



Experiencing History Where It Happened: Living History and Re-enactment as Public History Tools

Living history and re-enactment are experiential learning tools that historic sites and educators use to allow their students and guests to experience history. The only real limits on living history and these types of presentations are the historic records that exist and human imagination.

BY DANIEL P. O'NEIL

At first glance, historic sites resemble museums, in that they preserve and display objects of a historical, and when relevant, artistic nature. Where historic sites differ is in three key areas: location, authority, and context. Unlike museums, historic sites commemorate a significant event or persons that are directly connected to their location, thus allowing the discourse of place in history, and providing a sensory experience beyond objects. Historic sites become the authority on the events that occurred on site by collecting documentation and artifacts, and employing people charged with interpreting them. While museums derive their authority from the artifacts they preserve, historic sites derive a great deal of their authority from the landscape, and the artifacts enhance that authority rather than provide it. Finally, historic sites often serve as a conduit between academic history and the public, and are charged with helping a community contextualize the role its locale played in a large-scale event. The method and

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transmission of the context is key, as historic sites must employ a multi-faceted approach that is interesting, engaging for the public, and historically accurate.

One method of engagement for historic sites is to connect with educational institutions. In 2012, researchers from Boston University tested the efficacy of using a historic location to enhance text-based learning. While the study was still ongoing at the time of publication, it did discover that using historic venues made the process of contextualization much more effective for students. Specifically, this research suggested that being able to view modern sites and buildings as the “physical manifestation of a series of choices made by historical agents” helps students read the text in a new manner. Connecting to place makes historical inquiry more accessible, and challenges the idea that history is an abstract concept far removed from the present.¹ Learning the story of the events that occurred in a particular location, and being able to witness the impact of those events, enhance the learning experience.

While academic historians analyze and interpret history, the public historian must take that work and transmit it to students and the educated public outside of academia, while simultaneously creating a product that is interesting and that the public will consume. Many sites look at re-enactment or living history as a way of achieving those goals. Often standing at a location and reading about the events that occurred there centuries ago is not enough for some visitors, whereas watching the events unfold is much more effective. There is, however, a noticeable tension between academic historians and re-enactors, described as a tension between provided context and achieved context.² Studies indicate that this tension between academia and living history is largely due to a mutual desire to educate the public about history, and a desire to do so in an authentic manner.³

The modalities of presentation are in many ways different: Many professional historians look at re-enactment and living history events as methods of commodifying history, serving a tourism function rather than an academic function, while some living historians view academic history as elitist and detached.

Upon further analysis, however, historic sites that host living history events actually put a great deal of effort into preserving authenticity and providing context, resulting in a valid interpretive tool that serves the dual function of serving both history and the community. Different models and methods are employed by various sites, each with its own benefits and drawbacks, but the result is that living history done correctly requires a great deal of academic rigor. Many sites that employ it

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do so as a teaching tool more than a money maker, and it can create an effective interdisciplinary learning experience.

In the course of discussions with site administrators and based upon my personal experience as a participant at many of these events, three distinct methods of living history have come to the forefront: immersive, demonstration, and participatory. All three types take place in Vermont, and each has its benefits and drawbacks.

Immersive or “progressive” living history models recognize two audiences: the public and the presenters. These re-enactments recreate historical events based on the records and are heavily researched, with all aspects of the event analyzed or rehearsed. The presenters strive to achieve a high level of authenticity, and express a desire to not just mimic but actually experience the events from the point of view of the participants. By doing so, they attempt to give an accurate representation of those events to the public. Two examples of this sort of event in Vermont are a yearly re-enactment of the Battle of Hubbardton, and the 2014 re-enactment of the St. Albans Raid.

Hubbardton was the site of a rear-action battle during British General John Burgoyne’s campaign in 1777, and was the only Revolutionary War battle that took place in present-day Vermont. (The Battle of Bennington, while named for the Vermont town, actually took place near Hoosic, N.Y.) As Burgoyne’s troops moved south from Canada, Continental forces retreated from Fort Ticonderoga, and the pursuing British caught up with the rear guard outside the town of Hubbardton on July 7. After a pitched battle, the Continentals were driven from the field, but they successfully slowed the British advance.⁴ Today the State of Vermont’s Division of Historic Preservation maintains the Hubbardton Battlefield as one of its historic sites, and hosts a re-enactment of the retreat and battle every year. Re-enactors from all over the region assemble at this site to portray the combatants. Many of the re-enactment groups who attend portray the actual historical units that fought there in 1777. The event is planned on or around the date and time of the original battle, so guests can also experience the climate conditions like the participants. The actual re-enactment takes place on the second day and follows the order of events according to record.⁵ Staff interpreters narrate the proceedings and explain why the presenters act in the way they do. For their part, the re-enactors are also part of this experience: They feel the discomfort of fighting in woolen clothing in July, and literally walk in the footsteps of and perform similar actions as their eighteenth-century counterparts. The actual battle re-enactment is just one part of the entire event, but it is the most immersive part, where the viewers are able to watch the events unfold just as they did over 200 years ago.

