

Reenacting How-tos: Methods

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION 101

by Nicholas Redding

"Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection." — Freeman Tilden

As 'living historians' we are bound to a duty not only to recreate historical events, but to also bear the burden of *interpreting* historic events. The issue of interpretation in 'living history' has been covered before—in some detail within our very own organization—but, to repeat and recover what has been said before represents another chance to discuss the guiding tenets of successful historical interpretation.

What exactly *is* interpretation? There are a great many 'interpreters' in the world, and so there are multiple definitions of the word relative to our use of it; for our purposes, I will define interpretation as, *"The revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact."* As a general rule, before attempting to explain or interpret (or delve into the theory of it), one must first know the answers to three basic questions:

1. What happened?
2. Why did it happen here?
3. Why is it important today?

While our National Park Service (NPS) by no means 'invented' interpretation, many of those who are responsible for the modern evolution of this practice were closely related to the park service, and, therefore, the NPS is referenced quite often in this article. In any dialogue on interpretation of whatever variety—natural history, cultural history, or other areas—Freeman Tilden is always a giant looming over the discussion. Tilden wrote a monumental work, *Interpreting our Heritage*, and is often credited as the founder of modern historical interpretation.

Tilden's book highlighted six major areas (as well as an in depth study of interpretation in the national parks) of successful interpretation, which the large portion of this article summarizes. These six points are the basics for any interpretive model. They are as follows:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials are presented are scientific, historical, or

architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

Each of these points is presented in greater detail below.

Item 1: The Need to Relate

- *Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.*

The relevance of the above statement arises from the fact that visitors/spectators will normally not respond unless the 'interpreter' can somehow connect with them, beyond the facts and data he offers.

This is also dependent upon the NPS's belief that visitors are seeking something of value for themselves and that it is the interpreters responsibility to arouse that interest, and allow visitors to create value. Visitors are also sovereign and not every encounter is ripe for an interpretive discourse, so the interpreter must meet the visitor only where they come.

An excellent interpretive tool for arousing interest is relating the historical matter to the visitor's personality, such as to place them in



CRs engaged in interpretive activities at Arcade, NY in August 2002 (Mike Peterson photo)

a historical setting (if only hypothetically) by asking the question, “What would you have done, had you been there?”

Item 2: Information vs. Revelation

- *Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information.*

Information overload is an ailment suffered by many well-read historians who fail to transition from historian to interpreter. The successful interpreter must make careful precautions to relate facts and information in human terms. Good interpretation creates opportunities for visitors to make their own connections; it is wise to remember this,



CRs engaging NPS visitors in battalion drill on the Chancellorsville battlefield in August 2004 (K. O’Beirne photo)

and to remember that too many facts can (and do) obliterate possible connections.

Tilden directly refers to the interpretation of Civil War battlefields and states that, rather than focusing on minute details that might interest the most astute researcher, interpreters should focus on the broad consequences of the war and its importance to the person standing before you.

Item 3: Interpretation as an Art

- *Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials are presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.*

Tilden’s effort in mentioning that interpretation is an art is to yet again keep interpreters from merely creating an interpretive program or model based solely on facts and not nearly enough on the tangible and intangible objects that possess meaning and relevance, and can be interwoven into interpretive programs to relate significance to the visitor.

An example given in *Interpreting our Heritage* on interpretation as art is, what if the Gettysburg Address, instead of being written as a “marvel of English style,” was a dry discussion of Meade’s and Lee’s tactics? The point is made that a good interpreter must have some skill in the art of rhetoric, and the careful application of information juxtaposed alongside ‘a relevance’ made to the visitor, creates opportunities for making a connection with the visitor.

Item 4: Provoke! Provoke! Provoke!

- *The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.*

Tilden’s point, above, is still as important and relevant today as it was when it was penned. As members of the ‘authentic’ reenactor community, we have seen a focus on preservation minded events, and “Item 4” above relates to our desire to provoke the general public to the cause of saving threatened battlefield land. In other words, if we can use the “art” and make the visitor relate to what we are telling him, then he’ll be provoked into thinking more about it, and sometimes creative—although not obnoxious—methods of provocation are necessary.

Instruction is education, and our purpose as interpreters is to provoke a visitor into creating connections by using the resources we have available, be they a tangible (musket, canteen, hat, etc.) or intangible (the concept of a civil war with brother against brother, etc.).

