it’s the museum’s job to enhance that personal connection between members of the group who are visiting. You want people to talk to each other, and facilitating that experience creates experiences that people share together.” These emotional connections are at the core of many interviewees’ concept of powerful connections.

“Part of the problem that history museums have,” says Dressel, “is that they tend to concentrate on facts and data but they are not terribly good at emotion and personalizing things.” Related to the emotional connection is the empathetic response, which enables visitors to identify emotionally or intellectually with someone from the past.

Empowered visitors are now seeking actions and thoughts that they can build upon in their own lives—actionable information—as Spear identified it. That information will hopefully lead to visitor outcomes that include changes in visitors’ lives. As Crosson noted in his outgoing president’s address at the 2006 AASLH annual meeting, “We actually have a meaningful role to play in changing people’s lives.



SF Arts Ed

Students perform *In Between Dirt and Sky*, an original musical inspired by the life of Cesar Chavez, by Chuck E. Gray and Lisa Quoresimo and performed by the SF Arts Ed Event Players, a San Francisco after-school musical theatre program. The musical provided a way for audiences to “connect” with the ideas and emotions of the play.

Fortunately, it is a vision gaining increasing credibility.... There is a growing number of history organizations around the country that have accepted this new vision of transformative purpose.”⁵

There is a movement afoot, a new paradigm, as Dressel, Crosson, Durel, and Herbst all allude to, that questions the value of high cost, encyclopedic exhibitions and looks towards creating experiences with emotional connections that empower visitors to discover their own connections. Herbst says, “It is very important to start to empower visitors to be able to steer their own path through history museums—and to provide them with opportunities to follow their own interests and to make connections themselves that lead into the past.”

Visitor feedback, stories, live interpretation, museum the-

atre, emotion, and actionable information all point to potential strategies. Two other concepts also emerged. Expanding linear progressions of connections can move visitors into deeper levels of connections (as in the example of the woman and the ox at Hancock Shaker Village). The other is layered and simultaneous connections, which happened for the young girl viewing the play, in which she identifies with both the emotion and idea of an epiphany. As I look at all these elements of personal connections, I can’t help but ponder the same question that Ellen Spear posed: “Can we design an interpretive framework that tries to hit as many of the dimensions of connection as possible? That would be the ‘total immersion’ experience.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The broad categories of personal connections and strategies considered here arise from anecdotal evidence and raise many additional questions, which someday research will answer. Even with the limits of this current exploration, however, this exercise seems useful.

Personal connections to history—whether expanding, linear, or layered—are infinite in scope and kind. Think of a web or neural network that contains emotions, ideas, and all aspects of the human, natural, and virtual worlds we inhabit. The more personal connections your visitors make, the greater the chance that those connections will be to your site, mission, and history—and that means a satisfied visitor who comes back again.

Maybe what Anita Durel said during her interview is true—that we and everything else are all linked together in a “Great Cosmic Soup.” Helping people discover the many threads that connect us is what the field of history in the twenty-first century is all about.⁶ ●

Dale Jones is founder of *Making History Connections*. Visit www.makinghistoryconnections.com for relevant articles and for additional interview excerpts. Dale is affiliated with Qm² consultants. He can be reached at dalejones@makinghistoryconnections.com.

¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 32, 105-107; Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood, “Seeking Numinous Experiences in the Unremembered Past,” *Ethnology* 42, no. 1 (2003): 55+.

² Margot Créveaux-Gevertz, “Revolutionary City Comes to Colonial Williamsburg,” *History News* 61, no. 4, (autumn, 2006): 7-12.

³ Jay Vogt, “The Kykuit II Summit: The Sustainability of Historic Sites,” *History News* 62, no. 3 (autumn 2007): 17-21.

⁴ Créveaux-Gevertz, 12.

⁵ David Crosson, “Ingoc, Dog Food, and Holy Water: The Three Greatest Challenges Facing American Historical Organizations in the Twenty-First Century,” *History News* 62, no. 4 (winter 2007): 12-17.

⁶ “The Great Cosmic Soup” is a concept that Anita Durel passed along from Janet Vaughan, Senior Director of Member Services, American Association of Museums.

Connect visitors to the past...



Create meaning in the present.

Making History Connections

Developing **MUSEUM VISITOR EXPERIENCES** that connect people to the past for over 25 years.

Dale Jones
dalejones@makinghistoryconnections.com
443-472-2670
Affiliated with Qm2: www.qm2.org

Live interpretation

- Museum Theatre
- Living History
- Historic House & Site Tours
- Educational/Interpretive Programs
- Oral Histories

Understanding Audiences

- Front-end evaluation
- Formative evaluation
- Summative evaluation

www.makinghistoryconnections.com