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The second immersive event took place in St. Albans, Vermont, a small city approximately sixteen miles from the U.S.-Canadian border. On October 19, 1864, twenty-one Confederate raiders robbed three banks and held a group of townspeople hostage in the village square, escaping after the explosives they planned to use to burn the town failed to detonate. This incident, known as The St. Albans Raid, has the distinction of being the northernmost action of the Civil War. The St. Albans historical museum offers a walking tour of the raid that can be self-guided or led by an interpreter.⁶ The town has been the site of several Civil War encampments, but in September 2014 it hosted a re-enactment of the raid in honor of the Civil War Sesquicentennial. The town enlisted the support of the Vermont Historical Society and other local organizations to develop a series of programs to commemorate the raid. The major event, part of a larger program, was a re-enactment of the raid. The organizers used historical records to establish a script, and performed both the actions of the raid and the subsequent trials of the raiders.⁷ This entire event was designed to take the city of St. Albans and its residents back in history for the day, and the community turned out to commemorate this significant event in their collective past.

Immersive events are the closest thing to an actual re-enactment, because they focus solely on historical events and follow the historical record. The public is invited to experience the events as they unfold, serving both an entertainment and educational purpose. Such events require a great deal of work by the organizers to ensure that accuracy is developed and maintained while the public understands the proper context of the events they are invited to witness. Many historic sites or societies avoid immersive events because their site is not military oriented; however, an immersive event does not necessarily have to be combat related. It would be possible to re-enact a town's chartering or other significant events in a community's history.

In order to establish an experiential learning environment, many historic sites also use the demonstration model. Some of the conditions and demonstrations are not always based on an actual historical event, but rather are aimed at recreating cultural and material conditions at a particular time, and teaching people about those situations. These demonstrations are more often called living history. In these events, participants often engage in third-person historical presentations, where the interpreters are still their modern selves while portraying the lives of historical people. Living history is used for both military and civilian life demonstrations. For instance, Vermont state historic sites simultaneously host demonstrations and activities that coincide with their immersion events, but are not directly part of the immersion experience.

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A re-enactor demonstrates how children made toys from scraps of cloth at the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum in Burlington, Vermont, May 31, 2014. Photo courtesy of the author.

Military or tactical demonstrations often get the most attention, as they are large-scale spectacles that draw large crowds. Many sites host military re-enactments despite not having been the site of a major military action. The public is informed that these simulated battles are meant to demonstrate the military tactics and battle strategy of the period. The leadership of the site and the leadership of the re-enactment groups plan the order of events, with scripted outcomes to ensure that the battle proceedings remain realistic. Site staff often narrate the battle events to provide context and explanations to the public.

While the public often thinks of military events when re-enactment or living history comes to mind, most sites also have extensive non-military programs. Many locations will have the interpreters dress in period clothing and perform tasks and skills to demonstrate the daily life of the people who lived at that place. Sites such as Billings Farm and Shelburne Museum often host demonstrations of crafts such as spinning, weaving, woodworking, leatherwork, cooking, and gardening associated with their site or with a particular time period.⁸ Many Vermont state historic sites include in their event calendars living history demonstrations of domestic, artisanal, and farm work. At the Ethan Allen Homestead, demonstrations of eighteenth-century domestic crafts and farm work are common. Programs such as these are an integral part of a site's interpretive plan and are effective teaching tools.

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Demonstrations, while not portraying an actual historic event, are effective at teaching about daily life in the past. A site's interpreters can use their competencies to demonstrate a wide range of historical research about their location. A historic site at the location of a one-room schoolhouse can have an interpreter conduct a period-accurate school lesson. Even locations like battlefields can employ non-military demonstrations to widen their scope and present a clearer picture of the history of their community.

One other method of living history interpretation is participation by the public in historical activities or presentations. Attendees are able to take part in re-enactments in a limited manner, either by learning how to perform historical skills, experiencing the living conditions of a particular time period, or even being historical characters. This form of presentation allows for a kinesthetic learning experience, and when combined with demonstration methods and context provided by experts, can be effective and popular.

One site in Vermont that hosts participatory events is Chimney Point, one of the oldest settlements in Vermont, with archaeological evidence dating back 7,500 years. For such places, which have a long and extensive history involving several cultures, the programs must be as varied as its history and the visitors to the site. Chimney Point's annual atlatl competition allows the public to get involved in the action, rather than just watching it. Participants learn how to make spear points and get an opportunity to use the atlatl—a Native American throwing tool—in friendly competition.⁹ This event is so popular that colleges such as the University of Vermont and Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire have formed teams to compete.¹⁰ This kind of activity is known as “experimental archaeology,” in which participants put ideas and theories to the test.

