

STORIES TO TELL

From Scholarship to Exhibit to House Tour

A triologue

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The legacy of historic preservation in New England is a landscape peppered with historic homes. In these settings the history tends to be conservative -- heroic genealogies and family antiques -- and the house tour remains an enduring mode of interpretation. These sites can only retain their relevancy by rethinking the history they tell and the methods they use for reaching the public.

The three projects that this panel discusses grew out of an reinterpretation initiative at the Porter-Phelps-Huntington Museum in Hadley, Massachusetts. [MAP] The initiative has been underway for several years. Until the spring of 1996, the products of the reinterpretation were primarily a series of scholarly papers presented at two colloquia, and some changes to the house tour that reflected the scholars' work. At that time, several new projects were begun as part of a graduate seminar in Public History at the University of Massachusetts. Rather than producing new research, Beth, Carrie and I focused on developing new ways to bring information to the public. The panel today reflects the work that we have done.

I was assigned the task of developing an introductory exhibit to be placed in the attached "corn barn," where visitors gather before embarking on the house tour. The goal of the exhibit was two-fold. At its most basic level, the exhibit is designed to help introduce and contextualize the family that owned the house and surrounding land for six generations. [GENEALOGY] The second and more important goal was to connect the family's stories to larger trends in regional and national history. By doing this, I hoped to provide visitors a framework that would prepare them to look beyond the decorative arts and family portraiture to the social and economic history of the Connecticut River Valley. In turn, the exhibit provides the tour guides with a better informed public. While this may be considered a boon to the overall interpretive scheme at the house, it also requires some rethinking of the house tour. At best, the exhibit does not function simply as a supplement to the tour but demands that guides include new information and jettison some of the old chestnuts that currently told to visitors.

Of course, much of the information included in the exhibit is not really "new." I have benefited greatly from scholarship that was produced in earlier stages of the reinterpretation initiative. [MARLA] Historians have focused in recent years on the roles of women in the house, both household members and the workers who came to the house on a regular basis. The work has been first rate. However, a scholarly paper can't simply be pasted into the house tour. The exhibit, then, became a way of bridging new historical research and the tour. For the exhibit, scholarship has been shortened and simplified for the public, often distilled in one or two labels that can be read in a matter of seconds. The guides can then use the house tour as a chance to take some of those shortened versions and expand them.

What I am going to be doing today is give three examples of ways that a dialogue between the three interpretive modes is working in my exhibit. Each may be termed women's history, though the exhibit is not explicitly about women. It was, in fact, my goal to present women merely as "history" with no further justification or explanation. The first example focuses on the earliest female inhabitant of the house and her relationship to the geography of her community and to the political turmoil of the mid-eighteenth century. The second highlights a group of women that doesn't often get talked about in historic home tours, particularly in New England -- slave women. The final example is concerned with one of the most enduring themes of antebellum women's history -- reform movements. In each of these examples the exhibit provides space for one small label, in many cases representing the summation of a great deal of research. The house tour is an opportunity to expand each label into a number of different issues, but at the same time tour guides will have to make choices about what new themes to pick up and which old ones to discard.

One example in particular illustrates how judicious substitution can shore up the historical accuracy of the house tour while introducing broad themes into the discussion of family and household relationships. One of the first stops on the house tour takes visitors

into a downstairs bedroom. This room is interpreted as the bedroom of the first mistress of the house, Elizabeth Porter. Elizabeth's husband left to fight in the French and Indian War in 1755 only three years after the house was built and died in the war. The house tour commonly recounts the story of the widow receiving the news of her husband's death. His body-servant, a Native American, knocks on the shutter late at night and silently passes Moses Porter's sword through the window. Elizabeth immediately knows that her husband is dead.

Though the story undoubtedly has the advantage of drama and pathos, there are a few problems. Like many favorite stories, this one is apocryphal. There seems to be no proof that it ever happened -- its only documentation is in a book written in 1949 not otherwise known for its historical veracity. It also has a sort of timelessness and unspecificity that should be held in suspicion. The widow's mute understanding of her tragedy plays as myth rather than history. Also, it reproduces a stereotype of Native Americans -- the silent but loyal body servant -- that adds little to an historical understanding of their relationships with white settlers.

A different story, used in the exhibit, should be substituted. Two letters that Elizabeth wrote to Moses (and which he never received -- pathos sustained) demonstrate in her own words the precarious situation the war brought about.

On August 9, 1755 she wrote: "I have had terrible frights with men that deserted from the army as we suppose, trying to break into the house in the night." Then on August 29: "the men I spake of in a former letter ... are yet very troublesome to us. They milk our cows, devour our corn, destroy our garden and are often about the house in the night which you must think is distressing."

These letters bring up several points that could be expanded as part of the tour

1. The relativity of geographical distance. The house lies less than two miles from the center of town, but the technologies of transportation and communication in the mid-eighteenth century render this distance vast. Elizabeth Porter's fears for her safety are based

in part on having no close neighbors to turn to. This immense distance should be contrasted to the somewhat surprising fact that Elizabeth sent these letters at all, fully expecting them to arrive miles away at an army encampment in the wilderness.