Our passion in this period, our devotion to the details, to the veterans, our focus on preservation—all of these may be passed on to the visitor. Emerson wrote, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul.” Passion for a cause, devotion to an ideal—it is all something that may be used not only to provoke, but to create connections, and inspire.

Item 5: The Whole, Not the Part

- *Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.*

Considering the complexities listed in the previous items and the various problems one may encounter while trying to offer an effective and successful interpretive program or a simple talk, it is assuring to consider the principle of Item 5: it is best to offer interpretation where not only do you provoke, create chances for connections, and appeal to that which is significant, but make an appeal to the whole.

Tilden’s example as it pertains to the Civil War is classic, and I will paraphrase it to some extent. For example, take two Missouri regiments at the siege of Vicksburg, and the fact that both armies in that engagement fielded regiments from Missouri—literally brother against brother. The importance does not lie in exactly where the regiment fought, or the commanders’ names and places of birth; rather, the importance and the interpretive whole is founded in the fact that these same boys could have once fed from the same jar in a dusty country home, and that is the ideal interpretive whole that meets all of the criteria for successful interpretation.

Item 6: For the Youngsters

- *Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.*

This principle is included in this article just as Tilden included it as part of his dynamic six principles in, *Interpreting our Heritage*. It also is of some consequence to us in our work as ‘living historians’ because we often deal with the younger generation, and must understand that simply ‘dumbing-down’ the subject matter is inappropriate. Steps taken to create interpretive talks for younger visitors are warranted, and well received by those who will someday be the stewards of our cultural history.

One great example of this was the Columbia Rifles' interpretive area at the 2003 Arcade event. While most of the members addressed their presentations and their "part" of the interpretive area to adults and teenagers, Charles Heath's cavalry demonstration largely catered to children, as he placed young kids on a saddle mounted only a foot or



John Tobey conducting bayonet drill with kids at the Arcade 2002 living history (M. Peterson photo)

so above the ground on a barrel, thus giving the kids an experience they'll remember for years, and one that was tailored solely to them.

Where Do We Go from Here?

It is quite clear that the aforementioned six principles of interpretation are decidedly basic in their approach, and understandably lacking exact and precise examples of how to properly execute each and every interpretive skill mentioned.

It also bears saying that the complexities of a 'first person' interpretation are far too wide reaching for the scope of this small article, and I would refer those interested in 'first person interpretation' to the countless works devoted to that art-form in and of itself.

Considering the limits, the above principles are not meant to be a rigid framework without exceptions, but guidelines to use when re-thinking how, and why we interpret our cultural history.

So, What is Success?

Success of an interpretive program—be it a tour, talk, demonstration, or something else—is not based on the volume of info, the applause received, or the interpreter's satisfaction, but rather on the outcomes:

- Successful interpretation has the *outcome* of making a connection between a visitor and a place, and a connection means that they 'care' about that place, and if they 'care' they will preserve and protect.
- Quality interpretation is *the* most powerful tool for continued stewardship, preservation, and protection of our cultural resources.

For those who are interested enough to read further on the theory of Tilden and others, here are a few good resources obtainable via the Internet and your local library:

- For a broad smattering of a wide arrage of interpretive resources, see The National Association website: <http://www.interpnet.com/>.
- Reflecting a rather professional approach (with certain references available upon request), the NPS's 'Interpretive Development Program' offers certain useful resources: <http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/index.htm>.
- Another online reference, complete with interpretive resources, is maintained by The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums: <http://www.alhfam.org/>.
- The American Association for State and Local History, from time to time, offers interpretation-related workshops and books. See <http://www.aaslh.org/>.
- Of course, as mentioned repeatedly in this article, Freeman

Tilden's *Interpreting our Heritage* is a must-have for anyone intent upon understanding the guiding principles of historical interpretation. The book can be purchased at many major retailers, such as [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

Conclusions

Before departing for the next living history' event, plan to have some meaningful exchange with visitors/spectators and, to prepare, take a quick look over Tilden's principles of interpretation, just like you may review skirmish drill. If we, as a group of serious 'living historians', are intent upon real preservation and protection of our cultural resources, we must begin with inspiring and provoking visitors to our events to understand and appreciate, if we wish protection, preservation, and stewardship to follow.

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