The Ethan Allen Homestead Museum hosts an annual historical scavenger hunt for elementary school visitors. This competition, based on an apocryphal legend about a backwoods race between Ethan and Ira Allen, incorporates woodsman and homesteading skills that would have been necessary in the eighteenth century. Guests try their hand at land navigation using a map and compass, weather observation, recognizing edible and poisonous plants, starting fires with flint and steel, military drill, grinding corn manually, carrying water from the creek, measuring tree height, gardening practices, and many other skills. Museum interpreters provide demonstrations and instruction, and then invite guests to try the skills for themselves. The event is set up with several stations, and each participant rotates through the stations and becomes proficient at the skills before moving on.

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Even military re-enactments can have a participatory element. Many units will “enlist” the public as “provisional recruits” and have them learn the manual of arms using prop weapons made of wood, since re-enactment units are very strict about only allowing safety-trained and insured members to handle firearms. “Non-Commissioned Officers” lead the military exercises, often with the assistance of junior members who either help the public learn the movements or practice themselves.

Activities like these do have their limitations, however, as some of them involve safety risks and must be performed by trained personnel. Historic sites cannot allow visitors to fire real muskets, hammer hot metal at a blacksmith’s forge, or drive a team of horses, because activities like these require a great deal of training and experience. Despite such limitations, participatory events incorporating kinesthetic learning styles can stimulate interest that leads to further learning.

Ultimately, historic sites and their living history programs are intended to serve their communities. The Ethan Allen Homestead is located in a historic venue in a large tourism market. The bulk of its day-to-day traffic is from out-of-state tourists interested in either Vermont’s controversial Revolutionary War figure or finding out if he made furniture. While the Homestead certainly benefits from tourism, its living history program is designed to attract a local audience. Many locals tour the Homestead either as schoolchildren or as parent chaperones; visitation tracking indicated that many local guests only come when they have out-of-town visitors.¹¹ Local visitors who have toured before will often ask about special events. Living history and re-enactments, spectacles that help attract attention to historic sites, also bring notice to the more traditional services they provide.

Elsa Gilbertson, the regional director of three Vermont state historic sites, argues that the interpretation of these sites must be relevant to the community, and the Division of Historic Preservation’s goals are to make its locations engaging sites of learning. She emphasizes that historic site administrators want the community to become involved with its local site and view it as part of its home. Instead of being just a historic area in a corner of the town, the sites become a vibrant part of the community. When a community is closely connected to its local history through knowledge about events that occurred in its backyard, its past becomes a source of local pride. In some ways, these historic places and events serve an economic goal as well, since many sites are located in remote areas that were convenient or strategic to the builders or settlers, but are now situated in heavy tourist locales with easy access. Living history events increase a site’s visibility in the community and in

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the region, attracting local and outside visitor traffic, thus increasing economic activity for the town.¹²

Although living history has become an increasingly important tool for accomplishing the goal of presenting a community's history and cultural memory to its ever-changing audiences in a manner that is attractive, engaging, and authentic, it is also controversial. Critics of re-enactment societies and events often dismiss them as anachronistic and discount the amount of intensive research and academic rigor that is needed for these events to be presented properly. However, the governing bodies of living history societies and the administrators and educators at historic sites typically work hand in hand to ensure that re-enactors offer the public an accurate and honest representation of events and lifestyles based on historical knowledge.

Experiential learning is different than didactic learning, because the student is an active rather than a passive participant in the learning process. Educators have found that when used properly, experiential education helps their students retain knowledge. Living history and re-enactment are experiential learning tools that historic sites and educators use to allow their students and guests to experience history. The only real limits on living history and these types of presentations are the historic records that exist and human imagination. Any locale can potentially host a re-enactment of some sort as long as it is well researched and locally significant. Historic sites, by hosting events designed to celebrate local history, thus fulfill their role as guardians of a community's collective memory.

NOTES

¹ Christine Baron, "Understanding Historic Thinking at Historic Sites," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 104 (2012): 845.

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³ Elizabeth Carnegie and Scott McCabe, "Re-enactment Events in Tourism: Meaning, Authenticity, and Identity," *Current Issues in Tourism* 11 (19 December 2008): 365.

⁴ H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 58.

⁵ Elsa Gilbertson, personal interview with author, 6 March 2014.

⁶ St. Albans Historical Society, "Saint Albans Historical Museum History Walk," (St. Albans, Vt.: The Museum; Messenger Print & Design, n.d. [2012]).

⁷ Brent Hallenback, "St. Albans Commemorates Civil War Raid," *Burlington Free Press*, 18 September 2014.

⁸ Shelburne Museum, Daily Demonstrations, <http://shelburnemuseum.org/learn/adults/daily-demonstrations/>, accessed April 1, 2015. Billings Farm and Museum, Special Events, http://www.billingsfarm.org/programs-events/special_events/index.html, accessed April 1, 2015.

⁹ State of Vermont Historic Sites, "Annual Atlatl Weekend at Chimney Point," <http://historicsites.vermont.gov/node/1026>.

¹⁰ David Rattigan, "Making a Point," *Boston Globe*, 15 July 2010.

¹¹ Visitation records from the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum, 2010-2014, compiled by the author.

¹² Elsa Gilbertson, interview with author.