2. The real dangers of living on the edge of settled areas. In western Massachusetts by this date, the threat of violence from Native Americans (never as great as literature often supposes) had been supplanted by another threat -- deserters from the British army. There is also the possibility that Elizabeth was incorrect in her assumption, and that the danger lay even closer at hand. The Porters were part of an elite group in the river valley, and may well have been the target of local vandals who resented their power and position. By raising these possibilities on the tour, guides have the opportunity to chart out a series of relationships between white residents of the valley based on class position and political loyalty.

3. A more nuanced discussion of Native Americans' relationships to white settlers in New England. Moses Porter, like many whites, may well have employed Native Americans. This illustrates a point both obvious and widely misunderstood -- that Native Americans still had a presence in areas settled by Europeans. The image of Native Americans being utterly exterminated or driven out is incorrect. Furthermore, a description of the real dangers faced in 1755 by army deserters from the French and Indian War could be compared to earlier periods (around 1700) when conflict between Native Americans and whites did exist, but was still intimately related to the political struggles between France and Britain.

Drama is not sacrificed in this version of the tour. An imaginative tour guide can incite the audience to envision the terror: the distance to town, the blackness of the night, the scratching at the house and noises in the barn, and a young woman with her young daughter sitting in the room alone. In the exhibit, this story is illustrated by a map, which stresses the distance that two miles represented to Elizabeth Porter. In the tour, the room

provides the setting for a dramatic scene, to be supplemented by copies of Elizabeth's letters.

The second example is a discussion of New England slavery. But "a discussion of New England slavery" is a phrase that promises much more than I could deliver. I had 75 words or less to discuss this issue, and I faced another disadvantage in finding accompanying images. Of course, photos even of the middle class white family that lived in the house at this time are unavailable. And certainly even if photography had been extant at this time, probably there would have been no photos of the slave family. So, I was posed with this problem of how to represent people -- any of them slave, free, black or white -- for the time period. The solution I came up with -- which is not entirely satisfactory -- was to produce genealogies. Genealogies are used throughout the exhibit to guide visitors through a family which is quite complex, particularly because so many of the names are repeated over and over. In each panel, the main family genealogy gets larger and includes the generation discussed and the generations that came before it.

Against this continuum, I counterpoised the genealogy of the slave family. I think it makes a striking comparison. The first thing that you might notice is that the slaves aren't represented with last names. Now, whether or not they were known in the community as Phelps -- which is the name of the family at this point -- I don't know. And so I didn't put it down, and they become simply first names. Additionally, there are no men in the genealogy. The single male slave owned by the family is never mentioned as the husband or father of any of the women. The point of leaving out last names or male names is not to emphasize a matriarchal family structure. Rather it is to show visually how little we really know about these individuals. Hopefully, visitors will raise questions based on that very fact. It will help expose the vagaries of the historical endeavor -- the people most likely to be remembered in the historical record were those with the means to leave their imprint. In other words, Peg didn't keep a diary.

The second striking thing about the genealogy is the dates that are placed with each name. Two of the four did not live past childhood, and a third died at the age of nineteen. Though early death is not unique to African Americans at this point in history, it is interesting that in these generations the white family -- the Porter-Phelps-Huntingtons -- were living quite long lives. There was one infant death in the third generation. Two (of eleven) in the fourth generation die in early adulthood. But the African American family consistently had children who don't make it into early adulthood. Also, this family has one member who lives to be freed by the courts in 1783. Though she evidently remains in the neighborhood, as evidenced by the work that Elizabeth Phelps hires her to do in later years, her death is not recorded by Elizabeth. This fact brings up a parallel point to the one made earlier about Native Americans. After freedom, African Americans also remained part of the human landscape in New England -- they did not fade out of history the way they often fade out of history textbooks.

Little is known about these women's lives, so I use them primarily to bring up the fact that New England slavery existed, and I think there is space in the house tour for a far greater discussion of the issue. At this point the discussion of African American slaves on the tour centers on a single incident. The story told is that of the mistress of the house, Elizabeth Phelps, nursing the slave Phillis as she is dying of tuberculosis. And as she is dying she is laid out in this box, a sort of a trunk, that they still have in the house. So, as the tour goes by the guide stops at the trunk, and the discussion centers on Phillis' death and on Elizabeth's concern that Phillis's soul may not have been saved. Again, the story is full of drama and pathos. But, I think that by inserting the notion of slaves as constituting a family, the paternalism that is expressed by Elizabeth Phelps in her diary is striking.

As you can see, Peg had two daughters, Roseanna and Phillis, and when Phillis died, Roseanna named her daughter Phillis. At least that's what we think. Now what is unclear from the diary is who got to name the baby. If Roseanna named her daughter after her sister, then it shows a certain family sensibility. If Elizabeth Phelps is the one who

names this child, it is an interesting indication of how a slave birth might be considered a replacement of slave who has died. Whether this too indicates a family sensibility or an economic one is really unclear. Furthermore, regardless of Elizabeth Phelps' motherly intentions towards her slaves, they had their own mothers and their own mothers are in fact living right there in the house. This illustrates the way that family ties between slaves were devalued by whites under the system of slavery. Generations become collapsed into a paternalistic family. Peg is not Roseanna and Phillis' mother -- Elizabeth Phelps is their mother. Similarly, Roseanna is not the mother of her child because Elizabeth Phelps is taking care of them all.

These are pretty deep issues to deal with either on the tour or in the exhibit. But they do point to some places where the interpretation is lacking. First off, it would be great if a scholar could really take to task this idea of slavery in the household. As far as I can tell, no one has attempted to do that, even to the extent of identifying individuals and their relationships to each other. Other, more easily digestible themes are available to the tour guide, however. For example, in 1772, Peg requests and is granted the right to be sold to another family so that she can get married. Later, then she returns, again at her request, by being repurchased by the family. Clearly, this indicates a more flexible system of slave owning than a visitor is likely to imagine.

These interpretive departures raise the question of how to place these themes into the house tour. For one thing, the interpretation might move from the site of this box, located in the second floor hall, either outside where a lot of household labor would have been performed or into one of the attic rooms where the slaves might have lived. If the box remains integral to the interpretation, it might be moved to the place where Phillis would have actually lain in it -- just off the kitchen. Certainly its worth having the tour guides more informed on this issue, so that they can encourage the visitors to ask questions about the issue of slavery after they have confronted the label and slave genealogy.

The third example is the issue of women and reform. This is obviously the subject of a great deal of writing in women's history and I was delighted to find that the family -- at this point, the Huntington's -- fit the model. During the 1820's, Elizabeth Huntington was excommunicated for the Congregational Church. This break with the church, which had been so important in previous generations, alienated the family from their community. What seems to have replaced that local community is a larger community of perfectionist religion and reform. In many of her letters to her thirteen children, Elizabeth wrote of extensive religious reading, and her diary is essentially a record of her spiritual development. The connections I made between her religion and contemporary reform movements were based on two pieces of evidence. First, I discovered a letter -- or rather a copy of a letter -- written to the editors of the *Liberator*, the abolitionist newspaper. Elizabeth Huntington wrote to renew her subscription, so we know that she was receiving the paper, and she also wrote to comment of the editorial content. Second, in a letter from Elizabeth to her son at school, we hear that her daughter Bethia is "organizing for temperance." In this way I knew that the Huntington women were involved directly, and it became possible to talk not just about women in general, but about them specifically.

I was able to do this in two of the exhibit labels -- the first dealing with the church and Elizabeth's excommunication and the second dealing with the involvement of the family in abolition and temperance. The big challenge again was finding some kind of visual representation. The letters are not available as visuals, the first written as it is on a scrap of paper and the second having been recopied from its original. Instead the exhibit features the masthead of the *Liberator*. For temperance, finding a visual representation was a real challenge, but the difficulties that I encountered there opened up an interpretation strategy that could be used in the house tour.

The images that I found depicting temperance organizing concern later movements aimed at legislating against alcohol. Some of them are great, but they don't reflect the type of organizing that the Huntingtons were doing. Bethia would have been trying to get men

to pledge not to drink, and to sign pledge cards. When Elizabeth writes of her activities, she has just returned from the local saw mill. Tour discussion could center on the difference between these two versions of organizing which is representative of a larger change. As local communities lost means to control their members informally (as Bethia was attempting to do) they turned to government structures, thus giving rise to the more familiar prohibition movement. Even better, the tour could include a discussion of women's "place" as it relates to reform movements. Normally, a foray into the masculine world of the sawmill would have been discouraged for a woman, such as the young and unmarried Bethia. Under the aegis of organizing, she moved, quite literally, outside of the home.

This discussion could be quite productive in any number of spots in the house. I would probably choose the main parlor. In the letter that Elizabeth writes to her son, she also describes their evening, that they are sitting at home in front of the fire and that Bethia has just come in. It would make a nice interpretive piece in the parlor, where the big fireplace is, where the writing desk is. Then the concepts of reform would be anchored in a sense of what a family evening looked like in the mid-nineteenth century.

These three examples have explored how the house tour could be expanded and improved by a dialogue with the themes found in the exhibit plan. They are, of necessity, quite specific. The trouble with making such recommendations is, of course, that tours are and should be the creation of the individual guide. Just because I think these are wonderful themes and stories, they can be easily rejected for any number of reasons -- they interfere with a different story that the guide is trying to build or the guide is concerned that the tourist can't or won't "get it." I think that the method at the heart of these suggestions is the real offering I can make to the re-interpretation initiative. House tours are all about telling stories -- that is their appeal and their strength. But for each story, we should ask the question -- what is it about? The answer should be layered and multiple. I told you stories about Elizabeth Porter, the slave Peg, and Bethia Huntington. I also told you

stories about the French and Indian War, slavery in New England, and reform movements.

I also told you stories about geography, paternalism, and perfectionism. Once we know what the stories are about, we can ask whether these stories what the museum is about?

When the answer is yes, then the house tour is complete.